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# Fake Empire

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# FAKE EMPIRE

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Dennis Wilfredo Gonzalez

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## **Dedication**

To my family and friends

# FAKE EMPIRE

by

DENNIS WILFREDO GONZALEZ, Spanish B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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## **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank to all my teachers and friends who helped write these short stories.

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## **Preface**

As I was researching to write this preface, I came to the realization that this was just the beginning and not the end of my apprenticeship. When I was accepted to the MFA, I imagined myself graduating with a solid novel. The first masterpiece of the many I was going to write in the future. I was wrong. Writing is always a journey. It is always a new adventure where the novice writer does not know where to go or what turn to take. I thought that by studying creative writing, I was going to become an expert in the art of writing. I know that many students have graduated with good novels or good collections of poems. Perhaps they came more prepared and with a more concrete sense of what they were going to do during the three years in the program. In my case, I came confused, and I am more confused now that I'm going to graduate. However, that's not a bad thing, due to my background and the circumstances that brought me to the program.

I came to the United States when I was 19. I was studying literature at the Universidad Nacional Federico Villarreal. I wanted to be a writer and a scholar. Like any teenager, I thought that with hard work I could win the Nobel Prize in literature. Every morning, I would wake up at six am and read three hours straight. In classes, I always was participative. I collaborated with the teachers and I hung out with my friends at bars and cantinas to talk about serious literature. According to this nostalgic account of my teen years, I was happy and I was on the right path to become an important writer. That's, at least, what I tell myself every time I am blue. "Dennis, you could have been a great writer if you have stayed in Peru." Yes, I could have been a great writer in a parallel universe where nostalgic thoughts are real. Unfortunately, I'm still here, in the United States, and the question will always haunt me for the rest of my life. What if I had stayed in Peru?



It's the same question many Peruvians and Latin Americans ask themselves. What if the Spanish didn't conquer Peru? You see, La Conquista, is the Leviathan of the Peruvian identity. Every time Peruvian identity is discussed, that question always comes up. The main reason is that the Spanish Conquista, as an historical event, signified a rupture in the history of Native Peruvians. To make the analogy simpler, I will concentrate in the American languages. Quechua, for example, was the official language of the Inca Empire. It was used in many aspects in social life. It was used in commerce, in art, in courts and in military speeches. It was a powerful language that united the empire and helped to maintain its stability. Like English today, I bet nobody in the Incan Empire could progress if he or she didn't know the official language.

After the Conquista and other historical events, (Quechua wasn't regulated to its actual status right away), Spanish became the official language of Peru, subjugating the former language. Now, imagine a Quechua speaker suffering from seeing his land being sacked and destroyed, and on top of that, he is forced to stop communicating in his mother tongue and learn the new language of the Conquistador. Even if he could communicate in his house in Quechua, in small gatherings, the fact that his language is no longer held as important as it used to be, should be humiliating. Learning a new language in those circumstances is not the best way to feel proud of being bilingual. I know that this analogy is forced, but what is not forced when you feel nostalgic, lost and desperate to return to your homeland.

Learning English was not as traumatic and humiliating as the Conquista, but in my first years in the United States, I felt that I was a nobody, that my voice didn't matter, that my Spanish was held in the basement of the public libraries. In these multicultural times, American society does not condemn you for speaking your native language among your people, yet, without

English, you can hardly scale the social pyramid. You're kept almost in isolation from the rest of the country. Therefore, learning English was urgent, a matter of social and economic survival.

When I started learning English, I banned all Spanish literature. I bought my first collection of short stories and, with an electronic dictionary, I read word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, decrypting the incomprehensible language, trying to figure it out, not only the meaning of the words, but the plot and the story in general. I promised myself I would not read in Spanish until I was able to master English. It was a cultural suicide for sure, an unhealthy obsession that was productive if you don't count the rich culture I have left behind. I learned English, but with a taste of betrayal in my mouth.

The second stage was the recovery of my native language. Suddenly, I wanted to express my true self. English, with all its silly rules and straightforward characteristics, lacked the passion and the familiarity that Spanish had. I was tired of always going to the writing center, always correcting all the silly mistakes in every paper I wrote, being reminded that certain phrases that I used were alien to native English speakers. I wanted to be free to manipulate my language at my will. When I decided to study Spanish at Western State Connecticut University, I was thinking of recovering my true self. I didn't know I was being naive. At the end, I didn't recover what was supposed to be my true self, but I discovered that there was no return. After graduating from Western State Connecticut University, I went back to Peru and I confirmed my greatest fear: I was different, Peru was different, my friends were different, even the food was different. I admitted that I made good friends and that I had a good time, but the United States was calling me back. I missed the American library system, the considerate drivers, the independent movies.

Moreover, when I was in Peru, I also tried to recover my Spanish. Somehow, I couldn't write as fluently as I used to when I was studying at Villarreal. I registered in a Spanish composition class and I bought Spanish grammar books. Nevertheless, I longed to have a conversation in English. Compared with United States, Peruvian journalism, except for few exceptions, lacked the seriousness and dedication that American journalists have. In other words, where I was in Peru, I read as many American newspapers as possible. I didn't want to forget my English. I suffered a lot to acquire it, and I didn't want to lose it just because I was in Peru. Then it hit me, I couldn't live without the two languages.

Trying to live in two languages is not easy. Most of the time, I have this feeling of betrayal when I'm speaking too much English or of stagnation when I speak too much Spanish. I thought that I was going to be mediocre, not good enough in English, not good enough in Spanish. In other words, *partido como yuca*. This dichotomy between two languages posts many problems for people who are trying to fit in two societies, especially when one is considered more prestigious than the other. Unfortunately, in the United States, most of the time, English outshines Spanish in all cultural and economic aspects. It doesn't matter that the Hispanic community is the largest minority and that year after year it continues to gain economic and cultural power, English maintains its hegemony. Therefore, it makes more sense to stick with English. Nevertheless, psychologically, an immigrant cannot survive in a new country without the support of his community. In my case, Spanish is not only my mother tongue, but it is also my shelter.

I believe that was the reason I applied to the Department of Creative Writing for the Bilingual MFA. Instead of being divided by two cultures, I wanted to be multiplied by two cultures and two languages. English and Spanish are global cultural powers, and at the same time

both languages maintain their local flavor. If a Mexican goes to Peru, he would be amazed by how different Peruvians speak Spanish. Likewise, if an Englishman goes to South Africa, he would have the same reaction. In literature, each Spanish speaking country has a rich heritage that can take many years to learn. In the Commonwealth, the English speaking authors are diverse and come from different backgrounds.

I understood from the beginning that living in El Paso-Juarez was going to give opportunities to navigate between two worlds. Perhaps that's the reason it took so long to find a glimpse of my voice. In the first year and a half, most of the writing I did was in Spanish and the other half, you guess it, in English. Therefore, although I can talk about my literary influences, I cannot be certain that those influences are going to reflect directly in my writing. In fact, I think that those influences are more about theme than technique. Moreover, I am a firm believer that everything that I learned from reading the great masters should disappear in the mysticism of writing. The only thing that I can do is to talk critically about the writers that I think have influenced my career, hoping that the reader makes the connection later. After all, I just discovered the real pleasure of creative writing. After three years in the program, I'm just starting to understand why I write the way I write.

In the words of Mario Vargas Llosa, there are two kinds of literary traditions. The first one is the established literary tradition. In other words, it is a corpus that has been arranged according to a nation, a culture and a language. We can talk about the English literary tradition, or we can be more specific and talk about British literature, Canadian literature or American literature. We can mention that early American literature derives from British literature, and that they are related and come from a single ancestor. For example, Anglo-Saxon literature. In other words, an English writer or an American writer can easily learn to write by reading the corpus

that is given to him by the literary establishment. According to Vargas Llosa "Como sus demonios personales e históricos, sus demonios culturales le son impuestos por el lugar y el tiempo en que vivió, por un medio en el que la literatura se halla estrechamente integrada a la historia y a la vida personal" (Vargas Llosa 205). In other words, Mario Vargas Llosa is referring to the cultural demons that influence us as writers. In some cultures, those cultural demons are organized through a literary tradition. Libraries, universities, criticism and other cultural means of distribution help to sustain a vast network of books that helps the amateur writer to learn his or her craft. Nevertheless, in other cultures, this network does not exist. Talking about Gabriel Garcia Marquez he says,

"¿Este es el caso de García Márquez? Diríamos que es exactamente el contrario. En tanto que el mundo de su infancia lo nutrió con fértiles experiencias personales e históricas, en el plano literario lo dejó en una casi total orfandad, sus demonios literarios debió encontrarlos en un extravagante periplo por todas las comarcas culturales del planeta" (Vargas Llosa 206).

The disadvantage of not having a rich literary tradition leaves the writer like an orphan. Having a recognized literary tradition helps the writer to position herself in a given space and time in the history of his literature. If the writer succeeds, the tradition will continue to grow and flourish. According to him, the writer is an orphan. His literary tradition has not been developed properly. This can be due to its incipient nature or to an abrupt interruption.

A Peruvian poet writing in Spanish in the XVI century cannot learn from Peruvian poetry since it is almost nonexistent. Unlike a poet from Spain or France, the Peruvian poet is forced to learn from other traditions in order to lay the foundation of his new heritage. This doesn't mean that British literature is better than Peruvian literature due to the age difference between the two.

The former being older, one can assume, should reflect in its quality. However, the main advantage that the Peruvian poet has is that he can be more inventive, producing a more vibrant literature. This is exactly what happened, according to Mario Vargas Llosa, with Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Lacking a strong Colombian literary tradition, he looked in other cultures and countries for authors he needed to learn from: Faulkner, Camus, Ernest Hemingway, Rabelais. In other words, he invented his own tradition.

Mario Vargas Llosa raises two questions. How important is it to follow an established literary tradition? And, what kind of risk does the writer take when he is forced to invent one? I will proceed to answer these two questions with my own experiences.

Coming to this country, as I stated before, resulted in a rupture. In this case, I can say that it also resulted in a break from the Latin American tradition. The few books I read in Spanish when I moved were available because of their popularity. Famous names like Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, José Saramago were easy to find. Writers like José María Eguren, Clemente Palma and Rodolfo Hinostroza required a return to Peru. In fact, most of these authors were recommended to me through friends who were kind enough to serve as guides in my search of an established tradition. To make my situation more complicated, my introduction to American and English literature suffered the same fate. I read Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and James Joyce because they're the most representative writers in American and English literature. The new authors I read were given to me through book club recommendations, the Book of the Year from New York Times, and the Pulitzer Prize. Thus, I might fit into the category of the barbarian. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why I cannot be systematic about my literary influences and my refusal to enjoy English or Spanish literature classes. I'm so used to reading randomly, that any attempt to follow a specific corpus will bore me to death.

However, Mario Vargas Llosa has a good point. It might be a disadvantage to be lacking (or cut off from) a strong tradition. Nevertheless, being a barbarian gave me the opportunity to invent my own corpus, to explore any writer from around the world without feeling constricted by space or time. I could feel connected to the stories of Haruki Murakami without being in his particular social context. Likewise, I didn't feel the need to read Chicano literature or Latino literature because I shared some of the writers' experiences even though I might end up writing about the same topic.

In conclusion, my selection of the authors and their books for this preface were selected by intuition. I believe that I can only master the art of writing by being passionate about the books I like. This doesn't mean I'm going to trace how each book taught me a specific technique, but by talking about them I believe I'm giving a map to the reader to figure it out how that book influenced me.

Let's imagine for a minute that the first chapter of *La Ciudad y los Perros* is a short story. Let's forcefully forget the rest of the chapters. Can we argue that most short stories are simple eventful moments in the life of a solitary character? Can we say that what distinguishes the novel from the short story is not only the length but its structure, its nature, its large stock of characters? Or can we state that the novel and the short story are interrelated and the difference between them is just arbitrary? That the reader is mostly responsible for that division, that in the eyes of a writer, the difference might be more subtle, almost imperceptible?

The short story begins with a number. "—Cuatro—dijo el Jaguar" (*La Ciudad y los Perros* 9). It might be odd to start a story like that, but in this particular case, it drives the reader to an immediate reality. The story didn't happen a long time ago, but it is happening as the reader is reading the text. Moreover, numbers in literature symbolize fortune, destiny, and the

randomness of life. The second part of the first line also gives us the name of a character. Jaguar. The reader up to this point is asking himself, who is Jaguar and why did he utter the number four? In the following paragraph, the narrator stops the time of the story to describe the space. "Los rostros se suavizaron en el resplandor vacilante que el globo de luz difundía por el recinto, a través de escasas partículas limpias de vidrio: el peligro había desaparecido para todos, salvo para Porfirio Cava. Los dados estaban quieto, marcaban tres y uno, su blancura contrastaba con el suelo sucio" (9). We know a little bit more about the situation. The characters are playing, are hiding from someone and are about to execute a dangerous plan. The number, as we suspected, is playing an important role in the destiny of the character. We confirm this in the following dialogue,

—Cuatro—repitió el Jaguar—. ¿Quién?

—Yo—murmuró Cava—. Dije Cuatro.

—Apurate—replicó el Jaguar—. Ya sabes, el segundo a la izquierda (La Ciudad y los Perros 9).

The rest of the story is easy to follow. A group of students are breaking into one of the school's offices to get the answer for a chemistry exam. Eventually, Cava is chosen as the lucky one. As we continue to read, the story subtly transforms into a thriller. We see how Cava sneaks through the buildings and reaches the office where the tests are held. "Comenzó a avanzar pegado a la pared. En vez de cruzar el patio, dio un rodeo, siguiendo el muro curvo de las cuadras del quinto. Al llegar al extremo, miró con ansiedad: la pista parecía interminable y misteriosa, enmarcada por los simétricos globos de luz en torno a los cuales se aglomeraba la



neblina" (La Ciudad y los Perros 12). So far, the tension and the suspense continue throughout the story and never slow down. The climax arrives when Cavas is able to break into the office and retrieve the tests. Unfortunately, as he is escaping, he breaks one of the windows, forcing him to escape. The resolution occurs after the encounter of Jaguar and Cavas.

—Serrano —murmuró el Jaguar, despacio—. Tenías que ser serrano. Si nos chapan, te juro...

Lo tenía sujeto de las solapas. Cava puso sus manos sobre del Jaguar. Trató de separarlas, sin violencia (La ciudad y los Perros 14).

In this moment, Jaguar is confronting Cavas because of his ineptitude. Without telling us much, we can figure it out who is in the position of power. In this case, Jaguar is the alpha male and Cavas is only a servant, a student who must comply with the authority. At the end, due to his failure, he promises Jaguar that if something goes wrong, he will surrender to the school's authorities. The final words of the short story reaffirm Jaguar's position. "Serrano cobarde—dijo—. Te has orinado de miedo. Mírate los pantalones." (La Ciudad y los Perros 14).

If this episode is extracted out of the context of a novel (let's say we find it in an anthology) it can leave many open questions that do not necessarily need to be answered. What is going to happen with Cavas? Is he going to confess? Get caught? Suddenly, the focus of the story changes from what is going to happen to the character, to what the relationship between Jaguar and Cavas is. In fact, a critic can easily argue that the story is about power in school and the submission to it or its plain revolt. We don't need to know what happens next, the critic might argue, since that's not the point of the story. Leaving some questions unanswered highlights that

vacuum, Of course, as I stated before, this interpretation is a forced one. A normal reader will demand answers, not only because it is a novel, but for the reason that the narrator has left some clues in the narration. For example, who is El Esclavo? In the first part we are introduced to him indirectly,

—¿Quienes son las imaginarias? —preguntó Cava.

—El Poeta y yo.

—¿Tú?

—Me reemplaza el Esclavo. (La Ciudad y los Perros 11).

Why on earth does Esclavo replace Jaguar? We understand that he is the alpha male, but we might be curious about that other character that is also under his control. In a short story, this information helps to reaffirm the authoritarian character of Jaguar. In a novel, it performs the same function, but it also serves as a connection to subsequent chapters. Therefore, el Esclavo is going to be an important element in the novel's plot.

In other words, it is the interaction between the chapters that gives form to the novel and not the novel as a whole. That's why I can take out a chapter of any novel and read it as a short story. A short story, I believe, works as an autonomous episode that can develop further into a novel only by association with other episodes. Of course, the short story must have ports in order to facilitate the connections. This doesn't mean that a novel is a set of short stories, but from the point of view of a writer, this is the case in order to facilitate a deeper analysis.

How does a reader feel connected to a book of literature? One possible answer is through mirror experiences. If the character is African American and has suffered racism, and if the

reader has gone through the same experience, we can confirm that the book is highly relatable to the reader. Likewise, if the novel is about the Civil War and the reader is against war and it happens that the book also criticizes the war, we can say, like the first example, that the book talks to the reader. Nevertheless, this approach is highly problematic because it can be the case that the reader hasn't experience racism or has a favorable approach to war. Moreover, do we always have to have a social connection to the book? Do we need to pass through the same experiences as the characters to create a bond? How many similarities do we need to have?

In my case, since I am part of a minority, most of the time I heard other minority groups complaining that they're not being represented. Scholars complain about superhero movies not having enough people of color as protagonists. A sitcom based in New York received criticisms because, despite being a multicultural city, New York magically is full of white people. Those complains are valid, but they have their limits. The limitation resides in the capacity of the critic to encourage change. The most a creator of a sitcom can do is to spice his program with a Hispanic or black character playing a very peripheral role. I have a question: how can you ask a white person to include a black or a Hispanic character in his creation if he never had a black or Hispanic friend?

Dubliners has no black characters or Hispanic characters. It is set up in a European country, and yet, as a writer and as a reader, I feel a strong connection with this literary work. How is that possible? I never been in Dublin. I never walked its streets, bars or offices. As one of my friends would point out, it is a white book about white people. The author does not speak to me. Probably, I should be reading other books that are closer to my reality. Yet, I argue, Dubliners has influenced my writing.

The main reason is that, as a reader, you don't have to find a connection with a book. You have to create it. *An Encounter*, for example, is about two kids who decide to skip school. It is the equivalent in Peru of *Tirarse a la pera*. Even though Lima and Dublin are two different cities it is fascinating how I feel connected to this short story.

The story starts with an introduction to a foreign element, "It was Joe Dillon who introduced the Wild West to us. He had a little library made up of old numbers of *The Union Jack*, *Pluck* and *The Halfpenny Marvel*" (Dubliners 14). The mentioning of the West symbolizes Dublin's cosmopolitanism and how young men attempt to escape reality by imagining their life in an exotic land. Of course, I never read Wild West literature, yet in Lima, especially for my generation, I had Japanese Anime as an equivalent. Japanese Anime was for me what the Wild West was for the protagonists of the story: an exotic land where I could escape and forget that I was living in a city as chaotic as Lima. Moreover, even though I didn't study in a Catholic School, I remember those times when the religion teacher would take us to the chapel and make us listen to a boring sermon. In other words, I had the same rebellious spirit that the protagonists of the story from *Dubliners* had. School was an oppressive environment. Japan was a faraway land where other kind of dreams were fermenting, and Lima, despite its ugliness, was a place to be discovered. If I write a story about *tirarse la pera* in Peru, and if the story is good, I will simply say that the story is a homage to *Dubliners*.

Perhaps readers feel more at ease with books that are written specifically for them, books that reflect their social status, their racial background, some experiences that they think resemble theirs. I don't know. Probably, I'm generalizing too much, but I believe the writer has to read differently. One way of reading *Dubliners* is through social-historical lenses. Another way of reading is through melancholy, through the random connections that my memories make.

The connections do not have to be logical. For example, in *The Dead*, even though it depicts an upper-class family, I cannot help remembering the parties in my house. There's always that feeling of rushing, of trying to make every guest comfortable, of enjoying the evening with a nice dance, a nice conversation, a demonstration of someone abilities. Moreover, especially after moving to the United States with my family, it is inevitable for me to compare Peruvian parties with American parties. Like Gabriel, who is caught in a quandary between his identity as an Irish man, I wonder what is to be Peruvian? What makes us different from other communities in the United States? Like that annoying Miss Ivors, I also have encountered people who have a different idea of their Peruvian identity and have complained about mine.

These connections that I am making between the short story and my personal life are made up. They are not explicit connections. James Joyce didn't write *Dubliners* thinking about the Peruvian diaspora in the United States. However, my task as an amateur writer is to be an active reader. Being an active reader implies that any text can be relatable, that the connections are created and never found. Finally, if I want to find a text that talks about my unique Peruvian experiences, well, it is better if I write it myself.

I have another question to answer. What do I write about? What kind of topics interests me? What theme drives me to obsession? I believe that the best writing comes from places that are not well defined, that are delineated like ghost towns, like schizophrenic hallucinations that catch me unguarded. Those memories that appear from nowhere and torture me to the point of paralysis. I believe that the best writing comes from real experiences that have marked the writer in a traumatic way. That's why it is incongruent to accuse a writer of not writing about certain topics if the writer hasn't experience them. How can a writer talk about terrorism in Peru if he hasn't been near a terrorist attack or hasn't suffered from it. I know it is a difficult question and

that there are many examples that prove me wrong. Nevertheless, in my personal tastes, I always incline toward those kinds of writing that come from the unconscious.

A great example of this kind of writing is Julio Ramon Ribeyro. Let's compare two of his short stories: *Gallinazos sin plumas* and *Por las azoteas*. Even though, the first short story is regarded a classic in the Peruvian literary tradition, I prefer the second one for its intimacy. *Gallinazos sin plumas* has its force in its descriptive poetry.

"A las seis de la mañana la ciudad se levanta de puntillas y comienza a dar sus primeros pasos" (53). This magnificent sentence transform the city of Lima in an animated being. Suddenly, the Metropoli gains life and magic. "Una fina niebla disuelve el perfil de los objetos y crea como una atmósfera encantada. Las personas que recorren la ciudad a esta hora parecen que están hechas de otra sustancia, que pertenecen a un orden de vida fantasmal" (53).

Nevertheless, I prefer the beginning of *Por las azoteas* as more intimate. "A los diez años yo era el monarca de las azoteas y gobernaba pacíficamente mi reino de objetos destruidos." This sentence is definitely simpler and less poetic than the other one; yet, the connection that I make with *Por las azoteas* is stronger due to its directness. What does he mean by "mi reino de objetos destruidos"? Why does the narrator call himself "monarca de las azoteas"? As we read the story, we find out that the narrator used to be a lonely kid with a big imagination. That characteristic alone makes him more original and interesting than Efrain and Enrique, who are subjected to the tyranny of their grandfather. I cannot imagine Julio Ramon Ribeyro as a poor kid, as an exploited minor. He belonged to the Peruvian middle class. Therefore, how can he write about a subject that he didn't experience? Well, he could and the result was *Los gallinazos sin plumas*.

Nevertheless, *Por las azoteas* portrays a more active childhood. Perhaps, Julio Ramon Ribeyro was that lonely kid whose imagination expanded his world beyond his own reality. Moreover, I think this story is more interesting due to this mirror nature. I suspect that the sick man is the writer himself, that the story is the encounter between his childhood and his adulthood, that the kid is witnessing his own death.

—¿Quién eres tú? —le pregunté.

—Yo soy el rey de la azotea —me respondió.

—¡No puede ser! —protesté—. El rey de la azotea soy yo (La Palabra del Mudo 243).

Why do we have this encounter? Why does the man keep insisting that he is also the king of the rooftop? Can we see this mirror nature in *Los Gallinazos sin Plumas*? In this aspect, the other story is more dramatic, more prone to tragedy. Its structure is more classic and the resolution is even more optimistic. At the end, Enrique and Efrain escape from that somber world. The journey of the other hero is more complicated. It doesn't have a clear end.

Writing for me, especially short stories, is very similar to the act of remembering. Memories are fragments that form part of a diffused past, of a history too dissimilar and so full of holes that it is hard to glue it together as a whole. In my own poetics, I see the novel as an act of building and the short story as an act of reconstructing. Writing a novel is like being an architect who designs a new building, a new monument. Writing a short story is like being an archeologist who has to dig some ruins, some destroyed citadel. I believe that with a novel you have more chances of writing about the other. With the short stories, the more personal you get, the better the result.

Of course, this differentiation doesn't make sense outside my poetics. As I see it, writing from memory is a very complicated process. First, somebody can suspect the value of my memories. "Why do I have to read about your past?" The stranger might ask. "I don't know. I suppose they are important." "Why are they important?" If I answer that my memories represent the Peruvian experience in the United States, I can win the argument, but at the same time, I can lose it. It is true that what I have been through can form part of a collective experience, but at the same time, my life as a whole cannot represent the whole Peruvian community in the United States. In other words, I have to take into the account that each individual, regarding his or her cultural affiliation, will have a unique encounter with the world.

As I stated before, for me, writing short stories is digging in an archeological site trying to reconstruct forgotten memories. In this case, my memories, even though they can be connected into a larger narrative, are so faint that they're like unedited footages. I have tried to unify them into a novel, but due to their intense emotional charge, I lack the discipline and energy to form a cohesive account of my life. Short stories, on the other hand, do not need to be part of a larger narrative. If I remember my first day in the United States, when my father and I took, for the first time of our lives, an airplane, and if I remember when I took the wrong bus to go to my house in New Milford, those two memories can co-exist in a collection of short stories without having a bridge. In one story, I can appear as a five-year-old, imaginative kid; in other one, I can have a middle-life crisis.

In this collection especially, I decided to contaminate my memories with fiction. Danny is me, but is not me at the same time. Perhaps, he as an alter ego, a character that has part of my soul but, as any creation, now has life on his own. The same goes with other characters. David, for example, has a distinct personality and is successful in real life. He has married his girlfriend



from college and has two kids. In other words, David is me if I have made the right decisions. In fact, the part of the concert, where he met his wife, is a real event. The only difference is that I never had the guts to ask "Karen" her number or look for her on Facebook.

In conclusion, I decided to write short stories because they are more in tune with the act of remembering. Most of the time a person remembers a part of his life, but does not have to recall other events that are connected to that specific memory. Most of the time, he is satisfied with the evocative short narrative. Then, he continues with his life.

I have talked about three major writers that have influenced my poetics. James Joyce and *Dubliners* has taught me that there's no need to make a "cultural connection" in order to be moved by a story. The reader, if he is a smart reader, has to make his own connections, has to play an active role in the act of reading. Mario Vargas Llosa, even though he is a novelist, has proved that episodes can be taken as short stories. Different chapters in a novel can be part of autonomous texts. In other words, a novel can be dismantled into different scenes and then rearranged in different orders to acquire a distinctive effect. Finally, with Julio Ramon Ribeyro, I argued that it is better to write from memory, from what the writer knows best. Thus, at least for me, the short stories become more organic, more honest and more authentic.

Yet, these are only ideas that somehow lay underneath my poetics. When it comes to writing, techniques is what matters most. In other words, how can I apply my poetics in a practical way?

The first collection of first short stories that I read with a cohesive approach was *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri. The stories didn't have a recurrent character nor were they placed in a unique city (like *Dubliners*), but all of them portrayed Indian Americans and their experiences in the United States. Like my own belief that I cannot represent a whole

community, the characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* are varied and distinctive. Many of them don't have anything in common besides the fact that their parents or themselves were born in India. Nevertheless, as a cultural group, the reader can appreciate their struggle to adapt to American society. I tried to model my collection of short stories with that idea in mind. Many of my characters are facing vicissitudes in their new environment, yet, each one of them maintains their individuality.

The other collection of short stories that had a practical impact on my collection is *The Bridegroom* by Ha Jin. Like Jhumpa Lahiri, Ha Jin decided to write a collection of short stories with a unifying topic in mind. In this case, their characters share a city, Muji, and a cultural event, the end of the Cultural Revolution and the aperture toward an open economy. Nevertheless, the main difference between these two authors is that Ha Jin has imprinted a historical narrative in his short stories. The first one, *Saboteur*, starts with the end of the Cultural Revolution. The last one, *After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town*, describes a fully integrated Chinese society with the modern economy. In other words, *The Bridegroom* achieves something that *Interpreter of Maladies* lacks: a full understating of how history affects each individual during a period of time. Society and culture not only change geographically, but temporally.

In my case, I didn't imprint a historical narrative in my short stories, but one of my characters, Danny, grows in the collection. In the first one, he is a child; in the last one, he is a mature man. Of course, my aim cannot compare with what Ha Jin did. My aim was to show that a character, despite his cultural background, can also change during his life time. If Danny is innocent and inventive in the first short story, in the last he is cynical, but at the same time, willing to be at peace with himself. For me, the individual matters more than the cultural group.

## **Fake Empire**

*“Let's not try to figure out everything at once.  
It's hard to keep track of you falling through the sky.”*

The National.

*Tell me, enigmatic man, whom do you love best? Your father, your mother, your sister, or your brother?*

*"I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother."*

*Your friends, then?*

*"You use a word that until now has had no meaning for me."*

*Your country?*

*"I am ignorant of the latitude in which it is situated."*

*Then Beauty?*

*"Her I would love willingly, goddess and immortal."*

*Gold?*

*"I hate it as you hate your God."*

*What, then, extraordinary stranger, do you love?*

*"I love the clouds—the clouds that pass—yonder—the marvellous clouds."*

Charles Baudelaire

## Bluebird

Danny closed the encyclopedia, laid his face on the cold table and drummed his fingers on the book's cover. His fingers looked like spiders' legs. Suddenly, the spider started to fight with him.

"Get out! You filthy insect!" He yelled.

The spider was fast. Every time he tried to catch it, the spider crawled around his body and escaped. When he finally caught it, he had a hard time killing it.

After a minute, he was bored again.

Danny took the encyclopedia, and stared at it. Something like a tree or a flower was drawn on the middle of the black cover. He put his finger on the flower, closed his eyes and imagined for a moment that he was blind. Could he be like Dare Devil? He opened his eyes and read the first page of the encyclopedia. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica Volume 14 Macro...* He stopped. There was a funny letter. It looked like the vowels *A* and *E* were sewed together. How do you pronounce that?

His mom had told him to read the encyclopedia. Only ten pages, but the letters were too small, and there were two columns per page. He decided to look at the pictures first.

For the second time, Danny closed the encyclopedia, and stared at his grandfather's portrait, at his black eyes, at his long, gray beard that made him look like a walrus. His grandfather came out of the picture, sat next to him and told him about the amazing adventures he had as a young man when he went to Huaraz and visited Pastururi. "Son, you have to see those mountains. Your breath will be taken away. The mountains' peaks stabbed the sky like bayonets. My feet sank in the snow, and the cold air pierced my face with its microscopic needles. It was a wonderful time. You have to go, son."

"But I stuck here."

"You have to be patient."

"I can't"

"When you grow older you will learn how to be patient."

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me. You're gonna travel a lot."

Danny climbed onto the couch, took his plastic sword and used it as an oar. He rowed in the frozen ocean, the only survivor of a shipwreck. A walrus, standing at the top of an iceberg, roared and dived into the sea. His cry rumbled in all the Arctic Ocean, and his powerful fins smashed the ice blocks. When he was close to Danny, he roared again and the ocean trembled. It was his grandpa. Suddenly, Danny remembered his mother's words, "you have to read ten pages."

Danny took the encyclopedia from the table and tried to read the first page. He gave up and tossed it gently on the couch, but the book slammed on the floor. Danny dropped dead.

"I'm dying. I can't breathe," Danny said.

He flapped like a fish out of the water, raising his hands and pretending that he couldn't breathe.

"Your clothes are going to get dirty!" His mother yelled at him, coming from the kitchen.

Danny couldn't escape, so he laid still.

His mother grabbed his right hand and pulled him up.

"I'm bored! I want to get out!" Danny complained, trying to make himself as heavy as a rock.

"You have to read!" His mother seated him on the couch.

"I want to go out."

"No. You have to read or you will be grounded," his mother said and returned to the kitchen.

Danny was skimming through the first pages of the encyclopedia when he heard his mom going upstairs. He stopped. Probably, she was going to take a bath or a nap. From under the couch, he reached for his notebook. *There was a time, he wrote, when Danny was a happy kid, and he could go out and play all day, and his mother didn't force him to read boring books.* When he finished, he kneeled on the couch and pressed his face against the window. On the empty street, a Bluebird landed and cleaned her wings with her yellow beak. After moving her head like a periscope, she flew away into the forest. Danny wanted to follow the little bird, but he was afraid of his mother. When she was mad, she would scream at him so hard that he had to cover his ears. He was afraid that his head would explode.

What to do now? Danny pulled his white shirt up and slapped his belly like a drum. He looked at the window and imagined a city inside the forest, and in that city all his friends lived in a tall building that cut through the sky. They were playing soccer in the parking lot. They chased the ball and when Danny scored a goal, his friends carried him on their shoulders. "He's our hero," they chanted.

A warm scent reached Danny's nose. He left his friends behind and ran to the kitchen.

"Stop right there!" His mother yelled at him.

Danny froze as if his mother had shot him with a freezing gun.

"We're going to eat the cupcakes after dinner."

"But mom," Danny protested. "I want to eat cupcakes."

"Did you finish the ten pages?"



"No," Danny replied.

For the third time, Danny tried to read the encyclopedia, but the cupcakes were getting colder. They tasted better when they were fresh from the oven.

He tried again. Words, words and more words. No stories. No heroes. No adventures. Even the pictures were boring. He closed the encyclopedia, and looked around. Nobody was watching him. Yet, he couldn't escape from his grandfather's gaze. Every corner he ran, his grandfather's eyes followed him.

"Don't be a snitch, Grandfather," Danny said and sneaked into the kitchen to steal a cupcake.

The sweet crust made him forget that he was going to get in trouble. However, as he was preparing for his grand escape, two strong fingers, like a pair of pliers, pulled his ear up.

"I told you not to eat the cupcakes!" His mom yelled.

"It wasn't my intention."

He couldn't come up with a better excuse. His dad used to say these same words when he came home drunk.

"Go to your room. You're grounded," his mother sentenced him.

When he closed the door, he didn't cry. Alberto, his older brother, was studying algebra while listening to the Beatles. Despite the daylight, his desk lamp was on.

Danny sat on his bed and looked through the window. A flock of clouds waded south. "Is there anybody going to listen to my story?" The fan nailed to the ceiling was spinning. The breeze gently tossed his hair. Despite the music, despite the spinning fan, despite the scream that was growing inside him like a balloon about to explode, he could hear Alberto's pencil plowing on the notebook. The noise was unbearable.

Danny sat at his desk, and opened his sketchbook. He drew an elephant balancing over a soccer ball and a tamer striking at the animal with a whip.

"Work, you piece of shit! Work, you useless beast!" Danny read out loud.

"Do you have to do that?" Alberto complained without looking back.

"There's nothing to do," Danny replied.

"I'm trying to study, you know. Can you play outside?"

"I can't."

"Just read silently then."

"My voice sounds funny inside my head."

Sometimes, the voice sounded like a very slow man, stretching the vowels and repeating the last word of the sentences twice.

"You're a weirdo," Alberto said. "Why are you making those noises?"

"I'm not a weirdo," Danny said.

"Weirdo, weirdo, weirdo."

"I'm not a weirdo!" Danny yelled and threw his sketchbook at his brother.

Alberto dodged the sketchbook, but he couldn't catch his brother.

Danny walked with his hands in his pockets, kicking the pebbles from the gravel road, looking at the white houses. Why did his mother move to New Milford? He couldn't understand what went wrong in his grandfather's house. He was in heaven, sure, but Grandma was still alive. In the new house, he couldn't play with any kids, the school was too small, and his brother was always doing his homework.

Without noticing, he reached the town's outskirts. Infested with mosquitos and poison ivy, the forest before him rose like an elfish kingdom. Beyond that kingdom, there was a private school, with tennis courts, football fields, and halls that looked like old castles. His mother had told him that this school was a historical landmark and older than the country itself. Now he wanted to visit the school. The trail wasn't that long.

Danny thought it was going to take him the whole afternoon to cross the forest, but that didn't happen. It took him twenty minutes.

When he reached the school, its vastness silenced his heart. He turned back and saw his house trapped behind the foliage of the forest. He could have returned to that old world, but as an explorer he knew that it was better to continue.

The buildings got taller and the space between them bigger. He arrived at one of the tennis courts. He laid on the floor and extended his arms and legs like a starfish.

The sun warmed his chest, but the breeze wiped the sweat from his forehead. He remembered the summers when his grandfather used to invite all his friends to the house every July 28th. The house would fill with old colleagues from the post office. They would sit in the backyard. In those summer afternoons, with the cold beers and the music soothing their hearts, they drank and talked about old times. Danny would walk around his grandpa's friends and ask them for money. Some of them would give him one or two dollars. If his grandpa was around he would say, "son, come here, what are you going to do with that money? Damn right, you're going to save it. You're too young to spend it, anyway." Danny would hide his money in his tin box and put it under his bed. What happened to those days? Far, far away, maybe where his grandfather went. Was he going to come back? Only God knew, but God never answered him.

He fell asleep and dreamed of the big, gray walrus. He sailed the Atlantic Ocean with him. Unicorn whales escorted them, and if an iceberg blocked them, the walrus broke it with his powerful tusks.

"I figured you would be here," someone said.

Danny woke up. A cloud painted his face black.

"We were looking for you."

His brother was seated next to him

"Is my mom mad?"

"I don't think so. She's too busy to be mad."

"Is she's going to punish me?"

"Grandma is coming, remember?" Alberto pet him on the head. "Why did you run away?"

"I hate the new house."

"Be patient, my young padawan. Wait you must. Friends you will have."

Every time his older talked like that Danny felt a little happier.

"Sorry for the notebook," Danny apologized.

"Don't worry. You have a terrible aim, anyway."

## Nothing To Hide

Sophia danced. The sun covered his body in the light of the early afternoon. She looked like a butterfly coming out of her cocoon, and her voice filled his heart with the song of an empty seashell. Diego looked at her naked shoulders, at her breast covered by her shirt, at her perfect legs.

"We all decide," Sophia sang, "how to draw the line." Her finger landed on his hair, on his face. "We've all got something to hide." She stopped. "Dance! Little cousin. Dance!"

Diego closed his eyes. A dark moon bathed her body with its faint light. Her breasts were dunes where his lips rested. The bounds between the earth and the sea disappeared. He drank from the foam of her hair, and his shadow drew a city on her back. Her scream crashed against the silence of the shore. The horizon reddened.

"I can't," Diego replied.

"Look, like this," Sophia grabbed his hands and put them on her hips. Diego didn't know how to dance, but he tried his best not to break her rhythm.

"Don't let me fall." Her back arched and he tried to hold her body, but they drowned on the bed. Sophia laughed and kissed him on the lips.

"Have I ever told you that you have the most beautiful eyelashes?" She asked.

"Many times," Diego replied.

"Close your eyes."

"What are you going to do?"

"Just close them."

Diego closed his eyes and Sophia, with her index finger, rubbed one of his eyelashes.

"Your eyelashes are so silky. What's your secret?"

Diego opened his eyes and saw the lines of her lips: vertical, short, barely dented.

"I have no secret," Diego said.

"Your secret is safe with me," Sophia whispered in his ear.

"I have no secrets," Diego repeated.

"You're lying."

"Why would I be lying?"

"Because you're a man."

A new song was playing. It was "Kiss Me." When he heard that song for the first time, he replayed it over and over again and never grew tired of listening to it every time he felt like falling in love with a girl.

"I think we should get out of bed," Diego said.

"We're not doing anything wrong."

"I'm know. I'm just hungry."

"I don't care."

Diego tried to wrestle with Sophia, but she was on top on him.

"Let's do it again. Let's dance. You need to relax. You're always tense."

"I'm never tense," Diego replied.

Sophia cuddled next to him. Another song played. Diego couldn't remember its name, but he didn't want to ask Sophia. It was one of those songs that he liked to hear only once.

Some songs were meant to be forgotten.

"Didn't your mother tell you?" She combed his hair with her fingers.

"What?"

"You're dying. You have blood cancer," Sophia said and got up and sat on the couch and covered her face with her hands like she was about to cry.

"Yes, Sophia de la Concha Negra." Diego kneeled next to her, hugged her and looked to an imaginary camera.

"What can I do?" He asked in a high-pitched voice.

"You have three months left to live. What would you like to do before dying, Diego Santos Sanguchero?"

"I don't know, but I have something to tell you."

"What is it? Tell me! Diego Santos Sanguchero!"

"I'm your father."

"Noooooooo!"

Diego liked to play these silly games with Sophia where they pretended to be superstars in a Mexican soap opera. The same soap operas that their mothers watched every afternoon on the Hispanic channel.

The playlist ended. Neither of them moved or said anything. They loved the silence that came after the last song. Sophia got up and opened the closet. Sophia's voice and her guitar replaced the silence.

"Will you ever say what I fear you're dying to say?" Her voice was on the verge of breaking into a whisper. "Well, I don't mind if I don't think about it." He felt that she was singing from a place he couldn't reach. "Another sleepless night reading over by the only light." He saw a ghost. He saw a town made of light and darkness. "But I don't mind if I don't think about it." Diego remembered the day he saw his mother crying. "What scares me most, I'll keep from you." She was holding a letter. "If you want me to, I'll keep from you." It was dark, but he could see

her long, black hair covering her face. "Does it makes sense to you, getting old, living life 22?"

He could hear the kids playing in the road. "Well, I don't mind if I don't think about it." He could see the sun setting on his mother's back.

"Let's go far away."

"Where?"

"Let's leave."

"When?"

"We'll leave today." His mother disappeared into the darkness.

"Did you like it?" Sophia asked.

"You sing horribly," he lied.

She hit him on his shoulder.

"You didn't keep your eyes closed."

"I know."

"Close your eyes again."

There was no music; only black dots emerged from the inside of his eyelids. They faded, reappeared, expanded and filled the red emptiness. Diego felt like God when the earth didn't have a form and the water filled the darkness and his presence roamed upon the sea.

"Let's go to the beach," she said.

"It's too late to take the bus," Diego replied.

"I have my car, little cousin."

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The houses blurred when Sophia sped up. Over the highway, the sun sank into the hills and different colors filled the sky. He felt tired and had a sudden desire to open the door and



jump from the car. He knew he would have a terrible death. However, the image of his body mashed against the pavement excited him.

"Did you have a lot friends in Peru?" Sophia asked.

Sophia asked the question without turning her head to him, looking, perhaps, at the road ahead of her, looking at the sea trying to invade the earth.

"Not really. My mother never let me hang out with the kids from the neighborhood. What about you? How was your childhood in Peru?"

"I didn't have a childhood in Peru. I was born here, remember? Oh, gosh, how could you forget that?"

This time she looked at him.

"I always wondered why you never learned to speak Spanish."

"My parents never spoke to me in Spanish. They thought I was going to get confused, and that teachers were going to think I was retarded."

"Oh."

"Don't *oh* me. In this country, nobody gives a shit if you speak more than one language. As long as you speak English, you're okay. Latinos always say, 'you have to speak Spanish. You have to be proud of La Raza.' Well, if you only speak Spanish, you're fucked."

"Should I forget my Spanish, then?" Diego asked.

"Of course not, but don't get too cocky if you speak two languages. You know what I mean? Sure, speaking another language is always helpful in this country, but only if you speak perfect English. A white girl speaks, like, broken Spanish and she sounds cute. A brown man speaks broken English and Americans assume he has crossed illegally."

Diego looked at the road in front of him and read the car's plates. The silence got into his head. He couldn't think of anything to say. Sophia turned on the radio and shuffled through the stations until she found the one she liked.

"Oh, Jesus!" she screamed "I love this song! 'Will you stare as the final curtain starts to fall. Will you watch with closing eyes.'"

"You really like Yo la tengo," Diego said.

"They're the best."

"Have you ever been to one of their concerts?"

"I could have, but I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I don't like to go to concerts. I prefer to buy a CD and play it in my stereo."

"I get it if you don't want to go to a Britney Spears concert, but Yo la tengo?"

"I know, but what can I do? I don't like concerts. I can't stand them. I don't like too many people around me. I don't like to jump and scream in order to show my enthusiasm. I prefer to lay still on my carpet and listen to every musical note from the song, even the little mistakes, even when Ira's fingers scrape the guitar's strings. I don't want to show my loyalty to a band. I only want to feel connected to the music."

Diego also had weird ideas about music. For some reason, he imagined himself being a talented percussionist who worked in the mornings as a bank clerk, but played in a night club in New York City at night. He only wanted to play for the sake of playing. He didn't want to be famous. He knew he had a strange dream, but he supposed he was as weird as Sophia.

At McDonald's she ordered two McChickens and two small drinks. They waited in a booth next to the windows. Sophia started to drum on the table with the palm of her hands.

"You can watch all you want," Sophia said touching her boobs.

"I wasn't staring at your boobs," Diego said.

"Ha, your face is red, you little perv."

"Sometimes I think you're the perv."

"I bet you think that all women are pure and chaste. I bet your mother made you believe that a woman should be treated like a delicate flower." Sophia sat next to him and touched his crotch.

"If you want to know the truth," Sophia whispered in his hear. "We're as bad as most of the men in this world."

"There are some women who are still pure," Diego mumbled.

"Bullshit! Maybe they're better at hiding it. Let me tell you something, little cousin. A woman can be the most despicable human being you've ever met, or she can be the most wonderful person." She stopped. "Fuck, I really hate poets."

"Why do you hate poets?"

"I don't know. I fucking hate them. I hate poets and I hate love poems and everything that has to do with romantic shit and the power of the word."

"What do I do with all the love poems I've written so far?"

"If I learn that you gave a fucking love poem to a girl, I'll cut your balls off."

Diego's testicles shrunk.

"But, seriously, who needs a poem?" Sophia said.

"Some girls like them."

"Some girls are stupid."

Through the window, Diego watched men and women walking with their dogs, listening to music on their iPods. Those people didn't care about the problems of the world, and Diego didn't find anything wrong with that. It was difficult to be happy these days.

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The waves stroke against the rotten dock. Diego held his legs up and rested his face on his knees. Sophia buried her feet in the sand. The beach was empty and the silence was creeping inside his head. The only word he could think of was *playa*.

"When your mom told me that you wanted to be a writer, I thought you were crazy," Sophia said.

"I don't know if I want to be a writer. I don't know what to do with my life."

"Nobody knows what to do with their life, especially you."

"Why me?"

"You think too much."

"Sometimes I wish I could stop thinking," Diego said.

"Is that possible? I mean, I have tried not to think, but I always fail. That's why I listen to music, you know. I want to reach a state of no-mind. Pure sound. Pure rhythm. Pure harmony."

Sophia poured some sand on her legs and the wind blew the yellow grains away.

"Yeah, I don't like to think, and with my big head, it's impossible. It's a word or an object that suddenly takes me to my childhood, and then the questions pop up, 'what if I had been born in Peru?'"

"But you never have been in Peru."

"I don't know how to describe it. A memory that never existed, but doesn't want to be forgotten? The funny thing is that that memory doesn't last. You know. It shows up and, poof, it disappears."

"I see."

"You're a man of short answers. It's getting a little annoying."

Sophia got up, ran toward the sea and stopped where the sand and the sea met.

"What was this feeling of loss?" Diego asked.

"Come here!" Sophia shouted.

Diego walked slowly, trudging through the sand, trying to think of something to say.

"Do you want to do something crazy?"

"Like what?"

"Like staying until dawn. I know sunsets are more beautiful in Peru, but you know, Connecticut can be a magical place too."

"I never said the opposite," Diego said.

"Yes, I know. But other Peruvians don't think like you. Other Peruvians are always saying, 'Peru is better than United States. In Peru you eat better food. In Peru people are more friendly.' Why, then, did they come here? Why didn't they stay in Peru if it was so magical?"

"I don't know. Probably because they think that the American Dream is true, and when Americans treat them like second-class citizens, like they treat the indigenous population over there, they get depressed. They know they will never be considered Americans."

"Are we Americans?" Sophia asked.

"I don't know."

The waves bathed their feet. The moon waved slowly on the sea. Sophia started to dance, opening her arms wide and making circles on the sand. She didn't need music. She got her heart to tell her what rhythm to follow.

"Come on," she said when she finished, "We must stay. We must see the sun rising from the sea."

"What about our moms?"

"We'll tell them we're at a party with some white friends. She loves when I hang out with white people."

"Okay."

Sophia ran to her car and came back with a small bottle of whiskey, a blanket and a towel.

"I'm 16," Diego said. "I can't drink alcohol."

"Who gives a shit?"

"The police give a shit."

"They're never here. This is a white beach."

"What are we supposed to do until dawn?"

"We can talk and drink and have fun."

"I don't have anything to talk about."

"I don't get you. You love literature. You're supposed to have thousands of stories to tell."

The novels he read, the poems he memorized, what happened to them? What was the point of reading so much if you had so little to tell? He read books because he didn't want to be so close to the world and to some people that were annoying to him. He didn't want to go outside and interact with the reality that surrounded him. Inside his room, nobody could say anything to

him. Nobody would complain if he masturbated too much or if he watched Netflix for five hours straight. Nevertheless, sometimes, he was crushed by the desire to be around a person. It could be anybody as long as he or she could talk, as long as the person maintained the conversation.

"I'll try my best," Diego finally said.

Sophia spread the towel in the sand and with the blanket she covered herself and Diego. The night got cold, but the whiskey warmed their bodies.

"You can spoon me if you want," Sophia said.

Diego felt his long legs tangle with hers, and the smell of her soft hair filled his heart with silence.

"I have a question for you. You don't have answer it if you don't want to."

Diego took two sips from the bottle of whiskey.

"Go ahead."

"Do you really want to be a writer?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure anymore."

Sophia turned her body toward him. She took another sip from the bottle, her right hand went under his pants and touched his penis. Her hand was cold but smooth. He felt like drowning in the ocean, watching the lights from the boats passing through. Death, for the first time in his life, looked beautiful.

"Why are we doing this?" Diego asked.

"Because nobody can't stop us."

"It's wrong."

"I feel like corrupting you, little cousin. I feel like coloring your life with chaos."

"My life is chaotic as it is."

"Yeah, but twenty years from now, you would regret not making love to me."

He let his body be taken care of. He let his thoughts go, like a river flooding a village. Not even a star asks himself, when he dies, "did I have a long life?" One million years. Two millions years. Three millions years of existence and suddenly he's part of the past. The present is the music you listen to when you're alive. The past is the silence.

"Why do you want to be a writer?" Sophia asked again.

"I don't know. I thought since I like to read a lot, maybe I can be good at writing books."

"You don't have a fucking clue. Do you?"

"That appears to be the answer."

Diego went into his memories. He saw himself reading books and playing with the broken objects around the house. One day the broom was a light saber, and the patio a battlefield. Other days, under the hot sun, with the help of a box, he traveled through vast deserts and climbed dunes as high as the Andean Mountains. The enemy troops were marching toward the last post of the insurgent army, and he was the only one who could save them from the impending doom. He fought bravely against the empire's troops. He cut off one hundred heads and two hundred hands. Diego was the hero, the savior, the messiah who was thought to be dead but came back to save his people.

"Do you want to feel me?"

Sophia got closer to him. His right hand touched her thigh. He felt deeply disturbed and shaken by that strange humidity, and yet he had always wanted to touch Sophia. His fingers advanced and his eyes stared at the beach. The lights flickered at the end of the horizon. A moan escaped from her throat. Her breath was warm.



"Sometimes I wonder what if I hadn't been raised here," Sophia murmured. "What if I had been born in Peru?"

Diego buried his face in her breasts.

"Do you want to see them?" She said.

"I want to kiss them."

They were small but firm, beige at the borders and darker at the center. He felt the little dents in her nipples. It took one sperm to open the gates that guarded the river of life, he thought.

"I am your muse that never existed," Sophia said. "You're the God that never created me. I am woman who hates and loves at the same time."

"Who wrote that?"

"I don't know."

"You don't remember?"

"Nope. Perhaps I read it in one of my father's books. The same books that I burn every year."

"Why do you do it?"

"I don't know. It's very cathartic."

Sophia touched his face. Inside her eyes, he saw his inverted and small image. The light from the moon cast a faint shadow over her face. Diego looked at the sea. What kind of invisible wall stopped the ocean from devouring the earth?

## **Luz**

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light," Dylan Thomas

His shadow was stuck on the pavement. He wondered what kind of face a shadow had. What were the color of his eyes? Could his shadow talk? Did he use sign language? Did he follow him voluntarily or was he forced by a more powerful entity? What kind of dreams did a shadow dream? What if he didn't have one? How would that be? Would he be lighter or faster?

Danny was going to the library to escape from the summer. It usually took him 23 minutes to get there from his house. Sometimes, he wished he lived in downtown. That was his dream, to live next to a library, to be able to walk just a block or two and not suffer from the unbearable heat. The same heat that killed old men, babies trapped in closed cars, and fat dogs who were too furry to cool off properly.

He drank what little water remained in his bottle. He closed his eyes and imagined a town made of darkness, where the sun never rose and the moon was the only celestial body that gave light to the small town. A broad and turbulent river crossed it. On the other side, a town made of light, full of translucent houses, populated with invisible men, flourished at the expense of the town made of darkness. The two of them had been fighting a war that was lasting more than two thousand years. Their dream was to see the other town torn to pieces.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the houses, the parked cars, and the dusty trees melting under the sky. He felt like he was melting with them too. The sun was at its peak. He wanted to give up. He wanted to go home, but his older brother was working at the Coffee House. His mother was teaching at the school. His grandma was taking care of his younger brother. And his

step father was working at the factory. If he went back, he was going to be alone, without supervision, but also without anyone to talk to. In the library, where he was supposed to be 20 minutes ago, he had free AC and free cold water. All of a sudden, he remembered he didn't turn off the AC in his house. He ran like those action heroes when they were escaping from a big explosion. He didn't care about the heat. His stepfather didn't like to waste energy and, especially, money. So he continued running. It was his duty to save his house from a big bill.

Danny was happy when he didn't hear any sound in the house. The AC was off. He also checked the TV and the radio. They were unplugged. He was supposed to feel better, but a void grew inside his heart like an iron bubble. The house was empty. He always felt like an orphan at this hour of the day. He wanted to scream, to break the silence, to rage against the silent light, but he didn't. He drank a glass of cold water instead. Then, he put his head under the faucet and let this thoughts be carried by the water draining down into the pipes.

Before leaving, he prepared two peanut butter sandwiches, wrapped them with the bags his mother always saved after going to the grocery store, and put them in his backpack. This time, he was determined to arrive at the library.

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Homeless, unemployed, undocumented immigrants and single mothers came to the library to escape from the heat, from the desolated parks, from the overwhelmed view of an empty fridge. They kept their minds busy surfing the Internet, resolving complicated crosswords, reading best-sellers, and learning about the world with the help of newspapers. Few of them were like Danny, who wanted to be alone, to stop dealing with the real world and just read. Yet, the people Danny admired most were the ones who were capable of sleeping on the couches. It took a lot of courage to sit, close one's eyes and sleep into oblivion.

In the fiction section, he looked for *The Unbreakable Soul*. He had been reading it before his grandmother caught him and took his copy away. "Why are you reading this book? You know this author is a satanist!" He was aware of the consequences of reading blasphemous books. If he did it again, his grandmother had said to him, he would die in sin and burn in hell. Danny suspected that parents invented hell and used it as a stratagem in order to force their children to obey them. In fact, death was an adult disease, an illness that never affected young people. Once you became an adult, all of the sudden, you were aware of the consequences of your own mortality.

However, he remembered his grandmother's words, "Death is the punishment for our disobedience. Those who die in sin will suffer in hell, will burn until their last breath, and God's true children will live in the Promised Land. Death will never touch us again." Danny asked her what he needed to do to be considered a true son of God. She said to him, "In his benevolence, God sent his only son to die for us, to clean our souls. We only have to accept Jesus Christ as our true savior." Danny wasn't satisfied with the answer. He suspected that there was something that perhaps had created God himself.

At one of the tables, he started to read *The Unbreakable Soul*. After 20 pages, he closed the book. He had too many ideas inside his head, too many memories from his childhood, too many daydreams where he was a different teenager, a teenager who lived in Peru, a teenager who was a ghost and wandered the streets of Lima, a teenager who fell in love with a girl from the town made of shadows. He put his face on the table. It was cold and smelled of Clorox. He was bored. He missed the late afternoons doing his homework in his room under the lamp's yellow light. He missed the hours spent in the classrooms listening to the history of the first Europeans who come to America looking for freedom, for new land to build what they couldn't build in

Europe, but his favorite class was math. He loved the exactitude of its laws. If there was a problem, there was only one solution, finding that solution was his challenge.

His life during school was simple. He would wake up at 6 a.m. and sleep at 9 p.m. He didn't have many friends, but he didn't care as long as he was in class, in the library or with his family. Nights and days passed by like the birth and death of fireflies, without worries, without being bored, without the long days spent in solitude. That's why he hated summer. There was nothing to do.

Because he was bored, because he didn't have anything to do, Danny drew a doodle of God in his notebook. He had two big sunglasses and covered his boldness with a black hat. In a speech bubble he said, *I'm the one who knocks at your door*. Danny looked up to make sure no lightning would hit him in the head. He was afraid that God, who was watching all his actions from heaven, would punish him for blasphemy. In that moment, he felt crushed by God's weight. How was that possible? The pastor had told him that God didn't have a body, a mass; that he was unsubstantial and because of these qualities, he was everywhere. Past, present and future were all the same to him. "If we go to heaven, are we going to be part of him?" Danny asked the pastor. "No. If we go to heaven, we will have perfect bodies and perfect minds," the pastor replied.

So, that was it. There was really nothing to do. The patrons walked around the library. Some of them checked out books, DVDs or free courses to learn English. Seated in that particular spot, he didn't feel like trying to read another book. He drummed with the palm of his hands on the table and somebody shushed him. Now he wanted to knock down the book shelves, throw the newspapers away and announced that the second coming of Jesus was close. He wanted to scream and tell people that they needed to repent. He wanted to burn the library, to make a big sacrifice to the only and true God, but he felt weak and his stomach started to ache.

Danny waddled to the library's garden to have some fresh air.

The trees protected the readers from the sun. Danny ate his sandwiches next to the water fountain.

"By the way, your grandpa says hi," Luz said.

Danny didn't answer her.

Luz walked in circles, her right hand under her chin, making long strides and counting her steps. She stopped in front of him.

"Don't you think those people are too crazy to be reading in the garden? I mean, if you think about it, it's better to read outside when it's spring or autumn. You know, mild seasons. Not too fucking hot. Not too fucking cold."

"Why did you come back?" Danny asked.

"I missed you."

"My grandmother thinks you're the devil, that I shouldn't talk to you."

"What if I am an angel? How can you tell that I am the devil?" Luz looked him in the eyes. "Danny, I'm going to be totally honest with you. I'm sort of your guardian angel."

"You're not an angel."

"Maybe I'm the angel of death or your imaginary friend."

"My stepfather thinks that I'm too old to have imaginary friends."

"I got it. Why don't you get a Bluetooth headset? That way you can pretend you're talking with your business partner," Luz said.

"I don't have money."

"Ask your stepfather to give you some."

"Yeah, but I don't see him every day. He's never around. Remember?"

Luz started to clap and dance in circles. "No money. No sisters. No house. No flower. No lover."

Danny yawned and covered his eyes with his left hand. A butterfly landed on one of his fingers. Am I crazy? He thought. He looked directly at the sun and then at his shadow. The other men and women in the garden seemed to blend into the light. Something aqueous surrounded them. Do not go there, a voice told him, do not go there without a fight.

"You know. You're not crazy when you're by yourself," Luz said.

Luz sat next to him and put her head in his lap. Danny could see her cleavage, the light trespassing her breasts, hear heart beating faster than his own heart. He listened to the cars driving through the main street, the voices of the birds hidden in the trees, the light being absorbed by the leaves. He drank from his bottle and tasted the bitterness of his thirst. He closed his eyes. The library was on fire. All the books and all the wisdom, all the treatises and knowledge, all the laws and the memory of men scattered in the wind. We should begin anew, the voice said, like Noah after the great flood.

"Are you dreaming of burning the library?"

"I'm bored."

"I can play with you if you want."

"I'm not a kid anymore."

"We can look at the stars."

"In the bright light?"

"Let's burn our eyes."

"I don't want to be blind."

Where were you, the voice said, when I created the universe? When I cast away the Grand Leviathan?

"What do you see?" Danny asked.

"A moon lost in the universe, an asteroid crashing into a desert, a star devouring itself."

Danny inhaled the grass's sweat, the indifference of the birds, the dying cells of his skin. Why did people have to die? Why is this rock dry? Why do my hands close when I think of a closing hand?

"How can you smell the indifference of the birds?" Luz asked him.

"When birds poo in the air."

The birds, the light, the men seating around disappeared. He wrote in the air, *do not go gentle into the good night.*

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"Sometimes I dream that the government kidnaps me, dumps me in an unknown country, and when I try to talk to the people of that country, nobody can understand me."

"A dream is not always a dream. Sometimes it's a sandwich."

"The most disturbing part of the dream," Danny continued, "is that I can't figure out what language the people are speaking. I thought it was Spanish, but it sounded so different."

"Maybe it's a language only spoken in your dreams. By the way, how were the sandwiches?"

Danny looked at the crumbs scattered on the grass. He hoped for the ants to come and take the leftovers.

"Soon I will be hungry again," Danny said.

"Don't worry. Your mother is going to buy food... Eventually."



A man carrying a newspaper sat on one of the benches. Danny stared at him, at the newspaper, at his black nails.

"What a twat," Luz said. "Is he looking at us?"

"I'm hungry," Danny complained.

The stranger stared at Danny. Danny smiled. The stranger smiled back. "Hey, kid," the stranger said. Is he real? Probably he is, who knows, maybe I'm not crazy and the stranger is God, and God wants to talk to me.

"He's a kid molester," Luz said.

"Maybe he's God."

Danny didn't want to leave the library. Diego wanted to talk to God, ask him why the earth wasn't built in eight days or in ten. Why seven? He had asked the pastor the same questions, and the pastor didn't know what to say, even though he pretended that those questions were beyond human knowledge.

Why, God, is the earth round and not flat? Why are the stars so bright? Why did you let Adam and Eve die?

"I wish I could call 911," Luz said.

"Are you deaf?" The man who was probably God yelled.

The sky looked like a dirty white sheet spread on an old mattress. Something grew inside his stomach, like weeds sprouting in an abandoned building. He walked slowly, almost as if he was walking in front of a white cop. He opened the door very casually and went to the bathroom.

"I forgot my bottle," Daniel said looking himself at the mirror.

"It's just a bottle," Luz said.

"My grandpa gave it to me before he died."

"Wait here. I'm going to see if the guy left."

Danny took down his pants, sat on the toilet and started to push. He hadn't eaten since breakfast, except for the two peanut butter sandwiches. He only wanted to justify his presence there. Waiting for his imaginary friend in a public bathroom without pooping or peeing was too radical for him.

A cloud parked in front of the sun. The room grew dimmer. What time is it? What is time without a watch? He couldn't think. He couldn't design a plan of action.

"The man is gone," Luz said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep."

"How can I trust you?"

"Can you pull up your pants first?"

Danny pulled up his pants, washed his hands in the sink, and combed his hair. When he opened the door, the man was gone.

"I told you."

He went back to the garden and picked up his bottle. He walked around the water fountain.

"Now. What to do?"

"I don't know."

"We can go home."

"Nobody is there."

"Are you afraid of facing your loneliness?"

"It is something I have to deal with...Eventually."

"When?"

"Not now."

"You cannot postpone that encounter anymore."

"What happens if I don't want to be alone."

"You're alone now."

"It's different."

"How?"

"This is a public space."

"You mean you don't feel so alone here."

"Yes. When I read a book from the library I feel that I'm connected to a larger group."

"You belong to an interconnected group."

"If you put it that way."

"What happens when the library closes?"

"Then I hope my family has returned."

Ten minutes before the library closed, he checked out *The Unbreakable Soul*. In that late afternoon, the heat was more bearable, and the street lights painted the pavement yellow. He felt as he was in the middle of a river. That at his left and at his right sides the towns of shadow and light looked at each other with disdain, that, even after all the efforts, they couldn't plead for a truce.

## Wake Up

David dreamed of Peru, a country he had left 15 years ago. When he woke up, he tried to recognize the room around him. He looked at the gray light coming through the window, at the forest behind the crystal, at the drawers, at the man who was looking at him from the other side of the mirror. For a moment, he believed he had been kidnapped, that he was being held in a white, concrete room, and he couldn't return to his native land until his family paid the ransom. Sometimes, David forgot he was living in the United States, that he spoke English and worked as a history professor at the University of Danbury. For a moment, he thought he was still living in Peru, only spoke Spanish and was ready to go to the elementary school with his mom. There he was, holding her hand, walking through the dusty roads, saying hello to all the neighbors and the other kids who were walking with their moms.

David thought he shouldn't have these dreams. He had married Karen, his girlfriend from college, had two kids with her and enjoyed a relatively easy life in New Milford. His colleagues from the university respected him. He was an exemplary, law abiding American citizen. His mother had moved to Peru three years ago and had asked him not to visit her. It wasn't necessary. She was going to live with Maria and with her granddaughter, Claudia. Maria was going to take care of her. In other words, all strings that tied him to Peru were cut off. Why then? Why was he still dreaming of Peru?

In that hour of the day, when all world's voices were sleeping, David lay still, facing the wall, trying not to wake up his wife. The morning light struck his fingers, bringing him another memory. He was in Peru on a hot summer day. His mother had decided to visit Grandpa, who lived alone with his two dogs in a two-story house in La Punta. From the roof, he could see all the little boats laying along the coast, the scattered fishermen knitting their nets while the waves

washed their feet, and further down, the big ships sailing into the Pacific Ocean, leaving a white trail on the sea. His grandpa would tell him that the Peruvian sea was the richest sea in the world, and from there, Peruvians had been fishing since America was populated for the first time. David looked at the sea and saw himself rowing in a little boat, singing an old song.

David felt better, but it didn't last. He remembered his dream.

He was walking in a crowded street market in Lima. The merchants announced their products with small speakers screwed to the stand's roofs. The clients haggled the prices with exaggerated hand gestures, opening their arms wide, telling the merchants that their prices were an abuso. He smelled the fruits baked by the scorching sun. He saw men and women cooking in big, clay pots. He heard children licking their ice creams that melted in their hands. In his dream, an old woman served him a bowl of hot soup. It had been 20 years since he had eaten pastasca, a delicacy among the lower class in Lima. He tasted the white corn, the lamb calves and the cow hooves. When he looked up to thank the old woman, he realized she was his mother. He was now in the kitchen. His mother was cooking, and the summer light bathed her cinnamon skin, her curly black hair, her eyes the color of coffee beans.

"What are you cooking, Mamita?" He asked in his dream.

"Adivina Adivinador."

"Are you cooking...Lomo Saltado?"

"Sigue adivinando."

"Are you cooking...Cau Cau?"

"Bingo! ¿Qué comes que adivinas?"

David ate all the Cau cau and his mother looked at him with a sad, tender smile. In that smile he saw the most beautiful woman in the world.

"You have to eat to be strong like your father," his mother said.

"Where is he?" but his mother couldn't answer him. He was no longer in the dream.

David didn't know if he had remembered his dream or if he had dreamed again. He wasn't sure anymore.

"Did you sleep well?" Karen asked him when she woke up.

"I dreamed about my mom again," David said without looking back at his wife.

"What was she doing this time?"

"She was cooking."

Karen smiled. "I guess I could never cook as good as she."

"You know I love your food."

"I think you should move back to Peru."

"Sorry," David apologized.

"I was joking. Do you want to cuddle?" Karen whispered in his ear.

"What about the kids? We have to make them breakfast."

"They can survive for 15 minutes without breakfast for god's sake."

David buried his face in Karen's black, soft hair. He kissed her neck, inhaled her sweat, and made love to her and didn't care that her breath reeked of late morning.

"Do you feel better?"

David nodded.

"Mañaneros are always good. Don't you think?"

"Do we make breakfast for the kids now?"

"I want to take a cold shower," David said.

"You wash the dishes then."

"Fair enough."

The water fell on his body, and he stopped remembering the walks he used to take with his mom. This was the American Dream: being able to enjoy a hot shower without worrying about the shortage of water or the energy wasted to heat it. He knew he shouldn't enjoy watching vital resources being wasted, but the world, the world was going to end. In fact, the universe was going to be destroyed, and when that happened, even time would cease to exist. Everything would end where it started: nothing, a big black void in the middle of an empty space.

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Mario was at the table eating his cereal with yogurt. Like David, he couldn't stand drinking milk. He would throw up. That was the result of having Peruvian blood in his veins. It wasn't uncommon that many Peruvians were lactose intolerant and were more likely to drink yogurt than fresh milk. He had read somewhere in a newspaper that Peruvians were prone to suffer from that deficiency, and why a deficiency? Humans were not supposed to drink cow's milk or any kind of milk that didn't come from a woman's breasts.

"I'm hungry," David said.

Mario stood on the chair and gave him a spoonful of cereal and yogurt.

"Yummy. Give me another one."

"Are you stealing Mario's food?" Karen yelled from the kitchen.

"Don't pay attention to your mother," David said to Mario, and opened his mouth.

"Do you want another one, Daddy?" Mario asked after giving him another spoonful.

"No, thanks. Mommy is making pancakes."

"Pancakes! Pancakes!" Mario screamed.

"Pancakes! Pancakes!" David repeated.

The only one who wasn't screaming was Alberto. He finished his cereal with milk and walked to the kitchen. When he went back to the dining room, his younger brother was playing red hands with David.

"Come on! Don't move your hands!" Mario yelled.

"I'm not moving them," David said.

Alberto sat on his chair.

"You did it again!" Mario burst into laughter after David pulled away his hands.

"You're too slow, grasshopper," David said.

"It's not fair!" Mario complained.

"Breakfast is ready," Karen said from the kitchen.

"Hurry up!" David said to Mario. "This is your last chance."

"But, promise me you won't move," Mario said.

"I can't promise you that."

Karen put the pancakes on the table.

"Mario, you have to sit down if you want to eat," Karen said.

Sometimes, David thought that his oldest son was too American for his own good.

Alberto was like Paul, David's father in law. He inherited his rigid schedules, his inflexible rules, his unbreakable determination. Paul was the kind of guy who believed that self-discipline and hard work were the cornerstones of the American society. He didn't believe racism was responsible for the social inequality in America. "Esos manes son unos vagos," he would say. "Vagos del carajo." In that aspect, Karen was like her father too. She was a control freak who couldn't stand a dirty spot on the table, who organized her schedule to the last second, who, for vacation, didn't like to hear, "let's see what happens, honey." Fortunately, she was also like her



mother. She had taught her that perfection, when taken to the extreme, was a sign of psychotic behavior. After a good day of hard work, it was okay to relax, to forget any unfinished task. Sometimes humans needed to do meaningless activities to not lose their minds.

Karen and David had met that way, through a meaningless activity. It happened at a concert in New York City. Arcade Fire was playing one of its first concerts after the release of its album, *The Suburbs*. David wasn't supposed to go. His best friend had told him that the tickets were sold out. David tried to buy the tickets on the band's website. Madison Square is a big place, he thought. It turned out that there were tickets available.

In the concert, in the section where he was sitting, he was the only Hispanic. Around him, white people talked about how the first two albums were totally amazing, but the last album was a little too pop, too mainstream. Hipsters, David whispered. Next to him there was an empty chair. In front of him, the empty arena. He watched the instruments being placed by the people dressed in black. They tested the guitar, the drums and the sound quality. They needed to make sure that the instruments were in tune.

David could have talked to the people next to him, but he didn't feel like it. Besides, nobody tried to talk to him. Perhaps they thought that he didn't speak English.

Twenty minutes before the concert, he heard somebody apologizing. A small girl was trying to cross a sea of legs to get to her seat. She reminded him of some Peruvian girls that were so thin and short that, most of the time, they were mistaken as teenagers by Americans. The girl had curly long hair, and her brackets shone every time she smiled in the dark auditorium. How old was she? She could be between 15 to 30. Some Peruvian women had that ability to reduce their age at their will. There was Jonny, who dated a girl from Ica who swore to him that she was 21, when in fact she was past her thirties. And what if she wasn't Peruvian? That was the thing

about being Peruvian. There were white Peruvians, black Peruvians, Peruvians who looked like Arabs, Hindus or Asians. Peruvians who you might think could speak an indigenous language, but were more tuned to listen to Nirvana or Radiohead. They didn't have a type, a special characteristic that defined them. What the fuck are we? He thought. A maze, probably, a big and intricate maze designed to confuse the untrained eye; a cluster of cultures, races, languages, traditions, and religions; an indefinite nation struggling to define itself. Maybe that was a good thing. Since we haven't figured out what we are, maybe we can always reinvent ourselves whenever it is necessary, David thought. Right now, he was a Peruvian student trying to make it in the United States.

The pretty girl finally sat next to him. Before he could plan a strategy to talk to the girl, she asked him if he was Hispanic.

"Sorry to ask you that," she continued, "sometimes I mistake Indians or Pakistanis for Hispanics. It's because we look so alike. I don't know, *tu me entiendes?* Maybe you're not Hispano. If that the case, my apologies. Anyway, I always talk very fast when I'm excited. I mean, for the concert."

"I'm Peruvian," David replied.

"Sweet. I'm Puerto Rican. Well, more like Nuyorican. You know. My Spanish is very bad, but I can try it if you want."

Her Spanish wasn't bad at all. In fact, it was fluent.

"Why do you think your Spanish is bad?" David asked her.

"Other Hispanics. Specially people who just have arrived. You know, you don't say 'factoria' you say 'fabrica.' It is not 'aplicar' sino 'postular'"

"Yeah, sometimes they are annoying."

David knew this because he used to be one of them.

When the concert started, he noticed that she was the only one dancing. Arcade Fire's first song was, *Ready to start*, and the girl just let her body move. It sounded like the song wasn't made just for moving the head back and forth, like white people did, but for a culture that was accustomed to dancing. At previous concerts, David would act like his white friends. He would restrain from moving too much. He wanted to fit in, but this girl, she didn't care, she didn't give a fuck about other people's opinions. David tried to dance with her and she let him. When the band was playing *Rebellion*, they weren't two strangers dancing in a concert, but two good friends dancing with each other.

"What is your name?" David asked her when the concert finished.

"Karen Echevarria Garay."

"And your number?"

"You can find me in Facebook."

"What if I don't?"

"If we're meant to be together. You will find me."

The family talked about the beautiful day, and how Alberto was playing soccer at the school and was one of the best players. The family smiled at Mario's funny faces and laughed at David's bad jokes. It was like any other Sunday. The problems of the world didn't spoil their lives. David's tragedies were hidden in the basement, in the old wardrobe, on its last shelf.

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The day David learned his mother was sick, he was explaining to his class the role of the Civil War in American identity. He was explaining how the South now looked at itself after the defeat, how the promises of freedom and equality were going to be implemented. It looked like

the nation had defeated a big monster, the biggest and baddest boss in a video game. "If you will, you can say that Lincoln has just killed Sauron, or Lord Voldemort, if you're into Harry Potter, and now every American citizen was hoping for a better world. What happened? Some asshole killed Lincoln." The students, as he had expected, laughed.

He was going to continue, when his cell phone rang. He paused, saw the number on the screen, and recognized that the area code was from Peru. Usually, he would apologize for not turning his cell phone off, but he had a premonition. This wasn't a regular call.

In the hallway, he heard a female voice. It was his cousin, Maria.

"David?"

"Sí?"

"Malas noticias."

He listened to Maria's cry, to her sobs and to her apologies. After 72 years of having a healthy life, his mother was sick. She had cancer. The doctor had given her two months. For the first time in his life, David wished God existed. His mother was an atheist. She had taught him that everything good that happened to them wasn't because of God, but because they worked hard to accomplish their goals. In fact, his mother hated the Catholic Church, the pedophiles dressed as priests, the intolerant people who call themselves good Christians.

David imagined his mother waiting for St. Peter at heaven's doors.

"Who is this?" St. Peter asked.

"It's me, Cristina."

"Who?"

"Cómo que who? Quién carajo you think you are? Open the door, barbudo cabeza de rodilla o I call a todas las almas del purgatorio y organized a strike right now."

When he entered the classroom, he apologized to his students. He explained that something terrible had happened en su tierra querida. There was silence. He didn't know why he had spoken in Spanish. He suspected that all of them were scrutinizing him, trying to figure out what the fuck was wrong with the history teacher.

David continued explaining that the freedom brought to the Black people was not real, but an illusion, a promise that never materialized. He stopped. Through the window he saw himself playing with his mother in the park. There was Alf, his dog, chasing the green ball he had thrown into the abyss at the edge of the park.

After class, David felt sick. He went to the bathroom and threw up in the sink. David couldn't finish his other classes and went home early.

The house was empty. Karen was at the office and the kids at the school. In that absence of voices, he discovered how terrifying solitude was, especially in autumn. He wanted to hug his wife and his kids. He wanted to erase the pain that was growing from his viscera like a cluster of grapes. For a moment, he wanted to believe that death was like a dream, a journey full of fond memories from the living world, but death was not a dream. All the memories that she had of the world would disappear, and what he remembered of her would fade. New memories, new worries, new dreams would accumulate in his head after his mother's death.

Through the window, the day was shading into a gray afternoon. White clouds like old elephants were walking to their deaths.

David knew he had to be with his mother in her last days. He didn't want to go. He didn't have any friends there. Moreover, he didn't get along with his mother's family. They were a bunch of resentful Catholics who always asked his mother for money. The only person he liked was Maria, but he hadn't seen her in a long time. Maybe it was a good idea to take Mario and

Alberto to Peru for the first time in their lives. Eventually, they had to reconnect to their Peruvian roots.

"Why so serious?" Karen asked David when she saw him seated on the couch.

"My mother is sick. She only has two months to live."

Karen wasn't the kind of women who would drop her bag or other stuff she was carrying in order to console her husband. She closed the door, hung her coat and her purse in the rack and sat next to him. They hugged.

David started to cry.

"I was thinking about visiting my mother before she dies," he said when he was calmer.

"David, you're the only person who asks such questions. Of course, you have to visit your mother. You're her only son."

"Do you want to go?" David asked.

Karen kissed him on the forehead.

"What do you think, tontito?"

"The last time we went wasn't that great," David replied.

Karen shrugged. "Gente mierda hay en todos lados."

"I know," David said. "But, I'm worried about the money."

"Fuck the money. I miss the days when you used to be a Commie. You looked cute with your Che Guevara T-shirt and your black beret."

"We all knew from day one this mumbo jumbo wouldn't fly!"

They laid on the couch like they used to do when they were dating, when there was nothing to do. He played with her hair, told her how beautiful she was. Nothing else mattered when David was with Karen, not even the imminent death of his mother.

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Lima, La Horrible, The Hideous One. Among the dirtiest cities in South America. It welcomed you with a urine smell, a stench that penetrated your skin and stuck there. How many years since his last visit? Eight years? In fact, Alberto had been conceived here. When David found out, he was desperate to return. He didn't want to see his first child being born in Peru. It was absurd. It would take nine months to make a baby, not two weeks, but he didn't care. He felt nervous all the time. He didn't like when the cars didn't stop at the stop signs or didn't yield for the pedestrians. He hated the bus drivers, the combis drivers, the taxi drivers, and all Peruvian drivers. People threw their garbage on the floor. They didn't clean after their fucking dogs shitted on the pavements. He also hated their stupid mentality. "So, you didn't improve your race by marrying a real American?" Karen was born and raised in American, but it seemed that they didn't care about that. "So, you didn't fuck any gringa? What a waste of time." His aunts and uncles were worse. They thought that he had come with a lot of money. They would invite him to fancy restaurants or to the mall and expected that he would pay for everything. "Come on, tu ganas en dolares. Come on, don't be cheap. Why are you an avaro?" He was already regretting coming to Peru. Why didn't he choose The Bahamas or another less stressful environment for his honeymoon? It was supposed to be special.

This time was different. His mother was about to die. It was a matter of weeks, and then he would be free of any attachments to his old country. David felt shitty for having thought that.

In the cab, the driver was asking too many questions. David suspected that the man somehow knew that they weren't Peruvians. That was the worst thing. As a Peruvian returning to his homeland, he could never talk freely about himself, about his plans, about his past or what he did for a living. The country he had left was frozen in a permanent state, and now he was

returning to a different country. Once you emigrated out of Peru, you could never be the same. There was no return.

The driver realized that David wasn't going to talk, so he continued driving in silence.

As the cab was crossing the city, people were waiting for the buses at the corners where there weren't bus parades. The billboards suffocated the sky with their announcements, and the street vendors sold bootleg books to the drivers stuck in the traffic. He watched the kids who begged for money, and their mothers who took care of them with their tired eyes. He read on the walls the promises the politicians made to the exploited nation. They promised a better Peru, a country for the first world, a happier Peruvian. There was Cesar Vallejo talking with Miguel de Cervantes, drinking their emoliente, and Hemingway was serving them. "Yes, I promised myself that I was never going to return to Peru. Yes, I'm actually doing quite well in Paris," Cesar Vallejo said. In this country everything was possible, and if an expatriate had seen a deceased Peruvian poet talking with two famous novelists, it didn't mean that he was crazy. What was real, anyway?

When they arrived at his mother's house, Maria was waiting for them on the pavement. She looked thinner than the last time he had seen her. It never occurred to him that the person who was taking care of his mother could also be affected by the illness. Maria wasn't his mother's nurse, and she didn't receive a salary. She took care of his mother out of gratitude, for letting her live in the house with her child and her husband. David felt guilty. He have never sent her money or gifts, had never thanked her for the trouble. He used to think that it wasn't necessary. His mother had informed him that the house would belong to Maria and her husband. "You don't need this house, son. You have a new life in America. You don't need to return to this



country anymore." Even though his mother was right, he was bothered by her act of charity. The house was his by law, and Maria wasn't even part of the family.

"How are you, primo?" Maria said and hugged him. David felt her round breasts, and that smell that told him she was tired and exhausted.

"No tan bien. I'm tired, you know," David replied.

"Your room is ready, if you want to sleep."

"Thanks, Maria."

He was going to enter, when Maria talked to Karen.

"Y tú, Karencita? How life is treating you?" Maria smiled.

"No me quejo. It can be worse."

They hugged.

"Ay, no llores, primita. You're are going to make me cry too."

"Ay, Maria, you know that I am a llorona."

David imitated Maria and Karen crying, and Mario laughed.

"Ay, primo. You never change."

"Sorry, I couldn't help it."

"And estos mocosos grandotes? Are you sure they're yours, primo?"

"I hope so."

"Don't worry. They are from el mismo palo."

"Ese, mi primo. Todo un campeón."

They laughed, hugged and dried their tears. They forgot for a minute about the pain that David's mother had brought to their hearts. They went into the house and into the room Maria had prepared for them. They needed to rest from the long trip.

"Don't worry about your mother now. She's sleeping," Maria announced before closing the door.

The room had two beds, a wardrobe and two bedside tables. Two white quilts covered the beds and on the tables Maria had placed two big, black Bibles. Through the window they could see the small orchard Maria had built with her husband. They sat on the beds looking at each other, not knowing what to say or how to proceed. They were supposed to get some sleep, but they forgot they were tired.

David was the first one to lay on the bed. He took his shoes off and crossed his hands behind his neck. He looked at the ceiling and thought that it would be a good idea if his mother died tomorrow or this afternoon, so the family had time to visit the city. He couldn't help it. What if his mother died tonight? Would it be different if she died the next year? He knew he was being a jerk, but those ideas were parts of millions of thoughts that crossed his head every day.

Later that afternoon, Maria knocked at the door. Her aunt was finally awake.

"She's a little drowsy now because of the medicines, but you can see her."

"That's okay," David said.

"Just don't talk to her too much."

Her mother looked happy when she saw him entering her room with Maria.

"Are you okay, tia Carmen?" Maria asked her when she was close to her. "Do you need water?"

Carmen moved her head from right to left.

"Okay. Just let me know if you're thirsty or if you need anything. Okay?"

"Go ahead, primito. I'm going to prepare dinner."

David sat on the chair next to his mother's bed. After all these dreams, after all the memories that haunted him, he didn't know how to react. She was almost on the other side of the river. She was already walking into the dark forest.

"How are you, Mamita?" Even for him, his voice sounded distant.

"Mejor now that I can see your pretty face."

David kissed her hand.

"David," somebody whispered.

He looked back to the door and saw Karen holding their children.

"Come on in," he said to the kids. "Say, hi to Abuelita."

Alberto and Mario kissed their grandma on the cheek. The last one to come was Karen. She was already crying when she embraced her mother in law.

"No llore, mi hija," Carmen said weakly. "No llore, que ya me voy a morir y nos los voy a fastidiar más."

"Don't say that, Mom. Remember that hierba mala nunca muere," David said, half smiling.

"Pues a esta vieja ya le llegó su hora," Carmen said.

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Carmen died in the second week of their visit. It happened during her sleep. Despite her painful illness, David could see in her face a tranquilidad he had never seen in other human beings. It felt like his mother simply fell asleep. He didn't even have to close her eyes. They cremated her in a private ceremony and took her ashes to La Punta, a beach in Callao. They hired a boat. Karen, Alberto, Mario and David looked at the Peruvian sea, at the ships that swayed in that immense vastness, at the seagulls and pelicans swirling around the fishermen and their boats.

David took out the vessel and dropped it into the ocean. He watched it sink and disappear into the green darkness.

## Paranoid Kid

I was trying to write about the possibilities of a second revolution in the United States, about what was necessary to start a rebellion that would destroy the American Empire. I was thinking about how to organize minorities in guerrillas, in what cities the bombs and the kidnappings should take place. In other words, I was having a dream where minorities got rid of off all their oppressors. However, as I was conceiving my master plan, I heard a moan, a slap, a girl screaming, "fuck me hard, baby. Fuck me in the ass."

The screams were coming from my roommate's room.

Because I have a vivid imagination, and I didn't want to picture my roommate's balls, I tried to draw a sea populated by deadly monsters, a city drowned at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, the big dick that was penetrating a giant vagina. I gave up. My roommate had distracted me. He was fucking one of his girlfriends and their screams didn't let me write.

I put my face on my desk and looked at the white wall that separated my roommate from me. My shadow lay still behind my grandpa's lamp. It didn't look like a shadow. It looked more like a shade. Thin and remote. Lacking in darkness and in volume.

The cries and the panting ceased. My ideas about the revolution were gone. I didn't know what to write. Even if I could, I knew that inspiration had left me. I have this idea that essays should be written right at the moment when inspiration strikes. Otherwise, it loses its strength. What to write now? I asked myself.

*I like to watch white people crying. They make me feel that they're alive, that they're humans. I wonder if they're robots. If they are, I want to be one of them. I want to be a robot. Is that a strange dream to have? I know I haven't dreamed enough. I know I should have*

*dreamed like a robot. All my confidence is gone. What should I do? Pure will. That's the American way. That's what holds this country together.*

*What about the massacres, the indigenous blood spilled in the land? What about the robberies, the assaults, the rapes, the slaves, the lies, the invaders riding white horses on the prairie, hunting men who got in the way of their dreams? Lies! Lies of the people who could not see how beautiful this country is.*

*Who am I to be taken seriously? Who is going to listen to me? I am the scream muddled in the multitude. I am the voice of a deaf God.*

*Oh! Forgive me, America. You, the great country that opens its door to the tired poor, to the huddled masses. Tell me, America how can I be a real American?*

I felt invigorated. I felt that this poem reflected all my fears and all my hatred. I knew that it was fucked up wanting to be white. Perhaps this was what the poem was really about: the impossibility of being white, that when we said that they would never understand how it is to be part of a minority group, how it feels to be discriminated, the reverse is also true. We will never know what it is to be white. We will never understand what it is to be in the position of power.

I said to myself, the only way is to make a real revolution and make them pay.

Nevertheless, I knew that this poem was a piece of shit. I knew that this was a poem conceived by a resented poet who lived in the depths of hell. Who was going to take me seriously? The only answer came from my roommate.

"Fuck me hard!" My roommate's girlfriend cried.

"Oh, yes!"

I rose from my desk and pressed my ear to my wall next to his room. I could hear their bodies smacking against each other. I could hear their panting and hollow breaths. I could see

that the girl was sucking his dick, touching his balls, inserting her finger in his ass. My eyes were closed, but my imagination was vivid. How was that possible? Maybe years and years of frustration, of failing to date a girl. Maybe countless rejections and "I only like you as a friend" had crippled my sexual life. I returned to my desk and wrote in my diary.

*I watched gay porn to see if I was gay. To be honest, I didn't get excited. There is something unattractive about watching two dudes sucking each other's dicks. I think it has to do with the fact that gay porn cannot make you gay, that if you get excited with gay porn, it is because you were born gay. However, something interesting happened. Out of the blue, I typed she-male porn. A hot girl with amazing tits was fucking another hot girl with his (or her?) gigantic dick. That got me excited. I don't know. Something about being indefinite is appealing to me. I know this because when I see a muscular girl, with arms that can lift 100 pounds, I imagine her sodomizing me, feeling her strong chest but also her wet pussy.*

When I finished, I threw my pen against the wall. I clinched my hands and hit the table. I was drowning in my own filth, in a pool full of excrement. I was a disgusting piece of shit. I looked through my window. El Paso didn't have tall buildings, bridges that took away your breath, lights that painted the sky with excitement and curiosity, or a river that carried centuries of history and pain. I picked up my pen and I wrote:

*Far into the desert there are creatures who fuck our dreams.*

In front of me, the night spread its wings over the dessert. The houses slept like lizards on a warm rock. I couldn't stand it anymore. The screams. The others. The fucking. My loneliness. At this hour the library was closed. I couldn't go there and take refuge. I decided to take a walk around the park in front of the university. It was already midnight and I was hoping that there were no white cops around.

In the park, I tried not to talk to myself. People had told me that I looked super creepy when I did that. Plus, I didn't have an ID if some white cop wanted to know who that crazy talking to himself at midnight in the middle of a park was. Probably he wanted to beat me up for disturbing the peace of these hard working trees. I had read about this Hispanic professor who was shot by a police officer for not carrying an ID. Of course, this was a lie, but it was totally possible. I could picture the professor, lying on the floor, with her disfigured face, with her blood spilled all over the pavement and the police officer spreading some cocaine on her.

"That would be funny," I said.

I kept wondering about my plausible death. Was it enough for me to act submissive? I knew I didn't look too menacing. Most of the time, people assumed I was an engineering student from India or Pakistan, not a potential writer. That was, somehow, a relief. People understood that geeks and nerds could do no harm. That's something, I thought, to be treated like a nerd. Of course, I knew I would never be treated like a white nerd, or to be more direct, like a white person. Maybe in the future, everybody would be treated like a white person. That was my fucked up dream.

By 12:30 no cop had shown up. This was the most outrageous crime I had committed so far: loitering in a public space in front of a university, waiting for white cops to beat me up, plotting in my notebook the most atrocious terrorist attacks.

When I was returning to my house, I texted my friend, Gus.

*What's up?*

After ten minutes, Gus texted back.

*Culero.*

*I survived.*



*What did you survive?* He asked me.

*I walked around campus, and I wasn't shot by a white cop.*

*That's good to know.*

I looked around to make sure no white cop was spying on me. I was the only brown student on campus. I was considered a potential terrorist.

*I wonder if I write on Facebook, 'today I'm going to blow up the university' if everybody would lose their minds.* I texted Gus again.

I kept looking and I found two surveillance cameras. They were definitely watching, those bastards.

*Are you seriously thinking of blowing up the university?*

*I bet they're recording this conversation. I bet they're ready to pop out from the bushes to arrest me.*

*Probably,* Gus wrote.

In that case, I thought, the only place that's safe is inside my head. I can scream: Barack Obama is a fucking assassin. Hilary Clinton is a bitch. My literature teachers are fucking prostitutes. Nothing would happen to me as long as I kept all my thoughts inside my head.

*Are you high?* Gus wrote.

*I wish I was. I kept looking and I found two surveillance cameras. They were definitely watching me, those bastards.*

He didn't write back. I went back to my room. My roommate was still fucking his girlfriend. The government was still spying on me. I laid on my bed. I tried to sleep. I couldn't. The bed's noises, the screams, the fact that the government was spying on me--they didn't let me sleep. Who were those voices from all the unborn chickens in my head?

At 1 am I watched two she-males fucking themselves.

At 2 am I thought of anal sex.

At 3 am I listened to Radiohead.

At 4 am I was completely naked looking at Ciudad Juarez.

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When I woke up, with my iPhone, I took a picture of the sun cutting through the window. Every day, for some stupid reason, I took a picture of the light. I didn't know why I did it. Maybe I was hoping for some kind of epiphany. Every morning there's always light to be thankful for. That was my thinking. It didn't matter. I was hungry. I was going to get up and prepare breakfast when Gus texted me.

*Are you alive?*

*Sort of.* I replied.

*I'm going to Costco. Wanna come?*

*Give me 20 minutes to get pretty.*

*Just don't dress like a slut.*

I went to the bathroom and saw an extra toothbrush. Definitely my roommate's girlfriend was going to stay one more day. It didn't matter. I jerked off. When I finished, I took a bath. I put on some Axe. Outside, I felt like I had a hangover even though I hadn't drunk alcohol. Gus arrived 20 minutes later.

Gus was the only friend I had. In the program everyone hated me. That tells you how egocentric I was and still am. I thought everybody despised me because nobody invited me to their parties or to the bars they went to after class. Maybe nobody hated me, but I hated

everybody. Still, that doesn't change the fact that I didn't have any close friends. Why did that happen? I don't know. Sometimes you want to see the world burn for no particular reason.

In Costco, we were talking about white supremacy again. Our argument was a parody of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X (or Professor Charles Xavier and Magneto if you're a comic geek). He was proposing a dialogue, a sort of holding-hand-together-and-singing-we-are-the-world. As in my unpublishable essays, I proposed a brutal and merciless war against white people.

"You're crazy," he said.

"Why?"

"Hatred doesn't lead to anything productive."

"Only violence can bring real change."

"So we killed all the white people, then what?"

"Then we killed ourselves."

"What the fuck?"

"We kill ourselves and there will be peace in this world. Real peace."

I didn't smile. I didn't chuckle. My face was serious as hell. Gus looked at me. He laughed. I laughed too.

"Pinche loco," he finally said.

Minutes later, I told him about a prophecy I had on Facebook.

"Basically, all these girls who're taking picture of themselves, with their young and perfect bodies, will suffer from Post-Facebook depression. Thirty years from now they will commit massive suicide."

I knew I was talking nonsense, but Gus was pretending to listen to my shit.

"What is Post-Facebook depression?" My friend said.

"Yeah," I continued, "eventually they will get old and will have saggy asses and the photos on Facebook will remind them about their golden years."

"I'm guessing your roommate didn't let you sleep," Gus said.

"You're very correcto," I replied.

"You need a girlfriend."

"Or earplugs."

"Have you ever fucked a prostitute in Juarez?" Gus asked me.

"I'm not that desperate."

"That can be the answer to all your problems."

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A prostitute? I thought. The little sex I managed to have wasn't that amazing. My encounters were awkward moments of laying on top of a naked woman, trying really hard to give her pleasure, and failing miserably. I kissed them. I caressed them. I was gentle and polite, but I could never ejaculate. The only time I came was when I fucked a prostitute in Peru in one of those fancy whorehouses. I paid \$10 for admission. The guard opened a heavy wood door. Inside the club, there was a dark corridor lit by neon bulbs. The girls were standing next to the doors. All of them smiled at me and, for the first time in my life, I checked them out without shame. Who had the biggest boobs? The biggest ass? Whose legs were the longest? Who looked the most innocent?

The first girl I picked was dressed as a school girl. I asked her name and she said Clarisa. Her small room was decorated like a classroom. I could see the desk and different maps of the world on the walls.

"Do you want to spank me first?"

I nodded and grabbed her ass and spanked her.

"I'm such a bad girl."

I felt like I was in a porn movie. Is this my dream? I thought. Is this what I want to do with a woman? My expectations were low, even though many nights I had fantasized about this moment: to fuck, to be fucked, to be inside a pussy, to touch a pair of breasts. It was my first time, and I wanted to make sure that I had fun. I wasn't looking for something special or memorable. Unfortunately, the girl was unexperienced. After some awkward sexual positions and some contortionist movements she tried, my 15 minutes with her were over.

I asked for another drink at the bar. Girls were dancing around other men. Watching the strippers, sipping their drinks, thinking that life couldn't be better, they enjoyed this ephemeral moment where they behaved like kings. All the problems in their lives disappeared in this night, in a dance, in a premature ejaculation. At that moment I thought I was gay. It was a weird revelation. I had never been attracted to men. Who knows? I didn't really know myself.

I walked again down the corridors. This time I chose a more mature woman. Perhaps, she looked into my heart and knew that I was falling into an abysm. With an efficiency I was sure came from years of experience, she sucked my dick the first five minutes. Her tongue licked my penis, my testicles, my scrotum. The next five minutes, she let me play with her tits and ass, while she was giving me a hand job. The last five minutes, with the same efficiency, she put my penis inside her and started to move her hips. I kissed her nipples. I grabbed her big ass. For a moment I saw her face melting in the blue and red light that lit the room. That night, I came really hard.

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We decided to eat in the food court inside Costco. I wasn't feeling like spending more than \$4 on my lunch. I asked for a baked chicken and a soda. Gus went for the Caesar salad.

"The other day I googled *prostitutas en Juarez* and I got a lot of phone numbers," Gus said. "Maybe that's a sign that you must go."

"If I go and I don't come back, would you look for me?"

"I'll light a candle in your memory."

In Gus's apartment, we opened some beers and sat on the balcony. Autumn was almost over and winter was settling down. In that warm afternoon, I wanted to forget about life, death and prostitutes.

"How are your classes?" Gus asked.

"I don't know. I didn't go this week."

"Are you that depressed?"

"I have this feeling of not being here," I said.

"Do you want to smoke weed?"

"I don't have any cash."

"Don't worry. Te la picho."

Gus brought a bag of weed and rolling paper. He prepared two joints. Every time I hit it, I held the smoke for 33 seconds. I don't know why I counted exactly 33 seconds. Maybe I wanted to connect with Jesus, with his immortal kingdom, with his infinite love. By my second joint, I wanted to jump from the balcony and crash against the floor. My final wish was to leave this world without regrets, but I knew that I wouldn't die. I would jump and float on a river of smoke. My corpse was going to depart with a wicked grin, singing, perhaps, from the other world: "you cannot always get what you want."

An ambulance drove through and its red and blue lights hit my face. El Paso was definitely on the good side of the border, and Juarez on the not-so-lucky part. Sometimes, I thought that they just lived side by side, indifferent to the problems of each other.

"Are you going to Connecticut for Christmas?" Gus asked me.

"That depends. If I don't come up with a good excuse," I replied. "I will have to go."

"You don't want to see your family?"

"I hate my fucking family."

"You're fucked up, man. Family is always first."

"That's my tragedy. They're always first."

"Go to Juarez, fuck a prostitute, and stop being bitter with the world."

"Juarez is a dangerous city. I don't want to die."

Gus's family was from Juarez. I tried to apologize, but it was too late. He wasn't talking, but he kept looking at the light in front of us. In those few minutes of silence, I imagined having a conversation with my roommate. "Hey, roomie, could you tell your girlfriend to be quieter. I know we don't get along, but try to understand my situation. I'm horny as hell. I'm jerking off three times a day. I'm starting to watch weird porn. Please, at least let me write, let me have my peace again." That conversation was never going to happen. When we bumped into each other, we only talked about hot chicks, a football game, any topic related to something banal and superficial. Any problem I had with him, I kept to myself.

"I will commit suicide if I have cancer," I said.

"What if it's not terminal?"

"It doesn't matter. I will kill myself anyway."

"Can you kill my thesis director before killing yourself?"

"You will have to pay me first.

"How much?"

"How much are you willing to pay?"

"\$500"

"Fair enough, but I don't want to have a funeral. Cremate me and put my ashes in a coffee pot."

"What should I do with the coffee pot?"

"You can have a cup of coffee every day."

We talked about the United States, about baby Jesus coming with style to fuck everybody in the ass. We discussed how he was going to use Vaseline for the foolish virgins who weren't faithful to him. Finally, we cursed the pedophiles who overcrowded the Catholic Church, and I rose my hands to the lord and sang.

*Jesus wants a cracker.*

*I should clean my finger first.*

*I think he needs some water.*

*Run and get some pauper*

*Before he talks shit.*

*Jesus was a rapper*

*who formed two men*

*that they could get their dicks clean*

*before going to hell.*



Time slowed and it seemed to run counterclockwise, like the sun retreating from the horizon, like a lightbulb glowing backwards. It was summer again, spring, winter and autumn. I looked at Gus. He shrugged, raised his joint and inhaled more weed. His smoke covered my face. For no reason whatsoever, I had one of my premonitions. One of these days, I was going to grab a knife and cut my wrists. The blood would reach the streets, the highways and all the United States would drown in my blood. Thinking about death was so cliché. Thinking about suicide was so cliché. Thinking about the ultimate pretty girl with the perfect face and the perfect body and the most beautiful eyes was so fucking cliché. Salomon was totally depressed. Life tasted like shit. He ate the most delicious dishes in the world, but food tasted like shit. He fucked whores, drag queens, putos, putas, sodomitas, and panzoncitas, and all the penises he blew, and the pussies he ate, and the assholes he licked tasted like shit. That's why he couldn't enjoy life. When he died, his ashes tasted like shit.

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The next day, I googled *prostitutas en Juarez* and I found some websites that claimed they had the best hot girls in the city. I clicked on one of the links and I saw a young girl posing naked with her face blurred. She looked feeble, lacking the weight and the mass that makes a woman real. The captions claimed that she was 18, a legal age to be a prostitute. In other words, it was legal to fuck them. I contemplated the photo. I remembered all the classes I took as an undergraduate about exploitation and the objectification of women. I knew I should have felt bad about even thinking about hiring a prostitute, but I was horny as hell, and in my long months of solitude, I had thought worse things. At the end, I didn't care. I gave a big shit to all the feminist discourses, to all those chicken voices raising from my head. I dialed one of the phone numbers.

"Hola," a male's voice answered.

I hung up. I didn't expect a man to answer the phone. What if that man was a dangerous pimp? The padrote? Fuck. What if the man was her boyfriend, and I had dialed a wrong number? But I was horny, horny as hell. So I called again. This time they guy talked to me in English.

"I have a special girl, La Güera. She has natural big boobs and if you pay extra she does anal. She is a number 10."

The man didn't have an accent, and his voice sounded so natural, even polite. It seemed that he had been doing these kind of transactions for many years. Probably because many Americans relied on him to find a way out of their miserable and lonely lives, and he, in order to give them confidence and security, talked to them with that business-like voice.

I asked him how much and he told me \$80 for La Güera and \$60 for the normal ones (they were between seven and eight).

"How can I be sure that La Güera is that hot?" I asked him.

"I can send you a picture of her."

With an efficiency that was proved to secure deals faster, he sent me the photo of his number 10. La Güera was fucking hot, like the man had promised. I don't know if she was an authentic blonde girl, or if her blue eyes were contact lenses, but she looked like a white supermodel, like one of those girls you see in a mens magazine, so unreachable, so out of your league. For a girl like that, \$100 was a bargain.

I sealed the deal with the pimp. The only problem we had left was to choose the place where we were going to meet. He proposed the Zaragoza Bridge. The hotels were cheap, but I rejected the offer. Zaragoza Bridge was 15 minutes away from where I lived... in a car. And that was my problem. I didn't have a car. I was a graduate student living under the poverty line with a \$40,000 in student debt attached to my ankle like a dungeon ball. Literally, I could have easily

applied to food stamps and other sort of government help, but I didn't because I had some dignity left. On top of that, I was trying to make it as a writer. I think American universities has a nitch for exploiting delusional students. I mean, they exploit football players, basketball players, college athletes and those guys don't care because they have this dream of making it into the NBA, NFL or signing a lucrative deal with a clothing or sport company. Wannabe writers are the same. I drowned in debt hoping that someday I was going to write the great American novel and win prestige, but that was just an illusion. American universities know that. Not all the college athletes are going to become rich and famous. Not all creative writing students are going to become great poets or writers.

I proposed the Santa Fe Bridge, the one close to Sunset Heights. He seemed to think about it, but after a quick deliberation, he accepted.

"I'm going to wait in the Kentucky Club," I said.

"Okay."

"See you at 10:30?"

"Deal. How are you going to be dressed?"

"I'm going to wear a New York Yankees cap and a red jacket."

I hung up and I saw myself in the window. My class was going to start in two hours, and it was going to be my third absent, but I was horny as hell. I showered. I used some fancy body wash and rinsed my cock three times. I put on some Axe. I rinsed my mouth with Listerine. It wasn't that cold outside. With my red jacket on, I walked to my destination. From one of the bridges that crossed Interstate 10, I saw the cars going south and north.

In downtown, I bought some condoms. I knew that in Juarez I could find some drugstores, but for some reason I didn't want to buy condoms in Mexico. I never trusted Mexico. I didn't even trust Peru.

Mondays in downtown were the perfect example of syncretism. You would see Chinese people talking in Spanish. Mexicans who only spoke English. Americans who spoke perfect Spanish, and real Mexicans who looked down at the pochos who butchered their beautiful language. If you didn't have a trained ear, you wouldn't know the difference between a Chicano and a Mexican-American. If you thought that a tall white guy with blonde hair and blue eyes was an intruder, maybe a redneck from east Texas, you were wrong. Probably he was from Chihuahua and was more Mexican than Pancho Villa. If you weren't tuned to these differences, probably this city wasn't made for you.

There was another thing I liked about El Paso. In this city I could easily hide. I could pass as a Latino, as a Chicano. I could pretend that I didn't speak Spanish, that I didn't speak English. Only racist Mexicans and Americans had a problem with that. "Así que hablas con pochadas, eh? So you cannot speak English?" Those were their usual reactions.

In Juarez I would introduce myself as a Peruvian. I didn't say that only my parents were from Peru, that I had only visited Peru two or three times in my entire life, that I had never set foot in Machu Picchu, that I never ate cuy, that my Spanish was good because my mom used to be a high school teacher and she would freak out if I talked to her in English or, even worse, in Spanglish.

I said I was Peruvian because it was easier that way. I suspected they had more sympathy for a South American than for a chicano or a pocho.

In the Kentucky Club I asked for a beer. I sat at a table next to the entrance. I had arrived 10 minutes early, so I waited. In those 10 minutes, I felt very self-conscious. I wondered if other people knew I was waiting for a prostitute. If you wanted a girl so bad, they might think, why don't you go to a bar, to a night club, to any social gathering and ask any girl out. It isn't that bad, mijo. Just introduce yourself to her, make some small talk, pichala some drinks, make her laugh, and ask her for her phone number. I can't do it, I might say to them. I have tried ten thousand times. That's why you're a pendejo, mijo.

A costumer played a Beatle's song in the jukebox. By his looks, I thought he was going to choose a ranchera, a narco-corrido, one of those songs that take you to the darkest and wildest part of Mexico, but he chose *Girl*. I started tapping on the table. That fucking song always took me to my bored and pathetic childhood in Connecticut. Suddenly I had this epiphany: the prostitute was never going to show up.

"Do you want another one, sir?" The barman asked.

"No, thank you."

I paid and went outside. I felt the fear that boiled under this city. I thought it would have looked cool if I had a cigarette in my mouth while walking down Juarez Avenue. I would have inhaled the memories of failure and defeat.

I didn't go back to the bar. I kept walking down Juarez Avenue. The voice came back. He whispered forgotten songs from my childhood. He painted pictures where I could see myself as a little kid wading on the beach. What would have happened if I have been born in Peru?

## To The Other Side

The yellow light cut through the window. Half of my brother's room was drowned in darkness. I heard a man's shout, another man's laugh; some students were talking about a game. As they walked away, I heard their steps fading into the city. What time is it? I didn't know. How could I? I didn't have a watch. I needed to get up, but this was the only time I could be by myself.

Eventually, I turned the lights on and looked for my phone.

*Where are you?* My brother had texted me.

*I'm still in your dorm.* I wrote him back.

As always, my brother's room was a mess. He had put in one corner all his dirty clothes, including his underwear. His desk was full of books, notebooks, single papers filled with doodles and different types of pens without their caps. Not even his bed was made. I had been forced to sleep in my sleeping bag.

*We're in the Tricky Falls. Hurry Up.* He texted me.

*OK.* I texted back.

I took a quick shower, shaved my face, brushed my teeth and sprayed my whole body with cologne. I wore skinny jeans, a black T-shirt and a pair of black Converse. I don't why I did that. Most of the time, I didn't care about my appearance. To be honest, I preferred to wear a pair of khaki pants and any kind of shirt. I guess I wanted to impress my brother's friends, show them that an engineer could also be cool. Not that I was desperate to fit in with the writing community, but since my brother left Connecticut for El Paso, he had become more distant. He barely called us, and when we called him, he never answered his phone. Perhaps, he had grown dissatisfied with himself, with his career choices, with life in general. That's why I was looking to have a drink with him. With three or four beers, maybe we could reconnect.

El Paso looked like any town in the United States. It had a small downtown full of parked cars, but with few people walking around. The only tall buildings belonged to the banks and to the City Hall. There was a baseball stadium. I guess it was the only building that I enjoyed seeing from my window. I always had liked stadiums of any kind. For me, those buildings represented a human desire for mindless spectacle. What was the point of seeing two teams playing against each other? What was the point of choosing a side? "So you cheer for the blue team?"

"No. I belong to the red team. The red team is part of my blood. If the red team loses, then I lose."

"It doesn't make sense."

"Yes, it does."

"And what about the blue team?"

"Oh! I hate those sons of bitches. Those fucking bastards."

And when I saw those empty stadiums, those vacant seats and the stadium lights that lay dormant, I felt that without humans, stadiums looked like a carcass of a dead Leviathan.

There was another thing that I found fascinating about El Paso. From my window, I could see Ciudad Juarez. It was an interesting thing to witness, especially when the city was regarded as one of the most dangerous metropolises in the world. I had heard about the massacres, the kidnappings, the pits crowded with arms, legs, torsos and decapitated heads. That was the reason my family was always calling my brother. We didn't trust Mexico. We didn't trust anybody who didn't speak English. My father always had told me that those countries were shitty for a reason; that across our borders people didn't follow the law, that they were barbaric nomads living in a chaotic land. I knew it was a fucked-up prejudice. I knew I was supposed to be sided with *La Raza*, with the people who had suffered from the racist machine created by the founding fathers.

White Privilege, they called it. The system that fucked people of color on a regular basis. The system that always was inventing new ways to screw them over. They also had created multiculturalism, a sedative that made minorities believe that as long as they kept their cultural traditions inside their houses or practiced them in safe places like cultural fairs, Univision, Telemundo, the academia, they were safe. "Don't worry, my immigrant friend, everything is going to be all right. Just wear your colorful costumes and eat your exotic food where you belong." They were supposed to feel blessed, despite the fact that more and more people of color were sent to prisons every year. They were supposed to do the pledge of allegiance, despite the fact that a white cop was justified in killing them as long as they looked suspicious. The cop didn't need to present any legitimate proof. He didn't offer them the benefit of the doubt because doubt was another privilege that only white people enjoyed.

As I was walking to the bar, I realized that at the end everybody was going to die. "Sería el colmo," I thought, "that white people discover the cure for death, that they become immortal too." I hoped that at the end, a big ass asteroid would destroy the earth, getting rid of the white people of the world.

At the bar, I saw my brother drinking a fancy craft beer and talking to a blonde girl. The girl had this kind of androgynous look. She was tall and her long, pale arms made her look like the girl from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. She also had one of those weird haircuts. Half of her skull was shaved. The other half was dyed purple. Yet, there was a beauty in her—in her small breasts, in her thin nose and round jaw.

"Hey, little brother! Do you sleep well?" He asked me when I sat at the table.

"More or less."



"This is Melissa." He introduced me to his friend. I was disappointed that her name wasn't Sally.

"This is my brother, who can't stand the heat from El Paso," he said to Melissa. "He's a fucking gringo. He misses the cold weather of New England."

"I thought you were from California," Melissa said.

"Of course we live in California, but he was accepted at the University of Connecticut to study engineering."

"You don't like California?"

I don't know why she asked me that question. We weren't from California. My brother had lied to her. Why did he do that?

"I just wanted to live on the East Coast for a change," I lied.

"Who wants to live on the East Coast?!" my brother yelled.

"Your brother must have his reasons," Melissa said, half smiling.

"Come on, have a beer. You need some alcohol," My brother said.

"Be right back," I replied.

I went to the bar because the waitress wasn't around—not that the place was full anyway. The bartender had a long, red beard. He looked like one of those motorcycle gang members. I imagined him driving into the red horizon, escaping from the police with his girlfriend holding him tight on the back seat. Unfortunately, he shattered my dreams. His voice was polite and even a little high pitched. Hipsters, I murmured.

"What can I get for you?"

"Do you have organic coffee?" I asked.

"We don't serve coffee here, sir."

I wanted to say, "I thought this was a hipster coffee house, but instead I said, "Do you have Brooklyn Larger?"

While I was waiting for my beer, I looked around. There were girls talking to their boyfriends, their boyfriends making exaggerated hand gestures to prove how big their dicks were. Somehow, the neon lights blended with the incongruent music. Yes, the songs didn't make sense at all. I expected some rancheras, corridos, even country music, but these people wanted to prove that they were modern, that they belonged to the most civilized part of the United States. My girlfriend was always complaining that I was happy thinking shit about people, stereotyping them, making fun of their weird accents or weird clothes.

"\$4," the bartender said when he handed me the drink.

I paid him with a five dollar bill. "Keep the change," I said.

Just in that moment, my girlfriend texted me.

*How's everything?*

*Fine, I'm in a bar with my brother. I wrote back. He wants to get me wasted.*

*That would be great. Do something new for once.*

*Thanks for your support.*

*You are welcome, sir.*

????

*Great! Now I'm dead.*

"Hey! Stop texting and interact with real people!" My brother yelled from his table.

I drifted, drink in hand, to the table. My brother received me with a slap on my shoulder. He almost made me spill my beer.

"Oh, little brother. What about if we continue the party in Juarez?"

"What?" I said. I wasn't drunk enough to do something stupid like that.

"Do they speak English in what?!" My brother laughed. "Oh, little brother, you were always the mathematician in the family. I was always the lazy writer. Why didn't I choose something more practical like your career?"

Because you're a dumbass, I thought.

"What is literature good for! There are thousands and thousands of writers out there." He stopped. "Hey, do you bring your passport as I told you?"

"I have it in your room."

"We have to get it."

I finished my beer. My brother drank the rest of his. Melissa drove us to the house. I picked up the passport. Then, she drove us again to the Santa Fe Bridge. She couldn't come with us. She had other things to do.

Even at this hour, people were crossing in and out of Mexico. The car lines were packed, and the flow of the people crossing was constant. It looked like it would never stop. To be honest, I was a little afraid of crossing to Mexico. In my mind, I saw myself being blown up, kidnapped or killed by a stray bullet. I had the delicacy to share my thoughts with my brother, and he assured me that Juarez was the safer city in the world, that all the killings were part of the American propaganda to stop people from El Paso from having fun. I didn't know if he was joking.

"Plus, we're just going to drink in Kentucky Club. We are not going to visit some Mexican ghetto, little brother."

"Are you sure?"

"We're here and Juarez is over there, and it only takes a few steps to have real fun. Come on! Don't be a faggot."

"It's just that I don't want to die. Besides, what's wrong with having fun in El Paso?"

"It's fucking boring!"

"We were having a good time in the bar," I said.

"Come on! We already have our passports. We only have to cross the bridge, walk to the bar, meet some girls."

"And then?"

"I don't know. I'm not Nostradamus."

To hell with him, I thought. I didn't want to die, but then I remembered why I came to El Paso in the first place.

"Fuck it. Let's go."

Crossing the bridge, I saw a graffiti depicting the revolutionary hero Che Guevara. He raised his hand and in a speech bubble he said, *Los pobres recuperarán su dignidad*. Next to him there was a Latin American map being taken by the evil claws of Uncle Sam. I looked at the famous Rio Grande River. It was just a scrawny canal running south.

"Look! Look up at the sky," my brother said. "There's no fences. The sky is empty of nationalities, languages, border patrols and checkpoints. Nobody lives in the sky. Humans, you know, are earthly creatures. If they want to move, they have to walk because they can't fly. They have to spend a lot of energy and resources to travel across great distances. That's why once they're settled, they don't want to move again. Thus, countries are created, nationalities invented and borders delimited."

I was afraid that my brother was going to throw up, but thank God, he didn't. If a person vomits, I wondered, to whom does the puke belong? Who cleans the mess? The Mexican authorities? The Americans? Do they hire a cleaning lady? If the gringos are hiring, do they hire a poor Latina woman? If the Mexicans are hiring, do they hire a poor Indian girl?

We crossed the bridge and went to the Kentucky Club. There were men and women drinking and talking more vividly than the people from the bar in El Paso. The barmen, dressed in black suits, were shaking margaritas or preparing other cocktails. At the end of the bar, I could see the small kitchen and the cooks cooking the food for the starved costumers.

"In this bar, they invented margaritas," my brother said.

"Really? I did not know that."

"This place is magical. Everything ends and begins in Kentucky Club, like Cheers, you know, where nobody knows your name," my brother said and laughed really hard.

We sat at one of the tables and ordered a couple of beers. The people sitting around us were dressed nicer than us. Their cups were filled with more sophisticated drinks: whiskey, margaritas, vodka and maybe gin. What is this place? What kind of country is Mexico? I had never been in Peru, and I wasn't planning to visit the place where my mother had been born. I wanted to visit Europe, Japan, maybe Russia or any exotic European country. Why Mexico? Why Latin America? I was half Peruvian and half American. There was always something ambiguous about me. Not completely Latino, not completely white. Something in between. But since I was a nerd, nobody questioned my allegiance. Everybody assumed I was a kind of weird white, maybe a southern Italian, an Eastern European, or a surfer from California, someone who had been exposed to the sun since babyhood. I was tall and lean, thanks to my dad, but I got my mother's eyes, her black, untamed, curly hair and her dark complexion.

"Look around!" My brother said. "These normal people are having fun and having regular ass conversations. Can you see fear in their eyes? Can you tell me if they are terrified of living in Juarez?"

"This is just one bar. It's not Mexico," I said.

"Coming here gives me hope."

"You sound like you want to move to Juarez."

"Maybe."

"My mom is going to kill you."

"She won't even dare to come here to get me. She has been whitewashed. If scientist invent a cure for dark skin, she probably will be the first to try it." My brother laughed and slapped my shoulder. "Definitely, I'm crazy. Look at these two girls. I think I know one of them. The one with the red hair."

I looked at the girl. Like me, she didn't fit the phenotype of redhead girls. She didn't have a pale skin or blue eyes. Her skin was light but not white. Yep, she was a fake redhead.

"How do you know her?" I asked.

"There was a stand promoting the Studies Abroad Department, and this girl handed me a pamphlet. She talked to me in Spanish and when she heard my accent, she said, 'you're not from here?' I didn't want to say that I had been living in Connecticut since I was five years old. So, I lied. I told her that I was an international student from Peru, that I was new here."

"You have been here almost all your life. You're basically American and you have citizenship."

"I know, but that doesn't surprise anybody here. 'So, you're a pocho!' They would say. 'So, you're a fucking coconut!' I told her I had just arrived from Peru to save me the trouble."

Mexicans are more fond of international students than Chicanos or Pochos. Come on, let's talk to them."

Before going, he put his hand on my chest. "Remember, you're from Peru."

"I'm only half Peruvian."

"Just be quiet. I'll do the talking."

We grabbed our beers and walked toward the girls' table.

"Hola, te acuerdas de mí? I'm the Peruvian guy."

The fake redhead looked at us, smiled and said my brother's name. Then my brother said hers.

We looked at each other for a minute. These were the kind of situations my brother loved to get me into. He was a little drunk, but he had faith that he had a chance to get laid with a girl he had barely met.

"Can we get you something to drink?" My brother asked them.

"Mande?" The brunette girl said.

"Can we get you something to drink?" I repeated the offer.

That was it. I was glad that the girls were going to say no, or make up a lame excuse to reject our offer, but inexplicably, they said yes.

We sat and called the barman. The fake redhead asked for cranberry juice and vodka. The brunette asked for another beer.

The drinks were brought. We raised our glasses and yelled, "salud!"

By default, I had to hit on the brunette. My brother was already talking to the fake redhead. For the first time, I knew I had nothing to lose. I had a girlfriend and was going to see her soon. If the brunette rejected me, I wasn't going to be devastated. Perhaps, I could hook up

with her. If we needed a room, I was sure there was one cheap hotel around. Of course, my girlfriend wouldn't find out. I'm already here, I thought. I should try to have a little fun.

"So, what do you do?" The brunette girl asked me after a long silence.

"I am a photographer." To hell with the truth. That night I was going to be a tortured artist.

The brunette was going say something, but the redhead whispered in her right ear. They laughed and looked at us.

"Boys, do you have a car?" The fake redhead said.

"Why?" My brother asked.

"There is a new bar in Juarez. We want to visit it. It's on Gomez Morin."

"We can take a taxi," my brother offered.

"We're not going," I said to my brother in English. I didn't know why I did it. The girls probably knew English, and I was making a fool of myself.

"Why?"

"It's too dangerous."

"It's not."

I smiled at the girl and took my brother to the bathroom.

"This is our golden opportunity," my brother said.

"We don't know where Gomez Morin is. It could be in a dangerous place."

"The place is the most fresa ever. Only snob people go there."

"We barely know these girls."

"Give me a break, okay? You can return to the house if you want. I'll take the girls with me," my brother said.



"I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"

"I have to take care of you. You're too drunk."

My brother tried to return to the table and I tried to stop him. He pushed me away.

"I remind you that I'm your older brother."

I tried not to laugh. I was taller than him. I could easily defeat him in a fight.

"Come on! Are you going to risk your life for a pussy?" I said.

"Two pussies," He said and laughed.

"Think with your head and not with your dick," I shouted.

"I have thought too much with my head, little brother."

My brother stumbled out of the bathroom. The girls were gone from the bar. I paid the bill, and took my brother to get some fresh air.

"What took you so long?" The fake redhead asked him in English.

My brother looked surprised. I was surprised myself. What the hell were they doing here? I assumed they had left. If you're a girl and a drunk guy wants to hit on you, I don't think it's a good idea to wait for him outside the bar. What kind of game was that?

"My brother had to puke. I had to help him," I said.

"Is he okay?" The brunette asked in English.

"Yeah, he's fine."

"Are we still going to Gomez Marin?" My brother asked.

"I think you need to take care of your brother," the fake redhead said.

"Don't worry. I'm okay," my brother said.

"Well, we better go," the redhead girl said.

"Come on, we can take a taxi," my brother said. "It's only midnight. You don't have to pay a thing. We're going to pay for everything."

For some reason I still can't understand, the girls accepted my brother's offer. We called a taxi and settled on 80 pesos or maybe more. I don't remember.

In the taxi, I was too tired to pay attention to the route the driver was taking, but I fell into a reverie. There I was, having a lovely evening with my girlfriend. The snow fell over the mountains and the gray wolves panted in the thick cold, but I knew this wasn't a dream. It was more like having a nightdream. My girlfriend had taught me that word.

"A nightdream is a reverie that we have between the dream and the real world. When you're about to sleep but you can't. Some powerful force stops you from doing it. If you think about it, nightdreams are worse than daydreams. Imagine you're a prisoner in Guantanamo Bay, and after long hours of torture and humiliations, when you desperately need to sleep, the torturers turn the lights on, play loud music, and lower the temperature of the room. What they're doing is taking away your right to sleep. In nightdreams, you're always walking that fine line between reality and unreality. That's when you cease to be human."

We arrived at Gomez Marin and tried to find the bar, but the bar was nowhere to be found. The fake redhead proposed to find another one. We got out of the cab, paid the driver and started walking. We stumbled through restaurants, nightclubs and parking lots. We were surrounded by the loud music, by the neon lights, by the screams that tried to escape the sewers.

*"What are we doing here?"*

*"Nobody heard what you asked."*

*"Why do I think I'm going to die?"*

*"Nobody thinks you're going to die. Your brother doesn't think you're going to die. The redhead girl doesn't think you're going to die. You don't know shit. You're being paranoid. In a city where more than three million people live, nobody wants to kill you."*

*"The narcos want to kill me."*

*"The narcos never existed. They were an invention of the CIA."*

*"The Mexican government wants to kill me."*

*"The Mexican government is also an invention of the CIA."*

We entered a bar that looked like a beach shack. The beers were brought. The music was good enough to enjoy the night without talking to anybody. I think I was too busy dealing with my own paranoia. I was trying not to fall into another nightdream, so I listened to the conversation.

*I want to be a nurse.*

*I want to write a novel.*

*I want to travel around the world.*

*I want to save the world.*

*I want to save at least one person.*

*I want to have a golden glove.*

*I want to live in another country.*

*I want to have sex.*

The beers were empty. The barman was shaking a cocktail—up and down, mixing liquors with other liquors. The palm trees painted on the walls started to peel off. For a minute there, I lost myself and was playing a video game inside my head. I was playing with my friends and my girlfriend. We were drinking beer and telling my friends how Sophia was so fucked up that she

didn't even remember how she got to her house, that she had hooked up with Mike in the bathroom and at the end of the party, she kissed John's girlfriend. I was in a nightdream, and I had this lucid moment where I asked myself, what if... what If my mother had stayed in Peru? Stupid question. I was born here. My father was white. I was basically raised as any American boy, but the question was always there, lingering in my half Peruvian subconscious.

"Are you okay?" My brother asked me. It seems that he wasn't drunk anymore, or that he was so drunk that he had reached another level of intoxication. "Are you still afraid of this place?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you want to go to a shithole, to a Mexican shithole?" My brother continued.

"I am in a nightdream," I replied.

"A place where you can find midgets wearing sombreros, niños panzones dancing with fat girls, Mariachis dancing with the La Pelona?"

"Is that possible?"

"Everything is possible in Mexico, fucking pocho."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You're a fucking pocho. That's what real Mexicans call the Latinos who think they're white. Those coconuts who can't speak proper Spanish, who are constantly butchering the language. Fucking pochos and sus pochadas."

"What's going on?" The barman asked.

This was real, I concluded. My brother was screaming at me, and the redhead and the brunette were freaking out.

"Nothing. My brother wants to puke," I said and took my brother to the bathroom.

"I'm going to catch pneumonia," My brother said after I splashed his face with water.

"Nonsense! For Christ's sake, can you behave?" I yelled.

"I'll do my best," My brother said and smiled.

"No more drinks for you."

"I can't. I'm an alcoholic."

When we exited the bathroom, the girls were gone for good. Just when I was going to pay the check, my brother tried to tackle me like a football player, but he was so drunk that he tripped over and fell on the floor, bringing a table full of drinks with him. The people seating around jumped, and my brother got covered in alcohol. I thought the manager was going to call the police, and that the three guys and the two girls were going to kick my brother. Nothing happened. They helped my brother get on his feet. I apologized. I paid for the drinks spilled all over the floor. I also had to pay the manager for the broken glasses.

"No te preocupes, muchacho. Estas cosas suelen pasar."

In the cab, I was thinking about all the things my brother had told me. I knew it had opened a breach between my brother and me. Obviously, I was never going to visit him again, or Peru, or Mexico or any Latin American country. Fuck the raza, I said, I want to be white.

## **I Want To Hold Your Hand**

I loved when Sara called me a big nerd, better than when the bullies in high school called me Mexican. In those moments, I would tell them I wasn't Mexican, that I was Peruvian, but they didn't care. They continued to call me Mexican until graduation.

I used to live in New Milford, a small town in western Connecticut. I lived far away from Hartford, Elizabeth, Bridgeport and Queens—cities that most Americans associated with Hispanic immigration. I guess my parents were tired of the dirt, of the overcrowded streets, of the police frisking the walkers that looked suspicious. "Those people," my father used to say, "They never learn. They're always fighting, always hitting their wives, abusing drugs, screaming their constitutional rights." When my family moved to New Milford, I knew the reason. They wanted to move away from their own people. They wanted to live in a city where the majority of the population was white. I don't condemn them. In New Milford, they found the peace they never could find in those cities.

When we moved to the new house, I stood at my window and stared at the forest in front of me. In that silence, I could hear my own heart beating. I could hear the little birds chirping and the branches swaying with the swift wind that bent the trees. My parents wanted to spend most of their lives in this town. In this ungraspable solitude, they wanted to find the happiness promised to them before they immigrated to the United States. I tried to be optimistic. I knew I wasn't good at making new friends. Being popular wasn't one of my superpowers. I couldn't be the class clown. I couldn't play football or basketball. The only thing that I was good at was being a nerd. My favorite subjects were math, English, and history. In other words, for most of the teachers, I was the perfect immigrant who made them believe that the American Dream was still alive. "If your son continues to study this hard, Mrs. Garcia, he can study at Harvard." "Keep this pace,

son, and you can be the first Hispanic president of the United States." I liked that idea. The only problem with that dream was I didn't have papers. I was an illegal immigrant.

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I met Sara at the Hispanic Club in my junior year. Since I was a fluent Spanish speaker, and since it was an easy extracurricular activity, it wasn't a bad idea at all. "Why not?" I said to myself. "You're like the big T-Rex in Jurassic Park." Inevitably, I was going to be the totem, the immigrant kid who denied all those fruity liberals who claimed that our high school lacked minorities. I didn't care. I was going to be the kid who spoke perfect Spanish and who could recite Neruda's poems like no other. In fact, in my first year, I became the president. For the first time of my life, I feel like a powerful man.

Sara was this overachiever little girl who would yell at you if you didn't do something right. The kind of girl who would panic if something didn't go according to plan. Like when we organized a Latino Festival with the University of Danbury and with the Spanish Department, and the band that was going to play Peruvian music didn't arrive on time. She got mad at me because I didn't panic like her. "Peruvians," I tried to explain it to her, "have a very ambiguous sense of time. Don't worry. They're going to be here." She couldn't trust me. She almost had a panic attack. If it wasn't for Professor Diaz, who assured her that the band was on her way, she could have easily cried in front of all the students, teachers, professors and parents who were attending the festival. At the end, the band arrived and the people waiting in the auditorium ended up dancing on the stage.

However, when she wasn't planning anything, when she hung out with me after school, she was the easiest person to be with. I could talk with her about my favorite comic books and anime movies. We could discuss who was the most badass super villain—the Joker or

Magneto—, who owned the fastest super vehicle—the Bat Mobile or Black Bird—, and other topics related to the fantasy world of comics that we called home. We were two dorky teenagers in search of a refuge, in search of a universe built for us.

The only problem I had with her, beside her bossy personality, was that I had started to develop feelings for her. A friendship between a girl and a boy, even in these modern times, tends to grow into a more romantic relationship. I didn't love her yet. I was only feeling a slight inclination to kiss her. I had never kissed a girl before, and I was wondering what it was like. Was it magical and surreal like other students told me? Was it the best thing in the world? I needed to find out. I believed that Sara was the right person for my first kiss.

Around the end of my junior year, I decided to invite her to my house to work on a project for the Hispanic Club. It was the first time she was visiting my house. Unfortunately, I didn't foresee my parents' plan. My mother prepared Causa Rellena as the appetizer, Arroz con Pollo as the main dish, and Mazamorra Morada for dessert. Of course, they let me work with Sara without interrupting me. They even didn't offer her ice tea or lemonade. I realized what they had plotted when we came down and saw the fancy dinner on the table.

"Am I your girlfriend or something?" Sara asked me.

"No. No. Sorry. My parents. You know. Peruvian parents."

I didn't know what to say. I was embarrassed. I wasn't expecting such behavior from my parents. However, it got worse when my dad said that Peruvians were the Asians of the Hispanic community.

"We're very intelligent, you know," my father said. "If you don't believe me, look at my son. He's number one in his class. Nobody can beat him in science and mathematics."

"I can see that," Sara answered him.



“You’re Asian too, right?”

“I’m Filipino.”

"How long have you been living here?" My mother asked her.

"All my life, Mrs. Garcia."

"You were born here!" My father said.

"Not exactly, but I'm hundred percent American." Sara said imitating a soldier.

That was my big problem. I didn't have papers. I immigrated when I was seven years old on a tourist visa. I was supposed to visit the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Empire State Building, even Disneyland—if there was still time—, but instead, my parents took me to New Jersey, then to different cities in Connecticut, and finally, we settled in New Milford. In other words, I never saw the big green statue. Disneyland only existed on TV and in DVD movies. Ellis Island was a fairy castle. For me, America was the cities nobody loved, the buildings only Hispanics dared to live in, and the constant fear of being deported.

"We want to be Americans, but the government doesn't let us," my father said.

We stopped talking after that confession. When we finished, we went upstairs to play video games in my room. It was still early. Sara's parents were going to pick her up at nine.

I like to believe that those mindless moments was the only time I felt like a normal teenager. I didn't think about the future. I didn't ponder about college. What for? After graduating from high school, there wasn't anything higher to pursue. I was condemned to work in a Burger King or in a McDonald's. My father, in order to cheer me up, would tell me about José Carlos Mariategui, a self-taught scholar who taught in the most prestigious Peruvian universities. “Son, he didn’t study in fancy colleges. What do you the need college? If you are disciplined and

methodical, you can learn anything. Do you want to be a mathematician? Well, go to the library and read math books.”

My father used to be a history teacher when we were still living in Peru. He always was talking about la importancia de leer siempre, the constant need to always read. He taught me to believe in the power of education. It didn't matter what our social-economic status was (or our immigrant status for that matter); as long as we always had a book under our arm, we could achieve anything. Yet, despite my father's philosophy, I didn't want to go to college to be a great scholar or rise to the top of the social pyramid. I wanted to go to college to have a decent job, to avoid working in a fast food chain. I had a dream that one day I might be able to buy a nice house, make barbecue in my backyard and eat my hamburgers on the bank of a river next to my son. Why was that dream so difficult to achieve?

"Why are you not playing? We're losing!" Sara yelled at me.

We were playing *Call of Duty* and we were losing because I wasn't paying attention.

"Sorry," I apologized.

"Damn it."

"What colleges are you thinking of going to?" I asked.

She turned off the game and sighed. "I don't know. Maybe University of Connecticut or Eastern State Connecticut University. I don't know. Can we play?"

"You don't really care, do you?"

"It's not that. It's just like I don't want to make my parents spend a lot of money. I could easily get a good scholarship if I stay in Connecticut."

What about going to Peru? I wondered. I could teach English and have a decent job. I could study international business and travel around the world. I could go to Machu Picchu and work

as a brichero. I could seduce a lot of gringas who were dying to fuck any Peruvian man. With the Internet I could still be connected to the world. It seemed to me that going back to Peru wasn't a bad idea, but I was afraid of the kidnappers, of the thieves, of the drunken drivers, of the neighbors who were always asking for money. I hadn't been in Peru in a long time. I didn't know how to survive in my own native land. The memories I had of Peru were vague, and as I spent more years in the United States, those memories became more difficult to evoke. Besides, I had an almost perfect life in New Milford. I had friends who were like me. I was the president of the Hispanic Club. I could be whatever I wanted in the comic cons, in the parties my friends organized, in any event that was related to the universe of Marvel or DC Comics. Yet, I could never be American. The high school counselor had told me that I better get used to the idea of not going to college, that it was better for me if I learned some technical career, like carpentry or soldering while I still had the chance. I refused to follow that advice.

"I want to burn a city," I mumbled.

"New York?" Sara asked.

"Washington. Like the Brits. The only the time the United States got kicked in the ass. Sometimes I imagine a city burned to the ground, ashes dissolving into the river, an American soldier crying for the destruction of his native land. They deserved to be humiliated. Those men, who robbed the land from the Indians, failed to invade Canada. Eventually, they invaded Mexico and decades later, the rest of Latin America."

She didn't answer me. She looked at me like I was a potential terrorist. I didn't blame her. I didn't know why I had said those things. Maybe it was an epiphany about my future. It was my destiny to burn this country down.

Just in time, Sara's ride arrived. I was relieved. I started to freak her out a little. Thank God, I was left alone with my thoughts.

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The week before senior year started, I was walking toward the comic store. It used to be a bodega, a jewelry store and a beauty parlor. The destructive gust of failure had come many times. It was a vacant lot for two years until some optimistic nerd rented it and transformed into a safe place for us to hang out. For the inauguration, he organized a costume party and a contest. The winner would receive a Bat Mobile Dark Knight Edition. I dressed as the Joker. I didn't win, but I didn't think for one night about my future.

The store was going to close in 15 minutes. I looked at the action figures, with their capes and their muscles. Not that I was desperate to look like one, but I imagined having super powers. I would help all the kids who tried to cross the border. I would take them to their parents or their aunts. I would rescue men strayed in the desert. I would punish all the racist cops and the border patrols who mistreated us. I would threaten to kill the president and all the incompetent politicians if they didn't give papers to all the undocumented immigrants. I would be a terrorist in the eyes of the government, but a hero in the eyes of my people.

"Ten minutes to close," the owner announced.

What to buy? Watchmen or Sandman? Maybe an anime movie? Why not a soccer ball? A soccer ball to play with my friends. I would gather my friends, organize them in two teams, put two rocks on the road for the goals, kick the ball, stop the ball from entering the goal, look out for bullies who might take the ball away from you, it's the only ball you have, it's the one Grandma gave you for your birthday, continue playing, be happy. Where was that ball?

"Five minutes!"

I decided to save the money.

I was always excited for the first day of class: new classrooms, new courses, new teachers and new books. But, as always, after the first day, the excitement wore off. It was my last year. Somehow, a month went by and autumn started to rot the leaves, to dampen the roads, to sadden people's eyes. However, autumn didn't spoil my mood. After all, it was my favorite season. It reminded me of winter days in Peru, of rainy afternoons and outcast skies, of the herbal teas Mom used to prepare to protect me from the flu. In those autumn days in New Milford I loved to walk to the town's park, sit on any bench and read a book checked out from the library.

Since I didn't buy any comic books during the summer, I had \$30 in my pocket. I felt rich and confident. I decided to invite Sara for a date. She lived close to my house so I could walk. We could have coffee or an ice cream in the cafe downtown. It was a matter of asking her out. I needed to walk with her after school, do some small talk, and very casually, ask her out. And that's exactly what I did.

"Do you want to have a cup of coffee?"

"With whom?" She replied.

"With me!"

She laughed. "Be more specific, dummy."

"Do you want to have a cup of coffee with me, Sara?" I asked her again.

"Where and when?"

"Downtown... at the Coffee House on Bank Street. Tonight—Friday at 6:00 pm."

"I like that place." she stopped and placed her index finger on her chin. "It's a date, then. Don't forget to wear something pretty."

After the conversation, I got onto the bus. Through the window I saw the other students from my high school talking and yelling at each other. I looked at the empty field behind the building. During the summer, not knowing what to do with myself, I played soccer with my friends and with some girls from the soccer team. My friends played to get girls. I wanted to play like I used to do when I lived in Peru.

When the bus arrived at my condominium, I got off the bus and, as I was climbing up the slope to get to my house, I saw Mrs. Asswood walking her dog. I didn't have any problem saying hi to her, but every time I did, she never answered back. She was a mean, white, old lady. I always wondered why she was like that. Maybe, her grandfather founded the Ku Klux Klan. Probably, her father was a Nazi general who escaped Germany when the Reich crumbled to pieces. I wasn't being paranoid. In this country, anything was possible. In the 40s, white people ate popcorn and drank coke when they witnessed a lynching. In the XIX century, the government rewarded white settlers to hunt Native Americans and scalp their heads. Thus, it wasn't impossible to imagine Mrs. Asswood as the proud daughter of a white supremacist. I imagined her as a part of a secret organization whose mission was to eradicate all the non-white immigrants in the United States, and her dog was a cyborg that recorded all my movements and conversations. They were dangerous.

I said hi as always. She didn't answer back. I speed up. If I stopped now to look where she was going, cops were going to raid my home, handcuff me and take me to Guantanamo Bay.

The house was empty. My parents were working overtime at the factory. I changed my clothes. I took out my food from my fridge and put it in the microwave. Because I hated eating alone, I played some music in the dining room. In that particular aspect, I didn't like Peruvian music. It was the only thing I wasn't proud of. *Música criolla*, *música andina* and *música afro-*

peruana were only fun to listen to in Peruvian parties, cultural festivals and special occasion when I was forced to show my Peruvianess. Was I a traitor? For me it was just a matter of taste. When I was sad I listened to Radiohead, Elliott Smith and Yo la tengo. When I was angry, to Nirvana, Bob Dylan and Godspeed You! Black Emperor. In those weird moments, I didn't feel like listening to Pepe Vazquez.

That was the other reason I didn't want to go to Peru. I suspected that I wasn't Peruvian anymore, that after 10 years of living in this country, I had forgotten how to be Peruvian. What was it to be Peruvian, anyway? What was it to be American? What about just being a normal teenager? If I could stay in New Milford, work, study and have a girlfriend without anybody asking me about my loyalty to any nation, I could have been the happiest man on earth. It wasn't too much to ask.

At five I took a shower. I used a fancy body wash bought for this special occasion and shaved the little beard I had. I used my father's cologne. I wrote a note and stuck it on the fridge. My parents were going to return from work around eight. I didn't want to make them worry.

I walked through the same route I took every Saturday to go to the comic store. In that late afternoon, I felt different, more confident, less scared of my future. I stopped thinking about college. I didn't even think about Sara or what I was going to say to her. Planning my moves wasn't my strongest suit. Act natural, my father told me, pay attention to her words, to her story, be your fucking self.

I was calm when she arrived. I only had shredded three napkins. Sara smiled when she saw me taking the little papers away.

"Do you want something to drink?" I asked her and smiled.

"Perhaps a glass of white wine."

"I don't think they serve alcohol here."

"They do. You only have to ask."

I wasn't sure anymore. Did they sell wine here? I was going to stand up. Didn't we need to be 21?

"I'm not old enough to buy alcohol."

"Don't you have a fake id?"

"No."

"Bummer."

Definitely, I was out of my comfort zone.

"You're so easy," Sara said and laughed.

I wondered if she was making fun of me because I was illegal. No, I thought, that would be too cruel.

"A green tea would do it," she said.

I went to the counter. I asked for a green tea and a smoothie. I paid \$10 to the girl attending the Cafe.

"We could take your order to your table, sir." The girl said.

I felt embarrassed and went back to my table.

"What were you thinking?" Sara asked when I sat again. "What were you thinking when you invented me for a cup of coffee?"

"Like...I mean, I just want to talk."

"Just talk? Nothing more? Just talk?"

"Perhaps get to know you better."

"You've known me since junior year."



"Not like I want to. If everything works out, maybe we go for a real date."

"I thought this was a date."

"Is it?" I said half joking.

"I don't like to fool around. You know that."

I was expecting some terrible words like, "I only like you as a friend." or "Give me some time. I need to think it through."

"Do you like me?" She asked.

"Of course."

"Tell me why do you like me?"

She tried hold my hand. If we got married and somebody asked me, hey, who wears the pants? Without hesitation I would say, "Sara wears the pants. She is the mega boss."

"I like your eyes," I replied.

"Anything else?"

"I like how you turn normal situations into weird ones. I like your sarcasm. I like that you're always right in everything, and I'm always wrong," but I didn't say that.

"I don't know what I like about you, but when you're not around I feel like it's the end of the world," I finally said.

"Not bad. I like that answer. More points for you."

"What happens if I win 1,000 points?"

"Do you want to find out?"

"Maybe."

"I like you too. I don't know why it took you so long to ask me out. I'm not that gorgeous. I'm an average girl. I'm approachable."

"I'm a little shy," I said in my defense.

She leaned forward and kissed me.

"It is official. This is our first date."

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Sara was like the best friend I always dreamed I'd fall in love with. She would kiss me in the park, in the bus, in the movie theaters. She let me rest my head on her cinnamon legs. Sometimes I would sing to her a song from The Beatles, and she let me hold her hand in the mall or when we hiked in the forest. I loved when she called me big nerd every time we made out in her room or on her balcony despite the winter. School was never mentioned. We talked about life. We discussed the books we read that the English teacher never assigned. When there was nothing to talk about, we watched Netflix. She was funny, smart, coquettish and a little cruel when making fun of the dumb cheerleaders. I loved her and she loved me back.

Her parents were nice to me. They always asked me about my family. I suspected Sara had told them about my legal situation. That was the reason every time they asked me about Peru, I exaggerated. "Yes, it was a terrible place to live. My dad was always afraid of going to work. My mother never let me play in the neighborhood." Sara laughed when we were in her room. She knew that I was making fun of her parents.

To be honest, I only remembered Peru as a big, chaotic city, as a house near the ocean, as a market full of unknown people walking around with dead chickens, fruits, and vegetables, and vendors announcing their sales. Only when I started to read the news on the Internet, I learned that my native country was a dangerous place to live. Of course, the news might be exaggerating, but now that I think about it, I had a better life here. Naturally, America wasn't perfect, but I had this dream of an America for all the races, creeds and beliefs; an America who treated all men

and women equally; an America where the happiness of its citizens was its priority. That was the problem. I wasn't an American citizen.

Was I Peruvian? I spoke Spanish. I had two Peruvian parents. I learned that the Incas were conquered by the Spaniards, that around the XIX century, my country was independent, but when you are seven years old, you tend to believe everything people tell you to believe. If, by a strange accident, I forgot the history of my native country, it didn't matter. I could learn it again.

"I can't believe they believe everything you say," Sara said one night.

"I can't help it. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. They deserve it. They used to be hippies, you know, very liberal, very, 'let's save the world.'"

"What happened?"

"They realized they were white."

"It's funny when you talk shit about your own parents."

"I'm adopted. Remember?"

We slept together after the second month. Her parents didn't mind. My parents pretended not to know what I was doing in Sara's room. I was a man. This was America, but I wasn't a bad son, so I told them that Sara was taking birth control pills and that I was using a condom. They freaked out, but didn't oppose. They had to trust me.

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The first spring rains came in May. I was holding Sara's hand. We were returning from the graduation ceremony. We didn't run when the first drops fell on our shoulders. We continued walking, even when the sky poured gallons and gallons of water on us.

"The gates of heaven are open," Sara said.

"You woke up a poet today."

"That's the romantic in me. Rainy rain, tiny man, why do you get us wet? I wish you weren't made of water. I wish you were made of air."

When we arrived at her house, we took a hot shower, boiled some water, and drank hot tea in her room. The house was empty. The first lightening flashes painted the walls white.

"What are you gonna do?" She asked me.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Are you going back to Peru?"

"Probably."

"Do you want to stay here?"

"I can't stay. I don't want to work in a McDonald's."

"We can get married."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Don't you love me? Look at my eyes and tell me that you love me."

"I love you."

"Let's get married."

"What about our lives?"

"When you have your papers, you can go to college with me."

What if I wanted to go to Yale or to the University of Texas at Austin? Why should I study in Connecticut?

"Don't do it because you feel obligated," I said.

"What's the worst that can happen? Get divorced? If we last three years, you can have your citizenship and we can be friends."

She sounded like she was sacrificing her life, like a soldier throwing his body on a grenade.

"I know you're trying to help me, but..."

"I love you."

"I know."

"So, why are you rejecting my offer?"

"Your parents?"

"It was their idea."

"They really like me. Don't they?"

"You're a good kid. You deserve to go to college. They said you can live here in the meantime."

"I know for sure that my parents are not going to love the idea."

"We can live together and we can go to University of Danbury and we can take courses together and be happy."

She was sacrificing for me. She was marrying me to help me. You better be a good husband, I said to myself. Still, why did I feel like I was losing my freedom?

"Sounds like a good idea," I said.

I looked at the clock nailed to the white ceiling, at the seconds passing through the numbers, at the minutes that waited to exist. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. The hours, the days, the weeks, the months, the years that waited ahead, that waited for me.

## **Far From Any Road**

For Danny, traveling was like a dream. All those hours on the road, driving his bike or riding the bus, were like witnessing a slideshow of his life. The past and the present melted into a reverie.

He never married and never wrote the great American novel. He suffered more defeats than victories. Yet, somehow, he was happy. Life taught him that grief was a noise that interrupted a symphony. It was be quiet and listen to the air blowing the leaves away. He also enjoyed the bitter taste of a good beer, the crispy texture of French bread, the sweetness of a fresh fruit. He didn't mind that his car was too old. He only drove to listen to the music while moving along the black road. He loved walking barefoot on the hot sidewalk. He hadn't bought a new pair of jeans in 10 years. The only expensive clothing that he owned was a polar jacket he used every day in winter time.

Every year, during winter break, he would go to Peru.

In his old suitcase, he packed two pair of jeans, three T-shirts, six pairs of socks and twelve pairs of underwear. In his backpack, he put a book, his laptop and his journal. He took the bus from New Milford to Danbury, and from Danbury to Southeast Train Station. He read the book he checked out from the library. Not that he didn't own books, but the idea of sharing a book among a community of readers made him feel less lonely.

When he was in New York, he took out his journal and wrote a short poem about the city. The people, the cars, the unreachable buildings and the chaos always impressed him.

In the airport, the passengers always reminded him of the first Americans, when herds of men crossed a frozen ocean in order to find food and shelter, to escape from the famine and

desolation of their hostile lands, and then he thought about the moon. Are we going to colonize it too?

He didn't care to find an answer. He looked for a chair to sleep. When he found it, he was glad he wasn't the only one sleeping in the airport.

The next day, he asked the flight attendant for a glass of water. When the girl returned with a bottle, he smiled. He drank the water, got comfortable in the seat and opened his book. He couldn't read.

The airplane was filling up. The passengers lifted their suitcases to place them in the compartments. From the window, the tiny employees carried the heavy luggage into the airplane. On the other side of the sun, men and women were getting ready for a new day.

He hold his breath when the plane took off. When he was a kid, he liked to imagine he was going to Mars every time he travelled to Peru.

When he breathed again, the earth looked smaller, the clouds bigger and his heart was beating fast. To pass the time, he played some music on his iPod. During the fourth song, he fell sleep.

When he woke up, he went to the bathroom, washed his hands, looked himself at the mirror and read the signs: *Don't smoke. Don't drink the water. Don't despair if we crash. When we crash, don't be afraid. We're gonna die anyway.*

He got out and looked at the flight attendant. She was pretty, probably in her early twenties and had a firm ass. Only in those moments, his fortress of solitude collapsed. It took the presence of a young woman, full of energy, hope and sexual energy to make him doubt his happiness. The most difficult part was that he didn't knew how to hide his excitement, his need for young women.

When he was in his seat again, he wrote in his notebook: *the presence of a female body is powerful enough to make me fear death again*. He crossed out the sentence and rewrote, *the smell of female hair is powerful enough to eradicate my fear of Death*. The first sentence was better.

He made sure that the passenger next to him couldn't read what he had written. It was the only freedom he cared about. Not freedom to bear arms, to follow any religion, to say whatever he wanted to say, but freedom of thinking, of being a sexist jerk, a piece of shit, a bastard, un perro malparido, an inconsiderate and despicable human being. If people got the chance to read his journals, they would lynch him ipso facto. He smiled, closed his journal and returned to his iPod.

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In his first visit to Peru, he discovered that he didn't have a strong accent when he spoke Spanish. Nobody suspected he had been living in the United States all his life. His grandma, fearing that the neighbors would start asking her for money, said that her daughter was visiting from Trujillo. It wasn't a good idea to broadcast that her grandson had been born in the United States.

From the window he saw Lima growing like a Gordian knot. Closer, it looked more like a tumor growing at the expense of the host. That was the only thing he didn't like about Peru: its capital. One of the dirtiest cities in the world. For that reason, he spent as little time as possible there.

When he arrived at his house, he paid the driver in dollars, stepped out of the taxi, and rang the bell. He waited with his suitcase next to him and his backpack on the floor. After a few seconds, Cristina opened the door.



"Danny, just in time. Carlitos and I are having dinner."

He came in and went to his bedroom, took a cold shower and put on some clean clothes. Cristina and her son were eating soup. When he sat, nobody asked him about the United States, how the last winter was, or how he spent the last Fourth of July.

When Carlitos finished, he went upstairs, and Cristina asked Danny where he was going this time.

"Maybe south," Danny replied.

"Ica? Tacna?"

"I don't know. I might go to Arequipa."

"La ciudad blanca! Es a pretty city. There's a lot of places to visit. Can you bring me something?"

"If it's not that expensive."

"Claro que no, just some souvenirs."

"Do you have the money?"

"Ay tio, you never change."

Danny went to sleep. Cristina went shopping with Carlitos. When Danny woke up, he went for a walk. Summer had just begun, and a breeze cooled the late afternoon. The park was quiet. In one of the bodegas close to the house, he bought a strawberry cake and a coke. He ate like he used to do when he was five years old, when his mother wanted him to keep still during their visits to the family. When he finished, he walked around.

He remembered reading about an old businessman who was killed last month. The old man had a small restaurant in La Marina. The body was found with a knife plunged into his stomach. The investigation concluded that it was a crime of passion. In his younger years, Danny

would freak out, but at his current again there was no point. You can die in the safest place on the world, Danny thought, like those kids in Newtown. You can die in Disney World, in a terrorist attack, in a bathtub, even in your sleep. Fuck, you can die in the womb of your mother.

Danny visited the abandoned restaurant. Nobody had bought it since the murder. Somehow, its emptiness attracted him. He wanted to buy it and go inside to see the violence of time.

Danny visited the abandoned house. Nobody had bought it since the murder. Its emptiness attracted him. He wanted to go inside to see the ruins after an act of love. After the killing, death was its most faithful client. "Why do you eat here?"

"I don't eat here. I only chill out."

"Still. It creeps me out."

"You shouldn't. I'm your friend, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"You have grown grumpy over the years."

"I guess it's the opposite."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to visit Arequipa."

"Nice place. I like it."

"Should I die there?"

"No. I told you when you're going to die."

"That's nice of you."

"Don't worry."

Danny wondered if the neighbors were looking at him.

When he came back, Cristina was making mazamorra morada. She smiled at him and kissed him on the forehead.

"Could you look over Carlitos? La comida will be ready soon," she said.

Carlitos was playing on his Playstation. He had an expression of concentration. He didn't seem to be bothered by Danny's presence.

"How is school?" Danny asked him.

"It's all right."

"Dinner is ready," Cristina yelled from the kitchen.

Cristina served the escabeche with white rice and sweet potatoes. Carlitos turned off the video game and ran to the bathroom.

"You too, Danny. Go and wash your hands."

In the bathroom, Danny looked at the liquid soap. Fancy, he thought. He pressed the button down, and a red liquid spread out on the palm of his hand. He rubbed the liquid with his other hand until a foam was formed. After he rinsed his hands, he stood there lost in thought. He saw himself as a kid in New Milford, a brat who was running in a soccer field chasing a soccer ball.

"You are doing a good job with the house," Danny said to Cristina when he came back from the bathroom.

She was in the living room. She had been talking on the phone.

"Tell that to the rest of the family," She said, a little bit angry.

"Screw them. I don't like them and they don't like me. Besides, the only person that matters is you."

"They say you are a miserable old man."

"I bet they're asking for money."

"They want to start a business," Cristina said.

"They know I would never give them money."

"They're saying that I'm being selfish, that I'm taking advantage of you."

"I promised I was going to take care of you and your kid. I can be a miserable old man, but I'm a man of my word. What do you care about them, anyway?"

"You have to talk to them."

"What's the point? They won't listen."

There was an uncomfortable silence, a point where it didn't make sense to continue with the argument without saying the truth. They ate in silence. Danny could hear his teeth gridding the food, the water being swallowed down his throat, the clattering of the forks. He was thinking about the truth, about what happened to Cristina. Did her family suspect? Did they know?

"Can I go now?" Carlitos said after finishing his plate.

"Sure, honey. Don't forget to say thanks to your tío Danny."

"Thanks, Tío Danny."

Carlitos walked out with a dignified air, like a tiny monarch or a dwarfish general.

"How old is he?" Danny asked.

"Seven."

"He's getting big."

"I know."

Another intermission. Another silence. They knew they had to talk about that little problem, about the gossip the rest of the family knew, but they continued eating.

"Well. I'm going to my room," Danny said. "What are you doing for breakfast?"

"Tamales with fried camotes and coffee."

"Nice."

Danny went into his room, turned the light on, and in that empty space, he remembered the first time he saw a naked woman. It was like listening to The Beatles for the first time. It was a revelation. The scent of dark skin, the trembling of the small body, the childish voice of a scared teenager, and his voice telling her that it was also his first time.

An hour passed and a shadow sneaked in his room. He felt a terse hand caressing his cock.

"I think you are ready." The shadow smiled.

Cristina climbed on top of him and put his cock inside her. He felt the lips opening up. He didn't move. He looked at the white ceiling, and thought about the flight attendant. Was she fucking anyone? Was her boyfriend handsome? Did they have kids? Did the kids go to school? Would they go to college someday? Danny ejaculated, his body relaxed and the shadow kissed him on the lips.

"Good night," the shadow said.

Danny took a cold shower, washed his penis, lost himself in the running water.

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The next week Danny bought a bus ticket to Arequipa. In the terminal, he was reading the book he had checked out, *The Immigrants*. It told the story of a Pan-American family that lived from the late XIX century to the early XXI century. From exploration to discovery, from subjugation to rebellion, from birth to death, the family represented the best and the worst of Peru and of the United States. How was it possible to end servitude in Europe but not to end

slavery in America? What happened to the scientific spirit in the first Great War? Did the spirit get corrupted? Why did the brilliant minds of the XX century work for evil governments? As any true human experience, the answers weren't that simple. Great literature, Danny remembered, never gives a definite answer. It only asks the important questions.

The bus arrived, the passengers moved and Danny followed them. He continue reading *The Immigrants*, but a young woman sat next to him. He guessed she was between her late twenties or early thirties. She had blonde hair—probably dyed— green eyes. A tourist. Was she American? Only Europeans were adventurous enough to take a bus in Peru, even the expensive ones. But maybe she was American. He couldn't tell.

"Hola," she said after the bus had left the city and was driving through the Limenean desert.

Situations like these were awkward for him. A person tells you hi and you have to reciprocate. Can strangers start a conversation with a less common word? This uncomfortable silence wasn't a sign that he had found the special one, but a symptom that he didn't know how to transition from a small talk to a meaningful conversation.

"Es un bonito día," the woman said again.

"Si," Danny replied in Spanish. "It's a beautiful day." He said in English.

"Hey, you can speak English. Where did you learn it?"

Americans had asked him that question so many times in his life that he didn't feel offended anymore. He took it as a part of being a short, dark guy living in a country that took it for granted that all people of color were immigrants.

"I have lived in the United States for a long time." Weird, he thought, I didn't say I am American.

"Nice. Your English is very good."

They shook hands. Her hand was pale and rough, not a very lady-like hand. Her arms were muscular. She wore a sleeveless T-shirt, a scarf around her neck and a bandana covering her hair.

"Are you going to Arequipa? Because I'm going and I don't know anybody, so I figured I could make some friends on the road. I know that's fucking crazy, but who cares."

"I've never been in Arequipa." It was the only thing Danny could say.

"Hey, that doesn't tell me anything. Are you going or not? Sorry, sometimes I start talking and talking and I never stop." She put her hand on his shoulder. "Please, tell me when to stop."

"I'm going to Arequipa too."

"So, you see, we have something in common."

It was the first time Danny had met an American girl like Elizabeth. Most of the American girls that he had befriended or dated in his life were shy, antisocial girls or girls who had problems with the fact that they had been spoiled during childhood and in puberty. He wondered what kind of American girl Elizabeth was. The over compulsive one? The one that needed to have everything in order? The one with the identity crisis? Those kind of white girls who had never travelled outside the United States? The English literature student who had never read a translated book? The weird ones that watched Netflix all day and only dated dorks like him? He also wondered if American girls had a similar system to classify Latino men. Probably just one. The over romantic, over macho, over sexualized and over dramatic one.

"What are you going to do in Arequipa?" Elizabeth asked.

"I like to travel a lot." So far that was the most confident answer Danny could give her.

"What places have you visited in the United States?" Couldn't she stop?

"Connecticut..."

"Connecticut! I hate that state." Oh, really? What can you tell me about the state I was raised in? "It's so haunted and boring. I prefer New York or California."

"Why do you think Connecticut is haunted?" You, hyper white girl. That's it. That's your new category.

"I don't know. The first time I visited Connecticut, I could only see trees, trees and more fucking trees."

"I might visit Connecticut it again." Yes, Danny, lie, lie to the white woman.

"Don't do it. Go to Boston or New York City. Those places are much better." I thought those two cities hated each other.

The dialogue became a monologue. Elizabeth talked about being a citizen of the world, how important it was for her to meet people from different parts of the world and how Americans needed to learn that the United States wasn't the center of the world. She got excited, to the point where Danny wished he didn't speak English.

"What do you think of Americans?" She placed her chin on the palm of her hand and blinked at him three times.

"They are nice people. I think," Danny answered while trying to avoid eye contact with her.

"Are you sure? Don't Latin-Americans hate us; you know, imperialism, The Bush Dynasty, the Cold War? I thought we screwed you over."

"I think our incompetence screwed us over."



She pointed her index finger at him. "You're strange. You're the first Latino who says that."

"Probably you haven't meet a lot of Peruvians." Or probably, Danny thought, you're the typical gringa who wants to fuck Peruvians because you want to redeem yourself. That's another type.

"You're absolutely right. I should meet more Peruvians. Sorry if I've offended you."

"That's okay," Daniel sighed and tried to read his book.

"What's the book about?"

"Europeans, Americans and the human condition."

"What else? I mean, can you be specific?"

"It's about a French family who becomes a Peruvian family, then an American family. It's the history of Europe, of the indigenous people from Peru, of the forces of destiny and fate, of war, rapine, melancholy and hope. I don't know how to explain this book. I guess I might tell you better once I finish it," Danny said.

"You mean, it's difficult to read?"

"The plot is complicated. Too much shit going on. Oh sorry," Danny apologized.

"Don't be. I like the word shit. It's very flexible. But I think what you really want to say is: I don't want to talk about it. Leave me alone. I want to sleep. Right?"

Danny burst into a fake exaggerated laugh. "Why do you think that?"

"Sometimes I overwhelm people, especially strangers. Yeah, sometimes I can talk for hours and hours. Once, when I was 13 I was talking to my boyfriend and while I was telling him about the new novel I was reading he went to the kitchen, grabbed a glass of water and came back. I didn't notice I was talking by myself until he told me what he did."

"Were you pissed?"

"I assumed he didn't do it on purpose."

"Are you still dating him?"

"Hell no! We broke up like a zillion years ago. You know something good about Latin Americans? You can open up to them and they don't judge you," she confessed. "They don't think you're crazy."

"How can you be so sure of that?" Danny looked into her eyes.

"I don't know. Americans nowadays don't want to listen to anybody."

"And what happens if a Peruvian guy doesn't want to know about your problems?"

"So far I haven't met one."

"What happens if there is an American who really wants to listen to you?"

"You're very smart."

For the first time she was quiet.

"I'm old. If I were smart, I wouldn't be here," Danny said after a while.

"What do you mean?"

"If I was smart, I would be living in Europe or in the United States. I wouldn't be stuck in this country," Danny lied.

"Do you regret living in Peru?"

"Not exactly. I'm just stating a fact. You told me I was smart, and I'm telling you I ain't."

"You're funny too."

"I don't think so, but thanks anyway," Danny said.

"Well, I'm going to hit the sack."

Elizabeth extended her arms and yawned. She snuggled in her seat.

"What are you going to do?" Elizabeth asked him with her eyes already closed. "What are you going to do while I'm sleeping?"

"Finish my book?"

"Well, I was thinking. Maybe you should come up with a topic."

"About what?"

"I don't know. Your life. Your country. Anything that pops up in your mind. And in return, I'm going to do the same."

Danny stared at her chest: small but firm; round but slightly oval. On her forehead and above her lips, drops of sweat were sliding down. Perspiration is what makes women mortals, Danny thought. Perspiration and the dread of living alone. In his youth, he worshiped women, and when they rejected him, when he failed at his stratagems to get a girl, he would go to a whorehouse in Peru, in Mexico, in any place that he visited. The prostitutes were kind to him, knew how to treat him. They were better than lovers. They were his friends.

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"Did you think of your topic?" She asked him when they arrived to Arequipa. Danny thought that she had forgotten about that during the trip.

"Kind of," Danny replied.

"Do you want to talk about it over a cup of coffee?"

"I don't know any cafe in this city."

"We can ask around," Elizabeth said.

She sounded too confident for her own good.

They found a cheap hotel near downtown. To save some money, they registered together. Later, they walked around the main plaza to find a Cafe. When they found one, she ordered a cappuccino and Danny asked for a cup of black coffee.

"Don't you feel strange?" Elizabeth said when the waitress walked away.

"Why?" Danny replied, placed his arms on the table. He didn't know why he was feeling more at ease with her.

"You know, an old guy sitting next to a young woman," she continued.

"I'm only 45," Danny grinned.

She looked at his eyes. He found her exposed, ready to answer whatever question he might ask.

"Did you think of your topic?" Elizabeth said.

"I was thinking how strange it was meeting you. I mean, it's strange that a guy like me is talking to a girl like you."

"Are you talking about destiny or fate?" Elizabeth inquired.

"What's the difference?"

"You can control destiny. Fate, I'm afraid, controls you."

"You can say that, but since I'm not young anymore, I should call it luck. Something that can't even control itself. You see, 20 years ago I would have asked for your number to have sex with you. Unfortunately, I'm at an age where it's easier not to feel any regret if I don't fulfill my desire."

"Do you want to fuck me?" She opened her green eyes, smiled and played with her blonde hair.

"If I were 20 years younger."

"What would you do after you fuck me?"

"I don't think I will fuck you, but if I do, well, I will get to know you better, write you letters every weekend, make expensive long distance calls and dream of a future."

"A future with a stranger who lives in the other corner of the world. A future with a person that I barely know but falls in love with me anyway."

"Like las telenovelas."

The cappuccino and the coffee arrived. Danny sipped from the hot boiled water, burned his tongue but didn't complain.

"However, that won't happen. I won't write letters to you. I won't make expensive long distance calls. I won't dream of a future with you."

"Why?"

"I'm too old for disappointments."

"What if I want to fuck you at least once?"

"I'll do the best I can."

"But I don't want to fuck you. You blew up your only opportunity."

"The other advantage of old age is that you get better at self-sabotage."

"Sorry to shatter your dreams."

"Don't worry. Prostitution is kind of legal in this country. It's easy for me to fuck any beautiful woman."

"You're a dick."

"The closer you are to death, the less you care about being a dick."

"What if I stay with you despite you being a dick?"

"We can keep talking, visit the city and have a nice day."

The silence that followed was heavier, as though the molecules of air were being replaced by the smog of a polluted city.

"Sure, but don't get any ideas," Elizabeth warned him.

"Fortunately we got separate beds."

They walked around downtown, looked at the stores stocked with modern and ancient artifacts: microwaves, plasmas TVs, indigenous pottery, colorful ponchos. The light of the day was receding, and the darkness descended over the city. The street lights painted the old buildings yellow. The moon arrived and the sun departed into the west.

They returned to their hotel.

"What do you want to do?" Elizabeth asked while she was looking for something in her backpack.

"We can drink some whiskey. We can sneak some alcohol into the hotel, if you want."

"Sounds like a plan, but let me take a bath first."

Danny laid down on the balcony. He didn't pay attention of the beauty of the city. He could hear the water falling over Elizabeth's body. He closed his eyes and saw her firm legs, the drops of water falling from her soft skin down her pubis, and her hair transforming into a waterfall. What else did he see with his mind? Elizabeth emerging out of the darkest sea. Like the little mermaid, she couldn't talk. They fucked, they howled and they become bubbles.

Danny woke up from his short dream. He saw the night, the city lights, the void left by the stars.

"Are you ready?" Elizabeth asked when she came out of the bathroom.

"Let me take a bath."

"There's no hot water."

"I don't mind. I need cold water."

It was colder than he expected, but he stayed under the freezing water. Somehow, he felt purified. Little by little, his common sense came back.

"So, how do you feel?" Elizabeth asked him when Danny got out of the shower.

"Better."

In one of the grocery store they bought a cheap bottle of Pisco and two plastic cups. On the balcony, hiding the bottle behind the planter, they started to drink.

"This is how it ends," Elizabeth said.

"What ends?"

"This relationship. It ends with a bottle of Pisco and a starless night."

"That's quite poetic," Danny said after finishing his second cup.

"I have my moments, but you haven't answered me. How does this end?"

"You go back the United States." If only she knew that I'm American, Danny thought.

"Can I change your mind about the fucking?"

"If I don't fuck you, you can do it with a prostitute. No big deal."

"I regret telling you that."

"Too late," she said.

She refilled her cup and look at the city. Her blonde hair laid on her shoulder, sometimes swaying with the cold air. Her eyes glittered by the light of the moon.

"What do you really think about prostitution?" Elizabeth asked after a long pause.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" Danny took another shot. "Are you going to judge me?"

"I'm too drunk to judge you."

"Prostitution exists because there is a demand. In other words, it's always going to happen, voluntary or involuntary, whether a woman wants it or is forced by others. A man who is horny and can't get any sex by normal means, will go to a prostitute. I know that some feminists are in favor and others are against it. For me, it's simple. A woman can use her body any way she wants. The only thing we can do is to protect her physical integrity. However, I suspect that even if we provide the most progressive laws to legalize prostitution, the fact that men are getting pleasure out of women without thinking about the women's pleasure tells me that men are the only beneficiaries. In prostitution, legal or illegal, the other does not exist. But, again, I fuck them so everything I've just said means shit. As you can see, I'm too old to be consequent with my beliefs."

Elizabeth poured herself another cup and drank in one shot.

"Fuck you for liking prostitutes!"

Elizabeth threw the plastic cup over the balcony. She laughed and picked up the bottle and drank the rest of the liquor. She belched and plodded through her own drunkenness to the room and laid down on the bed.

Danny looked at the plastic cup being dragged by the wind. The cup, weightless and empty, stumbled through the flagstones. In the room, Elizabeth's small chest raised up and down. Her hair was spread on the bed like golden threads. He sat next to her and observed her breath coming out of her nose.

"You know this is your opportunity," Elizabeth whispered.

"You're right. It's my opportunity."



Danny took the blankets from the other bed and laid them down on Elizabeth. He went to the bathroom and washed his hands, his face and combed his gray hair. He grabbed his backpack and without saying goodbye he left the room.

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## **Vita**

Dennis Wilfredo Gonzalez was born in Peru and immigrated to the United States in 2006. He continued his literary studies in Western Connecticut State University graduating with a Spanish B.A. He's recently graduated from University of Texas at El Paso with a M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

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