Everything In

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EVERYTHING IN

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EVERYTHING IN

by

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THESIS

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Exploring the Bildungsroman in a Cultural and Communication Vacuum

What is an I without a we, and does the absence of the latter loosen, if not erase entirely, the boundaries limiting self-discovery? Or is a lack of personal, social, and cultural context its own barrier to identity? In 2018, I was reading Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* for a graduate course. I brought it to the high school I was teaching at, and it quickly became a window into an experience of identity that I thought was mine alone, when I shared the novel with my students. They, like me, saw the photos in Cantú’s novel of family, places, and cultural artifacts as familiar—in that they were similar to their own family photos. However, unlike Cantú’s speaker, they felt distant from their own family photos and could not relate as Cantú’s speaker could. These students, who like me, had familial roots in both the United States and Mexico, felt no connection to one side of the border or the other. They felt like they had no tie to either their maternal or paternal history. Above all, with no pull and no pressure to identify with either, an indifference was present—one that seemed to have the potential to remain in place forever. It was not for lack of curiosity, but in resignation that an empty set of cultural identity was the norm. It is from this place that the character and story of Andrew Salinas rises. *Everything In* furthers the discourse on identity and what it means to come of age when culture is withheld and the bridge spanning the gap between past and present is never constructed.

*Everything In* is a multigenerational story focused on seventeen-year-old Andrew Salinas, whose grandmother’s death on his father’s side becomes the impetus for Andrew to see the extent to which his parents have disconnected him and themselves from any sense of culture, family, or heritage. Having been sheltered from ever knowing his white mother’s bigoted family, Carlos, Andrew’s father, complicates matters for Andrew’s understanding of family and identity when his indifference over the death of his own mother, Dani, is put on full display. Forced to reckon with
the ramifications of an outburst he had at school over the frustration with his family, Andrew is sent to therapy to resolve his disconnect. While seemingly a simple matter of communication, *Everything In* explores the ways in which the past is bound to the past, and how silence and inaction work to create barriers for Andrew to ever know the Salinas family, its story, and where he belongs in it.

At its core, *Everything In* is a coming-of-age story. To that end, my own introduction to the form is not insignificant. It was the bildungsroman that I was first introduced to while working on my undergraduate degree, and the fact that the curriculum focused on 20th Century Irish and British literature was critical as I considered the impetus and cultural differences for this novel. My focused exposure to James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and D.H. Lawrence’s Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* made clear, at the time, that this genre (Anglocentric in the course I was in) was one in which discontent existed within the protagonist, and for the hero to break free from the expectations set upon her or him, or to find one’s place within society, the hero must go on a journey of self-discovery. I walked away with an understanding that “through a harmony of aesthetic, moral, rational, and scientific education” (Castle 665) that the hero’s identity would come to light and that the genre itself “articulates the interconnection and interdependence of the hero’s inner life and the social system in which he or she moves” (Castle 671).

My understanding of the genre would shift when I entered UTEP’s graduate writing program. In looking at the bildungsroman through a more modern lens, it can be said that “the relationship between the individual and society that is central to the bildungsroman has been complicated by issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Rholetter). In being introduced to novels like *Parrot in the Oven* by Victor Martinez and *Canícula* by Norma Elia Cantú, the cultural
and socioeconomic factors associated with these novels, do not corrupt the form, but expand it to address the complications associated with coming of age. Paul Morel’s need to break from his mother’s grip in *Sons in Lovers* in order to form a relationship of his own with another woman is as complicated a struggle as Martinez’s hero, Manny, must deal with in *Parrot in the Oven*, having an abusive father and the expectation to bear the weight of how his decisions will impact the way he is perceived in his neighborhood.

In light of this, the form must have a plasticity to it, and the impetus for the hero’s journey must also be able to reflect cultural shifts. In *Mexican White Boy* by Matt de la Peña, the author not only tackles the challenges associated with being a mixed-raced adolescent living in America, but also the complications that arise when language becomes a barrier to building relationships, and how the absence of familial connections makes one’s identity even more challenging to discover. De la Peña’s protagonist, Danny, not only surrounds himself with those cultural influences with his friends as representatives, but he is also driven to bridge the gap toward his absent father by writing him letters. Andrew Salinas in *Everything In* departs from this archetype. He was raised in a way that has left him resigned to what is being posited as being ‘empty of identity’. After the 2016 election, Andrew not only understands the politics of his last name, but also his position as a “white” American. Despite this recognition, prior to his grandmother’s death, the need to explain this duality for himself remained absent and fostered his indifference, leaving him to think in isolation and be the arbiter of cultural views and beliefs he has no expertise in. This is most apparent with his own father.

So why, at the most random of times, he resorts to asinine and juvenile displays of identity, is just pathetic. Fortunately, I’d like to think that somewhere along the line I had imparted in me a strong enough sense of self to not get all butt hurt about a
piñata that was more for him than it was his own son. I can only imagine that strength came from my mom (Chavez p. 38-39).

In consideration of both the classic and modern interpretations of the bildungsroman, the challenge with bringing Andrew to the page lies in how his coming-of-age manifests when he seemingly has no history or culture to be drawn to or from which to escape. The novel seeks to question whether Andrew’s parents, Carlos and Karen, would be complicit should their son’s identity form completely outside the family and whether there is a moral imperative to avoid this. Moreover, in consideration of the bildungsroman, how is the hero’s journey changed? Is breaking free from an absence of cultural pressures and familial expectations a new social norm? Does this mean that the journey is now one in which the hero is in search of limitations in order to make such self-discoveries and find one’s place as being for or against that which is sought? And should the hero return, to what position is he returning?

Reflecting the disconnect between Andrew’s understanding of himself and that of his family, the novel’s structure is as much about its form physically separating its hero from his desired insight, as it is about the barriers that Andrew and his family have built between each other, the distance that language plays in understanding, and the way in which Andrew interprets information. In Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa writes that “[w]hites, along with a good number of our own people, have cut themselves off from their spiritual roots, and they take our spiritual art objects in an unconscious attempt to get them back. If they’re going to do it, I’d like them to be aware of what they are doing and to go about doing it the right way (68). In Everything In, I am specifically interested in exploring how Andrew, with the full potential to be directly at odds with Anzaldúa’s desire for individuals to be aware of what they are doing, epitomizes the ramifications associated with creating borders between one’s
roots—whether they are tangible or not. Moreover, I am as much fascinated by the spoken association between families and cultures, as I am the unspoken, and how identity is impacted when physical experiences and spaces are withheld. It is because of this latter point that Andrew’s family’s history is positioned “away” from him and delivered through a third-person narrator.

Even if Andrew and his family could break their silences, I am curious if spoken truths and revelations in the present can ever fully manifest an understanding of experiences in the past. Does a limitation exist that prevents Andrew from ever fully realizing himself within his family and in turn the history and culture he has been sheltered from? With silence among family members creating an identity vacuum to come of age in, I was interested in how the actions of today can form a connection to the past, even if that bridge is inaccessible, or will eventually be inaccessible, to those for whom it’s created. This theme is explored in multiple ways throughout the novel—the stories and histories in which Andrew is not privy, cultural objects in which his father, Carlos, cherishes, and in the pictures of places and family that Andrew’s grandmother, Dani, tries to see herself among when she “stood up and walked around the room silently. From wall to wall all she could see were stories upon stories hidden inside the covers of the albums, and then Lupita’s home came to mind, with her one of Hector and Sandalio hanging on the wall for her, alone. And she wondered if that was true, or if somewhere else, in this house, or another, the story in that picture was living out” (Chavez p. 204-205).

Although the novel acknowledges the argument that history repeats itself, what I am most interested in are the ways in which history echoes one’s story regardless of whether or not it is heard—or understood due to language or reason. As such, positioning Andrew as a first-person narrator in the present provides, as Mario Vargas Llosa states, “a point of view in which the space of the narrator and the narrative space coincide” (45); much of the influence for this novel relies
on the relationship that Andrew the person and Andrew the speaker have with that space. It is the one space in which Andrew should be most privy to the truth, and yet it is the one with which he feels most out of touch. And the one in which he is most opposed to “exploring” by speaking to those most knowledgeable.

Seventeen years and all I had to show for it was the dictionary definition of grandma and a woman I’d never see again, as if that were any different. Yet round one and round two [of family and friends] showed up and spoke to it. Said things to each other and my father in the language of their bodies as fluently as their tongues and it infuriated me how natural it was for my father. How purposeful he was at trying to shove a glove onto my hand as a kid. How deliberate he was at grabbing my ankles and squaring them up to a tee or a plate. Everything I knew from him was forced—including our relationship. And here he was in literal embrace of the goddamn stereotypes I thought I was right to ignore, because that’s what he taught me by teaching me nothing at all (Chavez p. 123-124).

By wanting to explore what happens when bridges between past and present are never constructed for Andrew, this meant having to navigate the truth, and in particular, whose truth it is.

The storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them. In short, the storytelling mind is a factory that churns out true stories when it can, but will manufacture lies when it can’t (Gottschall 103).
Gottschall’s perspective drills into the manifestation of Andrew’s subconscious. Andrew can only piece together his family’s story from what he knows. How he perceives his father is as much about what the man has done, as what it is he hasn’t. The only option Carlos has given Andrew is to formulate a truth based on the evidence at hand, but that evidence is so minimal that Andrew is left to fill in the gaps himself. What realities is he creating for himself and are these fabricated truths a danger to his own identity? By withholding information from Andrew, his parents placed him in a position of ignorance and by raising Andrew as they did, are forcing him to find, or in Gottschall’s words “manufacture”, meaning in that decision, with no guidance or direction.

Structurally, the decision was to have Andrew’s sessions with his therapist be without dialogue tags or other narrative descriptors. I had been wrestling with Alice LaPlante’s thoughts on narrators. She writes, “If you choose a first-person narrator, you’re going to run into the issue of reliability. Even the most reliable, the most honest, the most straightforward, intelligent, and moral first-person narrator is going to have limitations” (234). LaPlante also notes that “when a third person narrator tells us something about a story, it is, by convention, always true” (238). The notable exceptions are obviously with those narrators who are unreliable; but this was not my concern with Andrew—not in the sense that he is or would deliberately be unreliable, even if he were to be positioned as a third-person narrator looking back at his life or as one privy to the past.

From a narrative standpoint, my concern was with where the truth existed, Andrew’s position in relation to it, and whether or not he would ever be able to make that connection and enter the space that would ultimately provide him with all that was withheld. Although Andrew’s sessions with Dr. Rutter are not necessarily this space physically (although Andrew is free to
construct meaning and truth here), they are symbolic representations of a space and time in which Andrew is afforded some direction by his homophonically named therapist.

Dr. Rutter cannot simply give Andrew the truth about his life, but he can offer Andrew the space to construct a more informed relationship between his experiences before and after his grandmother’s death and what he has fictionalized in his mind. In fact, Dr. Rutter even warns Andrew of the cost of not doing so when he says, “we create boundaries with ourselves, others, places, the truth itself, and the list goes on, and the cycle goes on, because we are convinced that these boundaries are created as a reason to protect ourselves—or at times, others” (Chavez p. 181-182). This is the problem for Andrew, not only because of his own actions, but because of those of his mother, his father, and even those Salinas members and their familial ties from generations past who have committed themselves to doing the very thing Rutter warns of.

When Paola Bozzi writes of Herta Müller’s work, she traces a history that gives justification for fiction and reality to interact with one another through a creative process. Not only do I see this as my position as author, but I would also suggest that Bozzi’s argument entitles Andrew to a similar autonomy.

[T]he reader is not only confronted with “autofiction,” as Müller herself suggests, but also with something akin to ‘surfiction,’ a term coined by American author and critic Raymond Federman…[who]…calls the kind of writing that thematizes the constructedness of reality ‘surfiction,’ not because it imitates reality but because this kind of writing exposes the fictional nature of reality (7)… Federman focuses his attention on the kind of experience that levels the difference between life and fiction (7)... [F]iction is thus not a representation of reality but creates its own autonomous reality instead. Surfiction does not draw a distinction between memory
and imagination, between what really happened in the world and what it imagines happened. As such ‘surfiction’ erases the lines among past, present, and future and liberates itself from the conventions of realism (111).

Andrew is incapable of romanticizing his family and his life, but he does endeavor to imagine the reasons for why he and they perform as they do. Andrew’s sessions with Dr. Rutter are a means for him to “write” the rationale. As author, I am using this space, too, for similar reason. The question of What really happened? is a worthwhile, but herculean question to answer. Even when presented with the facts, perception of them blurs their truth in some manner. How can any rationale hold water when every vessel for the truth is poked and punctured by its audience? It is difficult enough for any of Andrew’s interactions to not be called into question. Were Andrew to narrate his own therapy sessions, the obvious hurdle of honesty exists, while an omniscient narrator must still answer for bias. Even the most objective third-person narrator leaves her/him/itself open to scrutiny. A dialogue tag, seemingly as innocuous as “she said”, still assumes a knowledge of intent from the character. Description of the setting and that of a character’s movement also submits intent on the part of the narrator, calling attention to some aspect of the scene.

I have suggested earlier that I am most interested in the ways in which history echoes one’s story regardless of whether or not it is heard—or understood due to language or reason, but I also agree with Müller’s position that fiction “creates its own autonomous reality”. Narratively speaking, I am arguing that Andrew’s therapy sessions are something different than those reflecting a “fly on the wall” approach for two reasons. Firstly, Andrew cannot have autonomy if someone else is speaking or “acting” for him. Secondly, I see Everything In as not only experimenting with the ways in which time and space impact the hero and story, but also with its
function within the discourse. I am as much interested in Andrew’s voice as I am the narrator(s)—including the one of “distance” in Andrew’s therapy sessions.

At its most basic, I am asking who is being spoken to, and what the purpose of that audience is. Individually, Dr. Rutter is Andrew’s audience and Andrew, Dr. Rutter’s; but what of the sessions as a whole? If Andrew’s therapy sessions are not even for “the fly”, then who are they for and for what purpose? In extension of that purpose, and within the internal constructs of the narrative, what purpose does Andrew’s story serve if it remains in insolation between Dr. Rutter and himself? Is Andrew’s story any more or less concealed than his father’s?

Both the narrative and its structure were the most challenging to integrate in order to attempt to address the question of concealment: How to explore the “unknown” for the novel’s protagonist, as the “never known” that it is? With one of the overarching themes being identity and the barriers to it, the greatest difficulty was in establishing a separation of truths and realities—specifically the past and the present. Superficially, the narrative strives to keep, quite literally, a separation between two stories—the story of Andrew Salinas and his desire for knowledge, and the story of the Salinas family to which Andrew has no access. However, the problem with this (in its literal endeavor to explore what happens when the two never meet to inform each other) is that it produces two separate stories. Narratively speaking, separate stories or perspectives in one novel is not new literary territory. Countless novels have exemplified their respective structures and forms. The Hours and Kafka on the Shore with their parallel narratives, The Sound and the Fury with its multiple narrators, The Grapes of Wrath and Moby-Dick with their intercalary chapters, even Percival Everett’s Erasure with its novel within the novel, all demonstrate that there is no single prescribed form for the novel to take. In fact, a novel’s structure works to tell the story. Even
the most seemingly out-of-place narrative thread is often integral to the whole, as it will often
speak allegorically to the other threads within a novel.

The writing of *Everything In* was complicated by my interest in experimenting with what
happens when neither the literal nor the metaphorical meet. What does it do to the characters and
the story, and what does it do to the reader? My first thought went immediately to the reader and
how two “unconnected” stories can result in frustration, and the obvious rhetorical of *why are
these narratives not two separate stories?* In trying to find guidance to address this, I turned to
Mario Vargas Llosa’s literary discourse on Chinese boxes or the “matryoshka technique” (101),
as well as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. The goal was to analyze how narrative threads
are both connected as well as distanced from the rest of the narrative, and to what effect.
Ultimately, could I position my reader in the same position as Andrew, and yet still provide my
reader with the context for what Andrew’s inability to resolve his struggle with the past and present
does for his identity?

Of the Chinese box and matryoshka technique, Vargas Llosa writes that the “story is
constructed […] with successively smaller and smaller identical parts nestled inside each other,
sometimes dwindling to the infinitesimal (101). He continues by adding that a “creative effect is
achieved when a construction of this kind contributes something to the tale—mystery, ambiguity,
complexity—that makes it seem necessary, not merely a juxtaposition but a symbiosis or
association of elements with a mutually unsettling effect on each other” (101). What interested me
was the ways in which the narrative could break from this structure or use it in a new way. Often
the bildungsroman has pivotal moments in which information is disseminated to the hero. The
technique Vargas Llosa speaks of is easily achieved by having Carlos or some member of the
Salinas family taking the narrative to this “other” reality of the Salinas past, and going deeper and
deeper into it for Andrew. As is the case with an innumerable number of coming-of-age stories, it resolves the problem for the hero, and in doing so avoids the challenge in *Everything In* of having its reader question the purpose of a nested story. Done well, “stories are connected in a system and the whole of the system is enriched by the sum of its parts; each part—each particular story—is enriched, too (or at least affected), according to its dependent or generative role in relation to the other stories” (103). What I was interested in experimenting with was the way in which Andrew’s identity can be dependent on stories he is never given access (or connected) to.

Although *Everything In* experiments with breaking from the typical mold, I would argue the matryoshka technique is still employed, not in an explicit “symbiosis or association” for Andrew’s narrative, but through time and space. What if we view the Salinas family historical thread, not as nested stories getting smaller and smaller, but instead as getting closer and closer in time and space to the time and space in Andrew’s thread, but never ultimately touching? Can two narrative threads be considered asymptotically, infinitely approaching each other, but never fully intersecting? By experimenting with the form, my goal is for the reader to be given insight into the Salinas family and emphasize the complexity of Andrew’s ignorance and the ways in which it impacts his understanding of self and his place within his family’s history. The story of the Salinas family appears to be its own autonomous story outside of Andrew’s. My argument is that it’s place outside of Andrew’s narrative is the condition for this novel. That Andrew is the only individual who cares, because it’s the one story that matters to him. Even he says, “[e]veryone has fifty billion stories to tell about the time they did this, or the time that that happened […] and none of it’s a story worth telling…until it is” (Chavez p. 265).

In Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, the novel’s interchapters work to provide allegorical insight into the plight of the migrant families. I see the challenges in understanding the placement
of these chapters as insightful for my understanding of how best to incorporate the chapters of the Salinas history into *Everything In.* Just as the position of the Joad family can be contextualized within the larger framework of the migrant families in Steinbeck’s interchapters, Andrew’s narrative thread and the Salinas narrative thread form a similar, though not parallel construction—the choice away from that being a means to reinforce the disconnect between past and present. Counter to the technique discussed by Vargas Llosa, Steinbeck’s structure and form alternates threads rather than have one dive deeper into the other. As mentioned, this method of telling two seemingly “unconnected” stories helped inform how to structure the narratives in *Everything In.*

Andrew’s identity is as much about information as it is about the lack of it, as such, the novel also focuses on the things that are said and unsaid, and how they are translated, if at all. Because the Salinas family fails at every turn to communicate, it positions Andrew to take his journey of discovery, in essence, alone. Because of this, I was interested in the ramifications and costs for Andrew of trying to rationalize who he is under the constructs of being sheltered from information. From the outset, Andrew is positioned as an outsider, any discovery means he has nothing analogous to compare it to.

Because Andrew does not see himself as possessing anything (he feels he is entirely void of culture and family history), this means that the potential exists for Andrew to take any form. His ignorance could easily lead him away from the inclusive beliefs of his friends, Davion and Gisella, and toward the attitudes of those bigoted individuals in his past, whether they be the haunted Tom Sullivan, or Andrew’s own intolerant family members, including his great-grandfather, Hector Salinas, or his unabashedly racist Grandma Katherine. If there is one understanding—one fear—that Andrew has, it is that he is *nothing.* “[I]t was like I was some pot of water on the range that [my father] never bothered to throw a single ingredient in, let alone start
the flame” (Chavez p. 38). If ignorance has the potential to lead to intolerance, what threats are there for Andrew in believing that he is nothing more than a blank slate?

My intention is not to argue every slippery slope, but I do see Andrew’s position in the discussion as one that emphasizes the need for nuance. If Grandma Katherine epitomizes any and all aspects of racism and intolerance, I would argue that the antithesis to her is not created by the removal of information and the requisite language to share it, as it creates a disconnect that can be just as dangerous. In *Excitable Speech: Contemporary Scenes of Politics*, Judith Butler puts forth that “[t]he speaker who utters the racial slur is thus citing that slur, making linguistic community with a history of speakers. What this might mean, then, is that precisely the iterability by which a performative enacts its injury establishes a permanent difficulty in locating final accountability for that injury in a singular subject and its act” (52). At its core, this is why I am so interested in the temporal spaces of this novel. Should Andrew euphemistically “turn”, is he then carrying the conversation of Katherine, Tom, or Hector?

Of no coincidence then, is that one of the biggest obstacles to truth is language and one’s own voice. How is Andrew expected to achieve the requisite insight for his growth and understanding, when he and his family do not speak, cannot speak without translation, and cannot fully understand each other—even using their own native language? The journey that Andrew takes is one in which he must come to terms with what the truth is. He will never have an intimate enough experience with the language, culture, and history of his family to ever know for certain why things are the way they are. For any change, Andrew must place trust in an unknown.

Even with the most well-laid plans, most journeys into an unknown often have vastly different outcomes than what was expected. So was the case with this novel. I had intended on the focus of this novel to heavily explore the ways in which a lack of identity, and in turn a search for
it, can ultimately lead to the misappropriation of culture. This is not to say that Andrew could not find himself doing just that, but the novel ultimately ends where that risk begins. In addition to cultural misappropriation, I had anticipated Andrew’s journey to emphasize a theme in which language, in particular translation, plays a role in understanding and to examine the ways language barriers position individuals to speak for others. Whereas this element is occasionally seen throughout as a means to spark the conversation, *Everything In* became more about a lack of communication and being sheltered from one’s past, rather than focused on what that language barrier means. In fact, language barriers become almost weaponized in the novel in order to keep information from others. Andrew’s father employs this method in order to keep his feelings and his immediate family distant from his extended one, especially in the case of Andrew.

The door to the master bedroom was ajar, and I could see him through the gap, standing at the foot of the bed, talking to what I could only assume was his mother’s ghost laying in it. It stopped me in my tracks, not because my father was talking to no one (he walks around our house talking to himself all the time), but because, again, he was talking in Spanish. And I could hear him, clear as day. And there was a word here, and a word there, that I knew as vocabulary. But no matter how hard I tried, no matter how fluent I’d become, I could not understand him (Chavez p. 263).

This lack of communication, which has been discussed above, was intended to be the focus of this novel for what it is—a barrier to information and understanding. However, in writing the novel, I discovered that it began to take on a tangible quality to it. It began to paralyze Andrew, immobilizing him in a way that kept him from moving into different spaces by travelling. It became a vicious cycle in which the more he internalized, the more he turned inward for answers—the
exact opposite of what he needed to do. And in trying to rationalize his actions, he only makes it worse for himself.

I know my parents are outside of myself, but it’s still within the family. So, the idea of going outside to find the inside when it’s right fucking in front of you, is just fucking stupid (Chavez p. 214-215).

I began writing Everything In prior to 2020. Had the novel been completed by the end of 2019 or in January or February of 2020, the aforementioned journey and themes intended for this novel would have transpired and the words spoken by Andrew of “going outside to find the inside…is …stupid” would have never made the page. Andrew was supposed to travel in this novel, not only during his post high school years in 2020, but also immediately following his grandmother’s death. As mentioned, it was during these times that I had expected to explore those themes associated with cultural misappropriation and language.

What surprised me about the COVID-19 shutdowns of 2020, was how they not only impacted Andrew in 2020, but how they impacted how I wrote Andrew prior to 2020. As my writing of Everything In progressed through 2020, I realized that I, the writer, was locking Andrew down. Not only did Andrew continue to internalize his thoughts and feelings rather than reach out to his family, I had also ultimately limited the spaces in which Andrew exists within the novel. Save for a few outlier moments with his friends, structurally, Andrew is relegated to his parents’ house, the school, Dr. Rutter’s office, and the spaces associated with his grandmother’s death—once again reflecting the inaccessibility of Salinas family history in the other narrative thread. Ironically, for all his concern about unknowns, it wasn’t until a real threat existed that Andrew finally took a step into one.
I expected to examine how Andrew would navigate all this and attempt to cope with the setbacks in doing so. Ultimately, I expected that Andrew’s journey would find him pushing back against cultural expectations he was unfamiliar with and potentially drive him to reject a part of himself he always feared he would. Instead, language surfaced as communication, specifically, a lack thereof. It was this lack of communication that created self-imposed barriers to understanding. Instead of the verbal spars that often push families apart, it was the absence of language that kept Andrew at length from his immediate family and eventually led to his final disconnect from them.

*Everything In*, although not autobiographical, is undoubtedly personal. It has sparked a notion that the knowledge of experience is as important as experience itself. While the two are not synonymous, the former justifies the need to speak to the latter, or else risk never understanding and identifying with one’s own history and place within it. The novel is concerned with the ways in which an individual’s identity may never be fully realized. It posits that there is a danger to this. A nonidentity is not a neutral one. It is fraught with indecision and unknowns, and although its malleability provides an opportunity for positive growth and development, without the knowledge of one’s past and voices to help guide in understanding, it leaves open the possibility for an identity to not only be corrupted, but to be the one that corrupts—if only itself. This novel is concerned with how an individual’s journey to bridge a cultural and historical divide is riddled with obstacles and borders that cannot be crossed without communication. As Andrew comes of age, his journey reflects the complexities of trying to reach towards an unknown and the risks associated with having been sheltered from his own history.
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87325632&site=eds-live&scope=site.


Who Me?

I don’t usually consider myself to be a know it all. In fact, I quickly learned after middle school that my silence on the majority of matters was typically the right answer in most cases. But, something about my father dropping me off at school at 6:30 in the morning so that he could go work another twelve-hour day pushing papers kinda flipped my switch. To be fair, that was only part of it. If the fact that he allowed me to get out of the car, close the door behind me, and take about five steps away from it before rolling down the passenger side window and calling out to me like they do in every goddamn high school movie wasn’t bothersome enough—what he did next was damn near unforgivable. In a tone that would make indifference sound like a bleeding heart, the man leaned over the center console like it was nothing and said that he almost forgot to tell me that his own mother died the previous night. Now, being that I was taken completely off-guard and therefore fresh out of ‘What the fucks!’ and the ability to vent, it sort of set me off for the rest of the school day.

“Salinas!”

“What?” I said.

“Shut it!”

“Dude, Andrew, you better shut up,” whispered Kole, tapping my desk with the eraser of his pencil.

“Sorry, Mr. Rafferty,” I said apologetically.

“Now, as I was saying, I expect you all to pay attention and take notes on this movie. Andrew, will you get the lights, please?”

I sighed. “I’m never sitting in the back again.” I slid out of my desk as Rafferty started the movie with the remote in his hand, moping to the wall to flip the switch, before shuffling my
way back, and sliding into the seat just as the title, *Freedom Writers*, appeared on screen. “Oh! You have got to be frickin’ kiddin’ me!”

“Out!” commanded Mr. Rafferty, following me into the hall as I pushed open the door. The door closed halfway before he stopped it with his foot, keeping half his attention on me and the other half on the class.

“Is this some Red4Ed protest or something or is every teacher in Scottsdale too lazy to teach today?”

“Watch it, young man.”


“I’m sorry, am I not being predictable enough for you?”

“No, you’re being lame like everyone else.”

“Well, sorry to disappoint. It’s not like we all got together and figured out how to make your life miserable. It’s just luck of the draw I guess, so turn off the commentary and go sit down and learn something,” said Mr. Rafferty, holding open the door.

“Like what? Diversity?” I said, my filter completely gone. “There’s nothing left for me to learn. I’m a panda with a taco.” The roar of laughter from the class shot out into the hall.

“Dude. You’re like the second whitest student at this school,” exclaimed Kole, nearly tipping his desk over, trying to lean back to see into the hallway.

“Salinas? Scottsdale, Arizona? Yeah, people with red hats don’t judge me by my last name or anything,” I said, taking a step toward the doorframe and inadvertently forcing Rafferty to step backwards with the door and opening it fully.
“What the hell does that mean?” shouted Kole, contorting his face.

“Watch the news, you idiot,” said Gisella. “Make America great again.”

“What?”

“Really? How are you friends with him?” asked Gisella, shifting in her seat to see around another student so that she could make eye-contact with me.

“He’s the only black friend I have,” I quipped. Davion, my actual best friend, adding, “Thanks a lot.”

“Dude! I’m whiter than you,” said Kole, presenting his pasty arms like some blonde model from *The Price Is Right*.

“Really? Wow! Well, Mr. Rafferty, I guess you’re right. Maybe a fourth movie in one day about triumphant Mexicans will teach me how *not* to be color blind.”

“Andrew, you made your point. Sit down.”

“No, I actually haven’t,” I said, fully stepping into the classroom. “If this were any other Scottsdale high school, you’d be showing us *Dead Poet’s Society*—but we’re the farthest south. I’m in AP Calc. Why is Mr. Gish showing ‘finger man’ to us? Pretty sure everyone in frickin’ calculus knows how to multiply by nine.”

“Yeah, Mr. Rafferty,” said Davion, holding up the back of his hands, all ten fingers fully extended, twitching his two middle fingers, “that movie taught us our 3’s”.

“You’re pushing it Davion,” said Mr. Rafferty.

“I didn’t bend the other eight down.”


“No. This is ridiculous. Like, what are you guys doing? We’re still going to walk out on
four-twenty to protest school shootings. No come together, stop hating each other movie is going
to stop that. If anything, it just supports what we’re going to do.”

“Yeah, like get Andrew some Xanax,” said Kole.

“That’s not why we’re watching this movie,” said Mr. Rafferty, pointing at Kole to knock
it off before pausing the movie with the remote at the end of his outstretched arm.

“This movie? I almost believe you. The other three? No way. There’s not a single teacher
who knows why any of us would just snap and shoot up a school. I just found out my dad’s mom
died! You don’t see me wanting to make everyone join her in the grave! No student who goes to
this school is going to walk into class with an assault rifle. You know why? Because nobody who
goes to this school—and their parents—can afford one. But all of you are still afraid of
something anyway.”

I let out an exhausted sigh and stared at Rafferty, relieved by just how cathartic it all felt
and feeling like I had vented my way back to silence on all matters.

“Andrew, I’m really sorry to hear about your grandmother,” said Mr. Rafferty. “I know
this must be hard for you and your family.”

Now, either my father’s nonchalance on the matter of his dead mother screwed me up
something awful, or I’m just naturally a cynical S.O.B. Whatever the case, I fired a ‘bullshit’
look at Rafferty that turned him whiter than Kole.

“I don’t want your sympathy. Life is not a movie. Even the ones that are based on true
stories,” I said, pointing to the projector screen. “If you don’t want racism or discrimination here,
then just be honest about it. You guys want everyone to get along no matter what. That’s not the
real world. In the real world, sometimes you have to kill people.”

“Andrew, I understand you’re upset, but you’re saying things that I’m going to have to
“Report what? My rhetoric?”

“Dude, you’re like losing your mind right now,” Kole chuckled.

“This. All this. Diversity, and acceptance, and overcoming our differences, and fighting for what’s right—it’s all crap. Let me tell you how it really is. When your mom is white and your dad is not—that’s not diversity. It just is. It’s just a fact. It’s not some label. And when your grandmother on your mom’s side of the family calls her daughter on the day your sister is born and asks what color she is, you hang up the phone. And you know what? Because it’s family, it is what it is. Nothing else. And three years later, when you’re born, and the same phone call is made, not only do you hang up, but before you do, you tell everyone on that side of the family to F-off.”

I took a deep breath and saw the entire class staring up at me. As if I were in some giant game of Whac-A-Mole, every student, with the exception of Gisella, dropped their head when I tried to make eye contact with them.

“Oh!” I added, before the silence in the room became deafening. “When your mom’s dad is dying of cancer, no one calls or visits. And when he finally dies, no one goes to the funeral. But, wait! There’s more. When your mom’s mom dies—same thing.”

“And,” I continued, watching Rafferty’s shoulders drop like bowling balls. “Get this…when your only surviving relative on your mom’s side, who happens to be a raging alcoholic, calls in desperation for help—you let it go to voicemail—”

“Dude, seriously?” asked Kole.

“Yah,” I said, thrusting my neck forward, “but the best part is that the very next day you get a phone call telling you that she ended up killing herself. And guess what? You don’t go to
that funeral either…”

“Dude, that’s messed up.”

“…or shoot up a school,” I said, dropping hard into my seat. “So, don’t go getting all SWAT team on me. Stop worrying. You’re all safe. No one’s going to die. Especially if you’re on my side of the family. There’s no one left to die.”

“Okay. Well, Andrew, thank you for sharing. I know this must be incredibly difficult for you right now, but I’m sure we can all sympathize with similar experiences.”

“No.”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, no. Definitely not.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Let’s just watch the movie.” Mr. Rafferty walked over to me, kneeled down, and asked if I wanted to go talk to the counselor. “No,” I said loudly, “I want to watch a movie about a bunch of high schoolers who look, sound, and act nothing like me so that I can finally identify with my people, you stereotyping motherfucker!”

Okay, so as it turns out, calling your AP English teacher a motherfucker is kind of a bad idea. No matter how often you rely on the rhetorical appeals and emphasize the fact that said motherfucker is actually a father—three times by the way, same woman, so yeah, a mother—you pretty much are guaranteed of being stripped of any chance at being valedictorian your senior year. Which, frankly, was fine by me. No one was going to catch Guoxing. His GPA was impossible. It was like they created an AP lunch for him or something stupid.

Unfortunately, the ancestry remark also meant getting in-school suspension—count the first. News to me though, apparently rules against double jeopardy didn’t apply at my school. Count the second—I got out-of-school suspension because Rafferty (Mr. Metaphor by the way),
took my “sometimes you have to kill people” remark literally. Back to my first crime, though.
My parents, for whatever reason, convinced the principal to make my in-school suspension an
out-of-school one, so that they could use it as an excuse to take me to my grandmother’s funeral
in Los Angeles—a fact that was not lost on me on the drive over. I couldn’t for the life of me
understand why I needed an excuse to go to a funeral. But then again, I was a white Salinas who
never made it all the way through Freedom Writers. So, what did I know?
The Brown Family

No one told Sandalio Salinas, when his son was born in 1954, what it meant to be a father. Of course, no one told Andrew Salinas’ father either, so at least there’s been consistency in the family—they’ve got that going for them. Had anyone bothered to take the initiative and break the cycle, Andrew wouldn’t be in this mess, but as they say, “the devil you know…”

Not that Andrew knows him either—or any of the messes that are traditional hallmarks of a pitchforked bastard that his family refuses to speak of.

By sixteen, Sandalio had been back and forth between Mexico and the United States so often that staying in one place for too long made him feel like he was moments away from being strangled to death. Call it paranoia or simply an itch, but being settled meant it was time to go.

All things being equal, Sandalio’s father had a good thing going. Hector was able to take advantage of the Bracero Program, while most everyone else was being taken advantage of. Of course, all things are not equal, and Hector’s relationship with the program was about as solid as his son’s relationship was with staying put—or his father—not that that history lesson would fix Andrew’s problem either.

Whether farming in the west or laying railroad tracks in the Midwest, Hector always managed to work out a respectable contract. Unfortunately, that was the extent of Hector’s respectability. When his wife was not around, other women were. He had been caught, multiple times, sneaking off to meet up with a woman, or bringing her back to the barracks for an unceremonious conquest atop some canvas bedding, while his fellow workers were breaking their backs outside with their short-handled hoes.

He made no friends with this ethic, but those cutting the checks cared little. What he lacked in effort, he more than made up for in knowledge. When a day’s worth of brute force and
sheer manpower was called for, so was Hector. The times he could solve the problem with ingenuity, were the days the men were back in their rooms long before the sun would set, and he would slip off to scratch that itch of his. When he failed, he found himself hunched over like the rest—a target on his back, not for failing to find a solution, but for the weeks of failing to carry his own weight.

Hector’s game could have gone on indefinitely, but he eventually found himself in love with a farmer’s wife. And then another. And an older daughter. And a foreman’s sister. And the list went on. And time and again, he was sent back to Mexico to start over. There were only so many explanations Lupita, his wife, could believe. But timing is a funny thing. What should have been an ultimatum upon his last disgraced return, was instead a ruling for the good of the family. Rather than greet Hector with another slap across the face, she shocked him by putting their newborn son in his arms and demanding he get back in line for another job up north.

“And we’re going with you,” said Lupita matter of factly.

“These contracts are only for men.”

“I didn’t say legally.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“So’s my husband, unable to keep a job. And so’s the father of our son in the bedroom of another man’s wife with his pants around his ankles.”

“No.”

“Lizeth and her sisters have been going with their husbands for over three years now. There is no discussion.”

Lupita nearly drowned the first time she tried carrying Sandalio across. Exhausted from lack of sleep as a new mother, she had been carrying up the rear. Tripping, her leg became
lodged under some branches from a recent flood. Twisting to keep Sandalio above water, one of the branches became free and slid on top of her chest, trapping her below the river’s surface. If not for Sandalio’s infant wails, the caravan of travelers hoping to find work on their own would have carried on tirelessly into the night and preemptively saved Andrew the headache of ever wondering how he got to where he was in the first place.

Hector’s third trip found the three struggling to survive in Texas. Farm after farm came under attack from American workers demanding higher wages. Those willing to hire Hector and the other braceros were forced to cave. Even those willing to hire men who came illegally, weighing the cost savings for such a decision, found themselves breaking to the pressure from the American workers.

It became too much for the family. Not only was consistent work becoming harder and harder to find, Hector and Lupita soon found themselves stuck between two worlds—two worlds which could find no peace in the middle. A little on the nose, if not entirely heavy-handed, but then again, who’s to know? It doesn’t mean shit if no one is going to bother to tell Andrew he can commiserate.

“We just ordered our food,” Lupita said to an angry man leaning over her at a diner one night, a second man standing quietly beside him. Lupita struggled to pacify Sandalio who would not stop crying in her arms.

The family had been driven from a third farm in as many days, this time having to run, leaving everything behind but the clothes on their backs and what money they had earned shoved into their pockets.

The rain had been slamming into the hard earth for so long that the front of the diner was beginning to look like a mud bog. As the thunder crashed again, so did the words from the angry
man with an Obregon pistol at his waist.

“No, how long you staying?” the man repeated, this time slamming down a chair and sitting down hard into it. “You believe this woman, Frank?”

The quiet man fidgeted with his wedding ring as he watched Lupita.

“Frank. What’ya think? She here for handouts?”

“You’re the expert, James,” said Frank, an exasperated look washing across his face.

With the family having come in drenched, their waitress assured them that they could stay until the rain let up. Not five minutes later, a group of farmers and police officers, as well as others claiming to be ‘in good with INS’ walked in out of the rain. A black man, who had been eyeing the ‘No Negroes’ sign on the door to the bathroom, quickly got up from his table and left the diner into the torrent. Two of the officers followed to the door, watching as he slogged his way into the darkness, then rejoined their group at the booths they took over, displacing a black family of five and Lupita and Sandalio from their respective seats—Hector noticeably absent as he had rushed to the bathroom after the waitress took their order.

Lupita desperately searched for the waitress as Sandalio continued to fight and fidget against her consoling.

“You might want to try feeding him,” Frank said, putting the wedding ring back on his finger.

“I—think our food is coming,” said Lupita, eyeing the kitchen, this time pulling Sandalio closer to her chest to muffle his cries.

“Nothing in that kitchen is going to shut that kid up. Feed your baby, mamacita.” A devilish grin washed over James’ face.

“Shhh. Shhh,” Lupita implored, leaning into Sandalio.
“Nobody wants to hear it. Now feed him,” commanded James.

“James—” urged Frank.

“What? There isn’t a wetback out of the whole lot of them that I want greasing up my land, but I’ll be damned if I’m gonna sit here and watch her starve one,” said James, turning back to Lupita. “So, you feed that kid, or I’ll have that boy out of your arms so fast.”

One of the officers came over, his hand on his pistol, accentuating its presence. “What’s going on? I’ve been listening to that kid scream since I walked in.”

“He’s hungry,” said Frank, twisting the wedding ring on his finger.

“Well then feed him,’ said the officer, looking at Lupita’s rain-soaked shirt, a smirk coming across his face.

“I—” Lupita stopped, locking eyes with Frank and pleading for understanding.

“Hey!” said Chase, placing his hand on Frank’s chest and guiding him to stand behind him. The officer widened his stance and clapped his hands to get Lupita’s attention off of Frank.

“Eye’s on me. He hungry?”

“Yes,” said Lupita, the word barely escaping her mouth.

“Then what are you waiting for?” James pressured.

“I—I can’t,” cried Lupita.

“Can’t?” said James accusingly. “What kind of mother can’t feed her own child? That a Mexican thing or a kidnapper thing?”

“I think that’s a fugitive from Mexico thing,” said Chase.

“That’s what I’m thinking,” said James.

“You’re about to have a very bad day, lady,” said Chase. “You see, James here gets paid a hefty sum for bringing criminals like you back to Mexico.”
“Come on now.” James reached over the table, grabbing Sandalio by the arm.

“No!” screamed Lupita, wrestling her baby’s arm free.

Chase pulled at Lupita. “Give him here.”

“No. No. I’m his mother. I’m his mother. See! See!” Lupita kicked herself back into the booth. The two men relented as Lupita sat up and yanked her shirt down from off her shoulder. The threads snapped as the fabric stretched violently down her side, exposing her breast to the men. “I’m his mother,” Lupita cried. She pressed her son to her, cradling his head in her hand as she looked to heaven, the misery returning to her eyes as she would be reminded again of what she could not provide.

She remained frozen to God, her soul, maternal, lost to an infinite for absolution.

“Don’t forget the other one,” said Chase, pulling on her sleeve, the torn neckline easily slipping, leaving Lupita exposed.

The officer looked up. The movement of the black family out of their seats and rushing to leave the diner caught his attention. “Look at that,” he said. “Hell, if that’s what it takes to clear a room full of niggers, sign me up.”

James and the officer laughed as they continued to leer at Lupita. She sat like a statue, the only movement her ceaseless tears gently falling onto Sandalio as he continued to try to suckle.

“With tits like those, I’d be hungry too,” said James.

“Now that’s a good mother. Wouldn’t you say, Frank?” asked the officer, stepping aside for Frank’s view.

Frank stepped towards the table, watching intently before leaning in and lifting Sandalio from Lupita’s bosom, leaving her frozen as he cradled her baby in his arm.

“Ass,” Frank scorned. He turned Sandalio towards both men, lightly squeezing his cheeks.
with his fingers and revealing a mouth devoid of his mother’s milk. “I’m going to find something for him,” said Frank. Lupita didn’t move. Her vacant stare looked directly through him. “Voy a encontrar algo para él,” Frank said softly. She blinked to focus on his eyes while pulling her shirt back up, then found her peace again in the distance. Frank walked to the kitchen, Sandalio still in his arms.

The darkness on the other side of the diner’s windows carried Lupita away. Her motionless stare into the night stole her grief and with it the vibrancy that once defined her as mother and bearer of life herself.

Hector never returned that night and neither did the waitress. The men sent Lupita back to Mexico to wait for a husband she hardly recognized when he arrived three months later. Unbearable as the lie would be, Hector told it to Lupita anyway, her acceptance of it taken with no greater fight than any unsuspecting shrub to a bone chilling freeze. Whatever the lie—the threat to life and limb—he promised never to go to Texas again. Promised, once he brought back their son.

It would take three years to reunite the family. Three years of relatives, foster homes, and a husband in name alone before Lupita would ever see her son again. They were phantoms to each other in that time. No one sent anything to her about him, and the time and the means to do the same were no easier for Lupita, as she struggled just to survive life alone. Absent were any letters or photos that could have possibly helped keep a pulse between the two alive. Nothing she reached for did anything to fill that void. She had come back to nothing, where no object or memory of her son was waiting for her. And Sandalio, too young to know any different, was merely bounced around an existence in the States, rather than given any home, roots, or real life to speak of.
Lupita was foreign to her son by the time he made it home, and like her husband to her, she was in name alone as mother. Sandalio couldn’t understand her, this woman desperate to connect to him. For months, he’d mirror their cat when she approached and hide under the bed or behind the couch. He would disappear for hours before emerging for dinner. It took an act of God for Sandalio to finally discover the comfort of his mother’s arms.

A heavy thunderstorm rolled over Bacanora one night, knocking out power and causing more leaks in the ceiling than the family had buckets. When lightning struck the clothesline outside, Sandalio ran from the dinner table and dove behind the couch, knocking over a side table and breaking one of its legs and the vase atop it. Hector broke a second leg that night. He grabbed Sandalio by his ankle and ripped him from behind the couch, his right-angle yank displacing the couch and snapping his son’s leg. Sandalio’s scream pierced Hector’s ears. He dropped his son and fled out into the storm. It took three hours slogging through the rain with her screaming son before Lupita made it to the hospital.

By twelve, Sandalio mastered his limp, walking with a swagger that had his mother slapping him across the face for bringing home girls from school who were years older. By thirteen, he was his father’s son.

By his fifteenth birthday, Sandalio had somehow managed to blur the lines between son, coworker, and ‘one of the guys’, whose stories of sexual conquests passed as entertainment and a means for bonding. Hector couldn’t help himself any more than Sandalio. The best he could provide his son, was his worst. As Hector saw it, to be a father meant to provide, and to provide he had to work. But with work, came money, and with money, opportunity. No one was quicker to learn this than Sandalio, and both father and son ran off with their earnings to buy broken down cars and farming equipment in an attempt to get rich selling them for parts.
In 1954, Sandalio’s conquests should have come back to bite him in the ass when his son, Diego Salinas, was born in Topeka, Kansas to an orphan girl named Dani. Instead, American policy saved the teen from having to raise a son, by rounding up Sandalio and his father—along with countless others—and shipping both back to Mexico to avoid the responsibility, as if veiled attempts at irony were passé, and the more blatant ones, en vogue.

For the briefest of moments, on the timeline of man, Lupita was finally able to be a mother—if only a grand one. But, within months, she’d have Diego taken from her too. And like her husband and son, was forced back to Mexico to live out an empty life she would have never constructed herself.
Dear poop emoji. Thank you for summing up my life in zero words or less. I wish everyone could be so succinct and to the point. Frankly, my life would be a hell of a lot easier if I could muster up the courage to lay down a steaming pile of me at any given moment and have that suffice as discourse.

I know I’ve got diarrhea of the mouth. It runs in the family. But how I get so constipated when faced with my father, I will never know. The man rambles on incessantly. It’s not even to prove a point—or at least not a logical one. It’s just so he can win. I suppose there is one truth about my father and me that I don’t care to admit. We both win by attrition.

Over the years I’d discovered that my ability to win at boardgames had little to do with skill, and everything to do with being completely content with dragging a game out until the other person didn’t want to play anymore. The difference between my father and me on winning has many distinctions though—not the least of which is the fact that I only apply this practice to boardgames, whereas he applies it to life.

When playing with me, the other player is either going to ask to stop and do something else or will inevitably do whatever it takes to lose just to end the suffering. I’ve only ever considered my wins as actual victories when the other person loses—even if it is sacrificial. But, when it comes to my father, either scenario is a victory.

My dad, standing on the far side of the kitchen island with my mother by his side, had been chewing me out for the past thirty minutes, and had already circled back to asking me the same set of questions for a third time. My sister, Amanda, taking great pleasure at the fact that a watched pot never boils, was all too content in the fact that her macaroni was not getting cooked anytime soon. Her front row seat to me being ripped a new one while stuck in front of the
kitchen sink with nowhere to go was all the entertainment she needed for the night.

“Do you have any idea just how stupid that was?” my dad asked.

Well into round three of the inquisition, the anger on my father’s face had already transitioned from hell’s fury to disappointment, and his mouth was settling into being some kind of idling Harley Davidson tailpipe—disruptive for any peace of mind, but given enough time, eventually driven off or simply run out of gas.

“What were you thinking, Andrew?”

I shrugged. The possibility exists that if I had dropped my shoulders instead, I would have pushed out a significant bowel movement and all would have been forgiven. But, I kept my mouth shut and shoulders up and subjected myself to another round of my father’s bullshit.

“We raised you better than that. What on earth makes you think that you can say whatever the hell you want, whenever you want?”

“You’re joking, right?” I said, my governor somehow deciding that audacity was acceptable, but facts were not.

“You wanna try me? We will lock you down so tight you will forget what the sun looks like.”

My mother had nothing to say. Punishments were never voiced in front of my sister or me. I glanced at her for salvation, but that you broke it, you bought it look she saved for just such occasions was all I got. Given her nodding approval at everything my father was saying, had I pressed my ear to their bedroom door later that night, I would have heard her say with zero sense of irony attached, I think that went pretty well.

“The sheer stupidity! You’re lucky the only thing you got was suspended. Had you been expelled— Had you— My God, Andrew, the gall— This is going to be on your permanent
record.”

“Gall?”

“No! Threatening your tea—Ha!” My father finished the chuckle, spinning himself around in frustration for composure. “Damnit, Andrew! Take this seriously. You threatened to blow up your teacher.”

“No I didn’t,” I said, my face contorting in ways that quickly revealed unknown muscle groups to me.

“Shoot him.”

“Not even close.”

“That’s not the story he’s telling.”

“He’s lying.”

“Doesn’t matter. Regardless of what you said or did, there are enough witnesses in class saying you are willing to kill people if necessary. The damage is done.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Andrew,” my mom interjected, “this is going to stick with you forever.”

“I’m already over it.”

“No,” she said. “Like your father said, this is going to be on your permanent record. You’re not going to be able to talk this away.”

“Then I’ll just keep my mouth shut,” I said.

“It doesn’t work like that,” she said.

“No, mom, I’m pretty sure it does.” A massive fuck it struck me, so I went with it.

“Grandma just died, but you could have kept it from me, and I wouldn’t have known the difference.”
“Don’t go changing the subject,” my father quickly jumped in to defend.

“The fuck!?”

“Go to your room!”

“No! I’m seventeen years old.”

“And I’m your father, go to your room. You will not speak to us like that.”

“And you won’t speak to me at all!”

“Andrew, do what your father says.”

“What am I? Five? Try having an adult conversation with me for once.”

“Andrew Ryder! Get up to your room, now!” my mom commanded.

Amanda tells me that she never did end up having macaroni and cheese that night. The three of them stood flabbergasted as I grabbed the keys to my mom’s car and stormed out of the house. Oddly enough, it was my sister, and not my mother, who was waiting for me in my bed when I crept back into the house in the middle of the night.

“You freaked the shit out of mom tonight.”

“Am I supposed to feel bad about it?”

“No, but maybe next time grab your phone so she can at least pretend to convince herself that you’d call if you needed help.”

“Am I wrong, Amanda?” I asked, stepping on the backs of my shoes to get them off before forcing my sister over to sit up alongside her on my bed.

“Wrong about what? That’s the thing. Like, I don’t even know what the fuck is going on. I’m at work, and I get a phone call from mom who’s in tears.”

“Oh, God.”
“She’s like, Andrew’s getting expelled. The police are going to arrest him. It’s all over the news.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing. Some dickhead at your school posted a video of one of the autistic kids having a meltdown but captioned your name on it. Mom just thought some video was circulating.”

“Do they know yet?” I asked.

“I don’t think they do,” laughed Amanda.

“That explains the middle name.”

“Andy, what did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“No, seriously. Did you actually threaten to kill your English teacher?”

“How is it that we can read The Great Gatsby where people get shot and run over by cars and—”

“You’re doing it again. Trying to rationalize—”

“This is different.”

“Brother, I love you, but it’s not. You’re one of the smartest people I know, but you gotta stop. You’ve got bullshit philosophies about everything. You bitch about dad, but you’re just as bad.”

“I’m nothing like him.”

“You just don’t see it.”

“You’re wrong.”

My sister had pulled the cellular shade up to open the window as she waited for me to
come home. It was finally getting down into the 60s at night, so I appreciated the thought. She was shivering, but I was finally comfortable. The orange glow from the streetlamp across the way shown through the glass and spotlighted our silence.

Amanda leaned her head against my shoulder, nestling herself down a bit before draping her arm across me in a half-hearted hug. Her intention was sincere enough, but the bed just made it awkward, so I understood the restraint.

“You scare me, Andrew. Sometimes I feel like I’m going to lose you.”
One Man's Truth

Tom Sullivan wasn’t the only American struggling to make ends meet when Operation Wetback snuck into town in the middle of the night and picked off every Mexican who hadn’t heeded the warning. He was, however, the only drunken employee in town to literally go to sleep on the job as the token gringo and wake up the de facto owner.

Over the years, Hector Salinas had encountered every level of vitriol while in the States. At their most innocuous, the names rolled off his shoulders like the water his back was accused of harboring. While the fear of being robbed and death threats were ever present, the constant bruises to his chest—and knuckles when he could get in a shot—made daily life, at times, unbearable. Running off with Sandalio to open the auto parts shop was no less a get rich quick scheme, as it was a means to stop punishing his ribs and lungs any more than they already were by having to bend over in a field all day.

Despite the beatings that still occurred from men who couldn’t pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, Hector could finally keep his head up and just breathe. So, when a drunken Tom Sullivan walked into Hector’s parts shop and began striking himself in the head with a piston for a ’41 Chevy, Hector was torn between sympathy and cosmic retribution.

“Is this what you want?” demanded Tom, slamming the metal cylinder hard against his temple. “You’re killing us! You’re not people. You’re a disease. How am I supposed to compete? You’re all around.” Tom struck himself on the opposite side of his face. “You phantoms.” Again, a strike, this time to the back of the head. Tom doubled over, crossing his forearms over the back of his head. “Ghosts! Seeds! Spirit planters!”

“Dad?” asked Sandalio, walking up to his father standing by the counter.

“Not now, Dali,” Hector said calmly, gently pulling his son around the counter and
behind him.”

“What’s going on?”

“No ahora!” Hector demanded, shoving Sandalio in the chest and knocking him to the ground.

Still hunched over, Tom stacked his hands on top of the piston and pressed it into the nape of his neck until his thick skin began to balloon around the metal. His deep yowl paralyzed the shop. All eyes turned and watched as his ceaseless bellow continued, saliva spilling from his mouth to the floor. “What are you people? Worshipers of death! Even when you’re gone, you remain. Bodies, land, spirits and demons. You poison us. Make us lotus eaters. Buy us off and leave us naked and barren. Unable to fend for ourselves. What are you?”

Tom slowly tore the cylinder from his neck, his skin pulling as the metal refused to release its grip. Piston in hand, he gently rolled it on the floor away from his feet, the uneven grade bringing its roll to a stop before returning it to Tom’s hand. Like a child at play, he focused, testing how far he could push it.

“No. Not what,” Tom continued, talking to the piston as it ebbed and flowed. “Why? Why are you…why are you the bearers of tragedy? The bearers who keep coming. You roaches. You arrive and we come to you—bring you the holocaust—and you emerge from the flames. You don’t learn. You adapt. What am I supposed to do? When I kill you, you survive. Do you hear me!? When I kill you, you survive. When I kill you, you survive. That can’t be.”

Tom stood up, paranoid. “No,” I’m dreaming. “This isn’t real.” With a violent swing of his arm, Tom bashed the piston over his right eye, the movement clipping the bridge of his nose and dislocating it. He fell back on his ass to the floor, knees up, and forearms resting atop. The blood streamed from over his eye and down his nose.
“He’s going to knock himself out,” said Francisco approaching from the back, inventory sheets in hand. He pointed at Sandalio to stay down as he passed him on his way to Hector.

“Or kill himself,” added Hector, his eyebrows raising as he stole a glimpse of his friend.

“Not an option,” said Francisco, setting the papers onto the counter.

Tom spit blood on the floor, his heaving capturing Hector’s attention. Tom’s labored breaths grew, building to an effort rather than an end.

“Hector,” urged Francisco, “it’s not an option.”

“You heard him as clear as I did.”

“And you’re a hero to no one if you let him.”

“Disagree.”

“Hey!” said Francisco. “And you’re no hero if you save him either.”

Tom’s labored breathing turned to low rumbling, his subtle growls becoming increasingly course and throaty.

“You gain nothing,” Francisco put his hand on Hector’s shoulder, grabbing his attention, “but you keep this shop up and running. No police. No questions. No one looking to find a reason. Don’t ever give them a reason.”

Hector knocked Francisco’s hand off his shoulder.

Without a beat, Francisco shoved his hands into Hector’s chest, the audible thump bringing Hector to his knees as he grabbed at the lingering bruises below his shirt and began his painful breaths again.

“You don’t want to bear crosses—there’s a bus heading back nightly,” said Francisco coldly. “You stay here, you wear that skin—broken and all—like a badge of honor. But don’t give me this shit that it’s too heavy for you to act like a man.”
Francisco stormed over to Tom, palm out, demanding the piston. “You want to give it to me? Or do you want me to take it?”

Tom stroked the rim of the piston with his thumb, calculating its edge. Try as he might, he could not will its lip to break his skin.

Squatting down, Francisco began. “There are some who would say that you’re not going to do it, or that you don’t want to. Some would be standing here and telling you that you would have already done it. Guess what? There is no one here who knows what you’re going to do, if you’re going to do it, or why. So, you keep figuring out how you’re going to get that thing through your skull, because there is only one thing that I know.”

Tom’s eyes met with Francisco’s, his subservient neck dipping between his shoulder blades like a dog caught shitting the floor.

“I want you to do it,” whispered Francisco.

Whatever ghost brought Tom into the shop repossessed the man. His blood stopped running and his sallow complexion began bleeding from his wounds instead. His involuntary breaths ceased and his lungs’ own will was bypassed as his mouth gaping—the greater the need to inhale, the stronger the force drawing forth the empty heaving and stealing what inadequate life he had fighting to remain within.

“Save me the satisfaction,” said Francisco softly into Tom’s ear.

The sickly look fled, giving way to asphyxiated lips, dizzy eyes, and a teetering head atop a neck already strangled for air. Tom collapsed backwards, the piston rolled off his fingers to a distant end of the shop. When he came to, Francisco was straddling his chest.

“You didn’t give me a chance to finish,” said Francisco. Tom’s pale blue eyes came into focus and found his captor’s—earthy and with the weight of the world—bearing down on him.
Francisco leaned in, touching his nose to the displaced and bloody one of Tom. “But I’ll never let you do it.”

In front of his God, a shop full of men, and a young man not ready to understand, Tom Sullivan began to weep uncontrollably. He turned his nose away from Francisco, and as if punched in the gut, curled on his side into a ball, his right arm stretching for eternity rather than grabbing to comfort his belly. Francisco allowed his wrenching, standing as Tom made his turn, taking the opportunity to wipe Tom’s blood from off his nose as he stepped over the man and approached the counter to retrieve his papers and return to his work in the back of the shop.

The moment was Hector’s. His men watched. His son.

When time refused to heal, Sandalio approached while his father remained still. He sat by the man’s outstretched hand and watched as Tom’s knobby fingers tried to grip the smooth concrete below. They were out of place on the floor. His blackened nails home, along with the rest of his arm, elbow deep, inside some oiled machine that needed to return to work. As Sandalio cupped the man’s hands in his, Tom’s body unwound. He reached his free hand up and patted Sandalio on the back of his.

The act was too much for Hector. He yanked the greasy rag from his back pocket and rushed over to Sandalio, sacrificing his blood again by tearing his son’s grip from Tom and leaving Sandalio aching and scurrying to huddle under the lip of the counter like a beaten child, rubbing his wrists in pain.

“You want to help!?” Hector yelled across to his son, violently flipping Tom onto his back in the process. “That what you want, boy!?” He showed the blackened rag to his son. “Look at me, Dali!” His son fought back tears, but he looked as commanded, the consequence for his failure known to everyone in the shop. “You want to help him!?” Hector demanded. He covered
Tom’s bloody nose with the oily rag and grabbed at it with both his hands, smothering him in the process.

“Francisco,” cried another employee paralyzed by the spectacle.” Francisco, quickly,” he called again. Francisco rushed to the front, demanding Hector get off of Tom. Ignoring his friend’s demands, Hector locked down on Tom’s nose, the broken man’s agonizing growl echoed throughout the shop. Matching his maddening screams, Tom kicked his legs wildly in a desperate attempt for freedom, but to no avail. His futile beating of Hector with the sides of his fists resulted in nothing more than exhausted blows to Hector’s hips and back.

Winded, Tom resigned himself to pressing his palms against his assailant’s chest—the effort entirely useless as Hector soon found himself atop a rag doll of a man. With the same care as a pair of bricks thrown through a jeweler’s window, Hector’s hands crushed into each other, the audible crackle and popping of Tom’s nose below the oily rag conjuring images of black magic among the cringing employees. Hector felt for something resembling straight and true before removing the rag and shoving Tom’s head from side to side to confirm his handiwork.

Hector stood up, marching directly toward Francisco. He stole the inventory sheets from his friend’s hands then slammed the bloody and oily rag into his chest, staining Francisco’s light blue shirt with the motion before the rag fell to the floor.

“He’s your responsibility,” said Hector taking over inventory duties as he disappeared into the back.

Tom Sullivan’s nose never looked the same again, though the alternative would have been much worse. Its crook formed more of an S than give any specific indication of which direction the man was facing. Had Tom never come to know Sandalio’s embrace, the two still would have found their bond among the broken lines of their bodies. As Sandalio grew into his,
his strength allowed him to walk like a snake hell bent on maintaining his cobra pose, his teetering gate transforming to a surefooted stomp by the time his step landed. As sure as it all was—that Tom was no worse for wear and that Sandalio would never fall—it was only by the grace of the men fighting to keep something worthwhile alive that the whole damn thing remained upright. For better or worse, Hector was not above finding fault with anyone—not the least of which were those looking out for his best interest.

It wasn’t that Francisco wanted to be the alternative role model for Sandalio, it was that life demanded it and that Hector found the terms agreeable.

There was a line and Hector watched as the three crossed it daily, standing idly by as their violations challenged his will—never his convictions. The statistics of the three were one thing, the whims of Hector another. Francisco had cautioned Sandalio on this, but the young man was unmistakably his father’s and he, too, could not stop himself from devouring a moment greater than he had ever known.

Francisco had many scars, but only one came from Hector, whose punch missed wide and ripped the fold on the top of his left ear straight up like an envelope flap. The spat came long ago when he challenged Hector’s bravery and call to duty. When strength and power triumphed over strength of character, Francisco, bloody and hearing from one side only, resigned himself to the role of better man with a strength and resilience that came from a life among a brotherhood Hector would never understand. And whenever Francisco used their own friendship as proof, Hector contested their bond as being only as strong as the weakest bone of either man.

Sandalio found himself in Francisco and Tom’s circle almost as immediate as the two bonded themselves, but Tom’s demons had him vacillating at arm’s length between the two at any given time. Francisco’s wing seemed tireless, he took Tom and Sandalio under it, talking
Tom down from his ledge and Sandalio back from wanting to push him off it.

“Why did you never get stitches?” asked Sandalio to Francisco one evening as the two closed up shop.

Sandalio put down his broom and eyed Francisco as he rubbed his mangled ear. It was not often that Hector’s son was given to thought; when asked, he answered, years of getting slapped upside the head or across his face instilling a conditioned response to bullshit if needed. But he felt safe with Francisco and his father’s friend offered him a patience not even his mother afforded him.

“There are some things you can’t fix. And there are other things you don’t.”

“That’s stupid. Your ear looks like shit.”

“Dali, this entire shop is based on that principle. Putting on a fresh coat of paint doesn’t make a tractor run better. This,” said Francisco, accentuating the gnarled cartilage with his thumb and index finger, “doesn’t stop me from listening. And it sure as hell doesn’t stop me from thinking.”

“Stops me. All I get is blah, blah, blah, look at his nasty ear.”

“And Tom?”

“The guy’s a drunk.”

“That what you see?”

“Doesn’t matter. The guy’s a fuck.”

“A fuck? Interesting, coming from someone who’s been getting enough of that for all of us. Love ‘em and leave ‘em. That about right, Dali?”

“Whatever. I don’t trust him.”

“That’s fair.”
“The man’s a killer. Or at least someone who tried to kill. What’s the deal anyway? Actually, doesn’t matter.”

“It matters. And it matters that he’s both.”

Sandalio twitched, the electric snap of his head, momentary as it was, revelatory in its truth.

“Makes it worse, doesn’t it?” said Francisco, Sandalio staring at him dumbfounded.

“You’d have a better poker face if you got your facts from the right man.”

“What for?” asked Sandalio, shaking off his stunned silence. “To find out what I already know?”

Francisco shot back quickly, “Why over what, Dali. Why over what.” He took his frustration out on a box of rags by kicking it into a corner behind the counter. It slid easily across the floor into place. “You’re as stubborn as your father. And as lazy too. Talk to the man.”

Sandalio’s shoulders dropped as he heard Francisco’s words, the boy’s face growing long and tired as he calculated the option.

The argument can be made that directing Sandalio to talk to anyone, let alone Tom, is an endeavor predicated on the son doing that very thing his father worked so hard at beating into him. And in doing so, whatever shit the boy spilled would be his and his alone. For his part, Sandalio came through—that is—for his father. With Hector having gotten his hands on him, the boy had shit for ears and shit for legs. He never let on to his father that the only thing he could ever feel was the break in his bones. But, whenever his mother brought it up, Hector, for his part, commented that the boy was too young to have bones at that point in his life, so he should stop his bitching and be grateful that he had a roof over his head.

Somewhere between being unable to walk—either instance—and the moment when he
finally mastered the art of literally putting his foot down, the boy landed on insufferable ass, having quickly passed through sniveling bitch, his father’s term; selective mute, bumbling idiot, bullshit artist, informed lecturer, and loud mouth know-it-all—none of which he seemed to graduate from with any definitive chronology. For someone so young, he cycled between them with ease, often finding sniveling bitch an effective disarmer and back pocket tactic when all else failed and the imminent threat of more broken bones was staring him in the face.

Regardless of what lies his mouth spouted to hide the truth or save himself, what Sandalio could never hide were his ears. In truth, it wasn’t so much that Francisco noticed that Sandalio had a shit poker face, it was that when it came to those inevitable truths, the boy had shit for ears. Francisco’s may have been mangled, but no deformity, no unstoppable hemorrhage, could ever draw the attention that Sandalio’s emotions did to his ears. The whitest of lies or minimal of embarrassment would turn them red like ornaments in winter.

The next morning, before dawn, Sandalio was looking down the barrel of a shotgun. He arrived before anyone else, save for Tom who had been working tirelessly all night on an engine.

“Tom! It’s me!” shouted Sandalio, ducking and covering his head with his arms in the process.

“Jesus Christ, kid! You wanna get yourself killed? What the fuck are you doing here? Shit!” said Tom relieved. He put aside the shotgun and picked up the wrench he had thrown to the ground. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Me!? What’s with the shotgun!?”

“Long night,” said Tom shaking his head and burying himself back into the engine. The light Tom had been working under slowly lost its brilliance as the sun began to rise and exert its dominance.
“You going to tell me?”

“Noope.”

“I don’t think my dad would appreciate you bringing a gun to work.”

“I don’t answer to your dad.”

“I don’t think he would appreciate you pointing a gun at his son.”

“Clearly you think I’m an idiot. Go, tell your father. Then come back and I’ll tell you where you can get some ice for that fat lip you’re going to get from him. Why are you here?”

“I suppose we both have things we’re not going to tell each other.”

“Well then make yourself useful and hand me that other wrench.”

Without a second thought, Sandalio grabbed the wrench and brought it to Tom. He watched closely as Tom used both, the muscles in his arms expanding the fabric of his shirt as he held a nut firmly in place with one wrench and muscled the bolt protruding through it tight with the other.

It was moments like these that Sandalio’s arm ceased being a keeper of distance and instead pulled towards the body those things of value, but devoid of cost. In truth, his relationship with Tom was not all that suspicious and improbable. Sandalio, much like his father, could only see a relationship within the physical world. If he could rationalize the bodily existence of the person in front of him—define it as some visible product, worthwhile and effective—then he had no questions or misgivings. He simply took. Sandalio wasn’t incapable of intellectualism, his conversations were just had with those physical movements, each one justified by its tangible end. His voice, when needed, was only to accomplish that end, nothing more. And so, Tom and Sandalio worked in silence—that morning; that day; and every other day from the moment they met. The two didn’t need words, they didn’t even need grunts. They spoke
with their hands, directing the other to their every need.

But Hector wanted more. And somehow, despite everything known of the man, he asked for it. Something about his words spoiled. They were rotten, right from the limb, bred that way to ensure that they were never picked and left alone forever. And indeed, no one ever challenged him. Or did, ever again. The obvious answer to the question of Hector was that he was the worst in men. And that—what is there to expect from someone who idolizes the greatness of himself and who finds the flames from off his tongue to be a far greater equalizer to humanity than any effort he can put into himself? Stranger still was the effort he put into others with his voice. For all the beatings that Sandalio took at the hands of his father, nothing corrupted his mind more than the words his father spoke to him.

“Francisco doesn’t know anything about us,” said Hector to Sandalio one night by candlelight. The two were on the floor of the parts shop, taking shelter from a storm that came on too quickly. It killed the power as almost immediately as it arrived. Everyone else had gone for the evening, Francisco being the last, and the only one to warn the two that they better leave with him or else get stranded by the storm that, at the time, looked hours away. Hector slurped up some cold beans from a tin can before continuing to lecture his son. “He’s not what you’d call a real man. Anyone can take him. It’s why he gravitates to people like Tom. He needs men in his life. He can’t live without them.”

An infinite number of words ran through Sandalio’s mind that night—as questions, others statements, and still others that were words left over that would have provided his father with answers, if only he were one to listen to them. Instead Sandalio sat there, drinking his beans like his father and listening to him deconstruct Francisco so that he could formulate a new man from the pieces. By morning, Sandalio’s mind was as flooded as the backroom they spent the night
bailing out. By morning, Francisco was a self-hating Mexican faggot-lover who sided with all American causes, even at his own peril, because the alternative would have him under the thumb of a woman he would never be able to control. By morning, Francisco was a Mexican outcast. By morning, Francisco’s parents had abandoned him. By morning, Francisco had sucked off a goat, not because he wanted to, but because he had been warned by the men in his platoon that if he didn’t stop catching glimpses, they’d give him a dick to remember forever. By morning, Francisco abandoned Spanish because it no longer felt right on his tongue. By morning, Francisco was a deserter. By morning, Francisco had been captured. By morning, Francisco was dishonorably discharged. By morning, Francisco owed Hector his life. By morning, Francisco was a homeless vet. By morning, he was a beggar, thief, cheat, and liar. He didn’t know who he was. He didn’t know where he was from. He was lost. He was friendless. He was hopeless. By morning, Francisco was godless.

“Then why did you hire him?” asked Sandalio, pushing the water through the doorway with a push-broom.

“Because I’m a great businessman,” answered Hector, watching with dry feet as his son, ankle deep, tried desperately not to slip and land face first in the murky water. “Francisco does for me what three men do. And for half the cost of just one of them.”

The black oil rings continued to grow around Sandalio’s legs as the water level lowered with each thrust of the broom. By mid-morning, his ankles were shackled with oil, the clamps indissoluble against his skin.

“What now?”

“Go find Francisco and tell he needs to dry out what walls he can and cut out whatever is not going to be salvageable. Tell him to go up the road to Wheelers to see if they
have any extra fans we can borrow.”

Sandalio followed through dutifully, day after day obeying his father’s commands in order to maintain that necessary separation between the two men. While Hector continued to reinforce the slander of the only man willing to call him friend, Sandalio became lost in the truths of the men in his life that would never see eye-to-eye. He couldn’t square them and the more he tried, the more he trusted in disbelief and the existence of lies than any particular truth from either person.
There would be something immensely satisfying in being able to tell you that the first time I saw someone go to town on a piñata I said something witty like *Jesus Christ that kid hates donkeys*. Frankly, I don’t think it was until Rafferty’s class that I ever came close to saying what was on my mind—too bad I went overboard. What we want to do and what we actually do are two completely different things. And what our parents want us to do is a third. I never got the chance to see some kid beat the shit out of a papier-mâché donkey. I did, however, see my father lynch one in our backyard before handing me a plastic yellow bat and telling me to swing. Under normal circumstances this might have been fun, but this was my twelfth birthday and the previous eleven required me to do nothing of the sort. To this day, I have no idea why the fuck he bought a piñata, but I do have three guesses and none of them make the situation any better.

I didn’t like tee-ball and I didn’t like little league. So, for guess number one, I’m willing to put money on my doesn’t-get-the-hint-father that this was some third, piss-poor attempt at getting me to like baseball as much as he did.

I probably should have thrown him a bone—or in this case a ball—sucked it up and whipped out some *Field of Dreams* “You wanna have a catch?” line and made a connection. But a pedigree and a paycheck does not a father make. Just because I saw my dad every day, didn’t mean he was any kind of rock for my sister or me. It’s not that I hated him or even disliked him. I just didn’t know him. As I come to find out, not knowing is kind of the Salinas M.O.

Guess two on the other hand strikes a chord that I had no idea could resonate. Case in point, I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve seen *Pulp Fiction*. But no matter how many times I watch that movie, I never quite know what my chuckle means when Bruce Willis’s character says to the female cab driver, “I’m an American, honey. Our names don’t mean shit.” Which
brings me to the couch that I watched that movie and countless others on. For as long as I can remember, my parents owned that blue sofa bed. It was as uncomfortable to sit on, as it was to sleep in, but no matter what my family threw at it, nothing, and I mean nothing would destroy it. I’m pretty sure the fabric was a mix between raw denim and S.O.S. pads. And for the life of me, I don’t know how we lasted five years, let alone over ten years, without ever putting a cover on it. Leave it to my dad though to put an end to an era in the most head-scratching way possible.

We don’t know where he got it, but one day we all woke up, went out into the family room, and lying over the back of the couch was a serape blanket with all the comfort and charm of carpet backing. And heaven help you should you even ask, let alone actually remove his pride and joy from off the couch.

There are things about my father that require an overabundance of arrogance to presume, but over the years I’ve decided that with all my silence at school, I’ve safely tipped the scales enough to occasionally be a blowhard about my dad without sending myself flying ass over head off a cliff. I can roll my R’s, no thanks to him. I have a sophisticated palate, in spite of him. And I have no idea who the fuck I am, because of him. Why he chose not to instill a single ounce of who he is into my sister or me, is infuriating to say the least. As teenage angst goes, I feel I was gyped. All my other friends got to rebel against their parents. Had he just been a hippie and treated me like some blank canvas that needed to paint himself, I would have at least been halfway on board. But instead it was like I was some pot of water on the range that he never bothered to throw a single ingredient in, let alone start the flame.

So why, at the most random of times, he resorts to asinine and juvenile displays of identity, is just pathetic. Fortunately, I’d like to think that somewhere along the line I had imparted in me a strong enough sense of self to not get all butt hurt about a piñata that was more
for him than it was his own son. I can only imagine that strength came from my mom—a woman who saw my father through undergrad and grad school without ever setting foot in a college classroom herself. She never once dropped my sister or me off at a babysitter, and what’s even more remarkable, I don’t ever remember sitting in a lump of boredom in the corner of an office while she choreographed the lives of million-dollar executives down to the minute.

As for guess number three, I can only assume that my father thought he knew enough about his mother-in-law to have the requisite arrogance to think that a fucking piñata was a big enough insult to her shit-for-sensibilities to smear it all over her face. This, however, was news to me. So, now that I think about it, it was probably the first time I ever saw my father be completely emasculated.

My twelfth birthday party was supposed to be a surprise. So, stepping into my backyard and seeing a grandmother who was persona non grata checked that box with a shotgun. Unfortunately, that was not the only surprise, as my twelfth birthday continued to descend into a day of firsts. I saw, first-hand, the regret on my mother’s face for this one attempt at being the bigger person and thinking that she could change her mother’s attitude and somehow mend fences. My dad on the other hand was far less pragmatic.

Grandma Katherine sat legs crossed in the only functional lawn chair we had left, sipping her Lipton iced tea and looking over to the corner of the yard at the remnants of the other three chairs. Their aluminum frames were twisted and bent beyond repair and their fabric was disintegrating into a fine dust under the Arizona sun.

I had only ever seen pictures of her, and in hindsight, the irony of first knowing her in black and white only to then be introduced to her in color was all a bit much. Even if I had the guts at twelve to take the sarcastic jab, I doubt she would have cared seeing as how her own
daughter was struggling to walk on eggshells around her. The fact was more than obvious when she told my mom that ‘Carl’ needed to have glass cups for iced tea instead of childish plastic ones. For as much as my dad hated the fact that Grandma Katherine refused to call him Carlos—he had, after all, been bitching about it since she first walked through the door—the plastic cup remark seemed to irk him even more.

Like a kind of metronome, she turned to sip her tea then turned to the heap in the corner of the yard, again and again, seeming to care little about what was happening in the middle of the lawn underneath the tree. My father on the other hand, sculpted me like clay, constantly turning me to ensure that if I swung the bat and made contact that I would “go yard” precisely in grandma’s direction. Whether seeing her pelted with hundreds of pieces of hard candy was all the satisfaction he needed, or if he had higher hopes that I would whack the head clean off the piñata directly into her face, giving new meaning to the term donkey punch, I can only assume.

Instead, I whiffed, over and over, matching Grandma Katherine’s head turns of indifference.

“You see, Carl,” said Katherine, focusing her eyes nowhere and ignoring the red rush over my father’s face for not calling him Carlos. “The boy can’t hit it because you’ve given him the wrong tool. You’d be best to give him a shovel or a pickax, so at least he’d have some skill in the future.”

Surprise!
Two Sides

When Tom Sullivan arrived, something changed in Francisco. Something happened that transformed the man from Nowhere, Mexico. Suddenly, Francisco became alive and it both confirmed and confused everything that Sandalio knew about Francisco. Tom was just some man, born and raised in Kansas, gone to war, and come back as disgraced and wounded as Francisco. That’s all Hector ever told him, and yet he was obviously so much more.

Francisco hated Tom at first, picking at him like a scab about his breakdown on the shop floor. He wouldn’t tolerate silence for an answer, no matter how many times he interrupted Tom and told him to shut up. Just when Tom thought he found peace, Francisco would needle him in the back about who survived his killing. But for all the deliberations and false starts from Tom about his truth, it was Hector who pulled away, unwilling to bear the weight of Tom’s actions on his conscience. It was easier to hate the man for some conjured justification than it was to be stricken with any specific burden of proof for why he felt the way he did about the man. These were the whims Francisco warned Sandalio about and it remained the dilemma for Francisco to struggle with at night. Give the boy a glimpse of facts and risk having him struck down by his father, thrown in a hole, and never be let out again. Keep the boy in the dark, and risk a fate more appalling than the alternative.

Eventually Tom broke and poured his heart out to Francisco when Hector and Sandalio were not around.

The two took the day to scour the county for abandoned equipment, vehicles, and parts, at times taking liberties with the definition and turning a truck on the side of the road that was simply out of gas into a much more complex problem for the owner who they inevitably passed on the road walking back with a gas can. And every time they kept their eyes straight ahead,
looking right through that Ford windshield of theirs with a tarp covering the bed of evidence.

“I got numb every time one of you spics showed up in my country’s uniform,” said Tom, breaking the silence in the cabin of the truck. He didn’t turn to Francisco, just kept his right arm on the steering wheel and his other elbow resting on the window opening. “All of your ulterior motives. It wasn’t why I was there. None of us were getting anything in return. And then to make matters worse, we were just supposed to have faith that your pilots—”

“Yeah,” interrupted Francisco, directly confirming the point for once rather than demanding Tom shut his mouth first so he could give him an earful. “What did you expect us to do? Side with the Japs?”

“Not unheard of.”

“The hell—”

“You wanted to know.”

“I could have come alone if I didn’t want to set the record straight with you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I know what I know.”

“If I wanted bullshit, I’d talk to Hector.”

“I’m telling you what I know. If you want someone else to tell you what I know, go find him.”

“Fine. Get on with it.”

For miles, the truck cruised, carrying the men in silence, as if Francisco and Tom had never begun their conversation.

They drove down backroads, unpaved and unattended, leading them through some of the most beautiful farmland they had ever seen. Tom pulled over and both men exited without a sound, each making note of a farmhouse in the distance.
The land was endless. The more they walked, the further the farmhouse became as they approached a tractor left in the field. No one was around to stop them from pulling from it whatever they could carry in the burlap and canvas sacks they had brought with them. They made short work of it, but had grossly overestimated their collective strength and spent the better part of the afternoon falling over each other in mime-like hysterics, trying not to call attention to themselves as they dragged their bounty back to the truck. Exhausted, the two men climbed into the cabin and fell back against the seat with nothing left inside of them.

“I’d be dead if not for you,” said Tom, trying hard to release the sentence in one breath.

“You wouldn’t have been stupid enough to carry this much.”

“No,” said Tom, correcting Francisco. “No. I mean I’d be dead if it weren’t for you.”

Francisco didn’t so much turn his head, as he allowed his neck to just give out so his head could flop over and his eyes could meet with Tom’s. He looked him over, trying to calculate the man’s words. “Oh,” said Francisco. “It’s nothing. We’ve all hit rock bottom at some point. And if we haven’t, we will.”

“Damnit!” blurted Tom, mustering his diaphragm to feign some semblance of vitality for the requisite breath.

“What?”

That was the question, and after nearly killing himself twice with Francisco by his side, Tom Sullivan finally answered it.

“My eagle,” said Tom, reaching his hand out to pat Francisco on his chest. When it came to rest, Francisco took Tom’s hand in his, and knowing every word that Hector ever said to his face, and behind his back to Sandalio and every other man who he needed to be better than, held Tom’s hand without shame, gripping it with a strength and pride that no one could ever steal.
“Tell me,” said Francisco, withdrawing his hand to wait for the punishing words he knew would come.

“In my sleep,” Tom started then stopped. He wouldn’t speak again until the sun slid below the horizon and time gave the sky its reds then blues. When blackness finally filled the cabin and Tom could see nothing more than a silhouette of Francisco against the stars, he took a breath and began his confession again. “In my sleep my mind tells me that I can talk to angels. Unlike God, they actually listen. I spent the better part of my life waiting for God to come to me and deliver the answers to my prayers. I don’t know what I expected, but I had this undying conviction that the worst in me would always be saved.”

With its windows down, the night’s cool breeze cycled through the truck like a pulse, taking the stagnant air off the men and whisking it away through the fields, returning a sweet zephyr, free and pure for both to share.

“Maybe it was that I would always be saved from the worst in me. That when, at night when I was on my knees beside my bed— Or years later on the bank of a creek calculating its depth— Or even now, asking would I have the will if you weren’t here? Or do I have the strength now to leave you behind?”

Tom put both hands on the steering wheel; his fingers and palms, slick from the day’s labor, still powerful enough to grip it for life, bear down in frustration until his calluses caught, and summon the friction of a rosined bow. He bit his teeth, then cathartically twisted his hands until the audible bellow came from within his grip—taking the burden from off his tongue.

Francisco continued to offer his patience, the continual breeze being the only rush he needed. He had become all too familiar with the ins and outs of most trucks, the majority of his
time being spent buried under the weight of legal passengers or cargo in the bed of one, and
twice having managed to hold on for life underneath one. Inside, next to Tom, he could tolerate
the delay. Although this was all a mystery, it somehow put him at ease. There would be no peace
from Tom’s story, but the truth in the confession would answer for Francisco some lie of
omission, scrub its existence, and finally bring definition to the man atop the terrible beauty of
his moral failure.

“I can’t be so self-aware. It’s not possible to answer to yourself like this. To recognize
that the worst in me would never be saved. Or to stand alone and have answered that I would
never be saved from the worst in me. But it is. It is possible. It’s creation. It’s all creation.
Fabricated truths. That’s what we get. That’s all we get. Because that’s all we are. We are the
question and the answer to the worst in us.” Tom leaned in, placed his forehead on the top of the
steering wheel and became mute. Even his breath fell silent as if Death entered the truck and
found who he was looking for. “God doesn’t tell you,” said Tom into his lap. “No one tells you.
No one other than you. Only your actions will tell you—”

“Tell you what?”

“Who you are,” Tom said, looking back up.

“Of course,” said Francisco sympathetically, “we are all judged by our actions.”

“No, not like that. No one tells you who you are—certainly not God.”

“We all have to figure it out ourselves.”

“I was good. I accepted that I would never be safe from myself—” Tom’s long pause
gave Francisco the opportunity to scan the man in his mind. The checklist was a long catalog of
the pain he inflicted onto himself. His nose, as it was now, was indeed the tip of the iceberg.
Buried under those long sleeves and pant legs were the scars of a man who had no intention of
surviving his wounds. “I never knew,” said Tom suddenly, “that it would be others who would have to be saved from the worst in me.”

“I believe in what we did tonight,” continued Tom. “My path to hell doesn’t have to be for nothing. I can at least die trying to help the boy. The kid’s his father through and through.”

“I know,” said Francisco. “But how does this help? Why are we doing this? Keep the shop up? Keep a job? Keep our sanity?”

It was to bring Tom around and into focus. There was no hiding it. Francisco could have been there all night with Tom’s asides. He would have gladly listened to the man dig through his confessions until the only one carrying any real weight stuck at the bottom of his gut.

“Did you ever find that the more proof you had against the existence of God, the more you began to pray to Him?” asked Tom slowly, his voice finding those moments to pause in the sentence like a teacher wanting an answer from the class, rather than initiate rhetorical contemplation. Perhaps it was Francisco’s insistence that now was the time for Tom Sullivan to start giving answers; or it could have been that Francisco never really found that connection between his teachers and himself to be able to recognize such vocal nuances; or it may simply have been that opportunity was always taken from him by the bloviating classes who’d just as soon terrorize a silence than allow reason to rise from one. Whatever the circumstance, Francisco remained still, his refusal to speak as much about the moment as it was his conditioned response.

Tom didn’t allow his question to spin around their ears for very long. He had his own answer—one that he had long fixated on. “Or does God only speak to those who go to Him? Were you the lucky few who flew past His whispers and could hear His blessing of grace?”

“We had missions. None of us felt safe. And we were praying as much as you.”

“Yes, but also answering ours. And I shot my angel anyway,” said Tom with such
soberly that the cool breeze stabbed at his passenger with frigid intent. Francisco’s heart dropped and he sank into the seat, his back resting against the door as he turned to face the specter of Tom somewhere in the darkness beside him.

“What happened?” asked Francisco.

Tom’s breathing became heavy and the rub of his callused fingers on the denim of his jeans filled the silence. A quick jingle, metal on metal, a click and a rumbling whir, and without warning the truck was on. Tom threw the pickup into gear and gunned it. Even with its load in the bed, the tires spun on the dirt, fishtailing the back end of the Ford before it caught and had the two barreling down the road into the darkness of the night.

“Tom!” yelled Francisco, bracing himself as best he could between the door, seat, floor, and dash. He switched his palm to the roof of the truck hoping for something more secure, only to fall back on the lesser of the evils. “Stop the fucking truck, Tom!” Francisco’s words were untranslatable. He screamed them into Tom’s right ear over and over until his throat felt cut and a mess of shredded tissue, but the man kept driving, his friend’s words irrelevant. “Tom! You’re going to kill us!”

The stars kept the truck straight as Tom zeroed in on the brightest, frozen in its space among the horizon of celestial bodies. “Tom! What are you seeing!?!” Francisco slammed his hand atop the dashboard, the massive thud doing nothing more than confirm Francisco’s fears with its abrupt sting—that this was happening, and that within the space of a singular vehicle, moving towards an unknown, one man could be grounded in a reality of facts while another could be lost in a fiction of his own design. Tom was locked in on an illusion of truth and with every revolution taking place below him, he gripped harder to his reality until it was no longer possible for it to be his own.
Desperate for anything to stop the man and save both from the imminent, Francisco screamed the one word he feared would always be his last.

“Incoming!!!”

Immediately Tom slammed on the brake pedal. The front end of the truck dug into the dirt road. No match for the heavy parts loosely secured in the bed of the truck, the tarp gave out as they all launched into the air, smashing into the back window and exploding the glass onto the men. Francisco flew into the windshield as Tom’s reflex to the shattered glass pulled his head and shoulders towards his lap. Tom yanked the steering wheel to the left as he descended, spinning the truck’s back end and upending everything in the bed. The shift in weight was too much. The right side of the truck lost contact with the road and in an instance the truck rolled over, mangling the truck into a metal heap and taking the godsend of parts and exploding them across the road and into the nearby field.

Bloody and with cringes and limps that would take weeks to hide before fading from the reality of their senses, and the view of anyone in the know, Private Tom Sullivan and Lieutenant Francisco Guerrero emerged from the wreckage as soldiers with a speechless understanding that would mean nothing to Hector, but would see them through the night. They took what they needed from the truck, and in the darkness tried to secure as many innocuous parts as possible, knowing full well that their greatest loot would have to stay or else raise eyebrows when the police would inevitably come asking.

It was the very next morning that Hector arrived at his parts shop and was greeted by the police. But when asked what he knew about a stolen truck, he turned, and with an honesty that was rare for him on such occasions said, “I have no idea. That’s my truck right there,” and pointed to his Ford, scratched, dented, bent frame, rusted out, and looking like shit, but present,
operable, and on the up and up. The policemen looked around, picked up and put down half the inventory in Hector’s shop before thanking him for his time, and asking him to let them know if anyone comes around looking suspicious, most likely injured, and potentially with a cache of auto parts they were trying to unload for some quick money.

It would take days for Tom and Francisco to make it back to Hector’s unnoticed. Their broken bodies needed rest and the two canvas sacks they managed to carry over their shoulders quickly became deadweight dragging them down as they inched their way home. By morning, following the accident, the same morning that had Hector answering questions about unknowns, Tom and Francisco were so exhausted that they both fell asleep seated against an enormous cottonwood.

“How far out did we go last night?” asked Francisco when they awoke.

“With all the stops, I thought only about 10 miles. 15 tops,” said Tom.

“Yeah, well, we’re nowhere near that. We had to have cleared the county.”

“Or two,” said Tom looking around.

“Fuck. You think we can get on the road and risk a ride?” said Francisco buttoning up.

“If I look as shitty as you, and we both look as shitty as I feel, we’re just asking for trouble. Besides, one cop and we’re done for.”

As the sun began to set and the reds and oranges washed over their faces, the two shook off their body’s signals to stop bringing about pain and not move a muscle. They were back trudging along, but by midnight, the sound of a stream had the men rejoicing, dropping their treasure, and piecing together a hobbled sprint until they were at the bank on their knees, necks hunched over like horses, drinking until their stomachs were begging them to throw it all up.

“This is much better,” said Francisco when the two were finally on their backs looking up
at the stars and breathing easy. “Where were you last night?”

“I think you know,” said Tom. The stillness in his voice was a comfort to both men as it signaled that they both survived his nightmare. In the hours since the accident, Francisco had been trailing Tom for miles trying to understand what happened. The math of it all was far too complex for him to calculate, but as heavy as the burden, it took his mind off the load he was carrying and somehow focusing on his heart being dragged down was a welcome reprieve from his mind telling him that it was his body instead that was sinking under the weight.

“How often are you there?”

“I buried myself there the moment I took the shot,” Tom said, his voice trailing as he turned his head from Francisco.

“At your angel?” asked Francisco awkwardly. The word felt strange leaving his mouth as his tenuous grasp on the reference was nothing more than him reaching blindly at some intangible significance.

“Fallen.”

“Tom—”

“Stop,” said Tom. Francisco’s silence came faster than the aspirated pop of Tom’s lips. He didn’t demand. He didn’t ask. The word left his mouth and as quickly as Francisco obliged, the act summoned that same demon that dragged Tom into Hector’s store. “Why do you listen? Why do you answer with your reactions? How? How do my words reach you? I don’t understand! Answer me!” Tom rolled over onto Francisco, wrapping his hands around his neck, and squeezing as tightly as his exhausted fingers would allow. “Answer me!”

The accident and the miles of travel on their broken bodies with their heavy loads equalized the men. Tom’s grip on Francisco’s neck was punishing, but countered by the nerves
Francisco’s fingers pinched as he grappled with Tom’s wrists. The grunts from both were as much offensive aggression summoned from a space beyond their souls, as they were from those uncontrollable defensive forces that boil up from within to blindly preserve such corporeal existences regardless of merit. They were both thieves, and whether or not Tom had murdered, they both had killed. Neither would ever speak to that, but they had answered the call when asked, and their bodies were determined to answer again if they had to.

“I shot you,” spat Tom. “I saw you go limp. I saw you die. I saw your rag doll body float down under your canopy and hit the earth.”

Long before Tom’s growls subsided and his painful grin ceased spilling his mouth’s foaming rage onto the man whose cause was just as much his, Francisco felt the parity in their strength. He relaxed his throat and kept the pressure on Tom’s wrists until finally, as he had before, Tom gave up.

“I’m sorry,” Tom said to heaven.

It was now the second night that Tom was nothing more than a voice in a black, empty space. Francisco sat up and rubbed his throat. He’d been shaving the pillowy skin under his jaw since he was a kid, borrowing his father’s rusty blades for the job. As his fingers ran over his Adam’s apple, the beads of sweat that permitted his fingers to glide so easily over the bulges and grooves summoned the memory of those bloody mornings when the nicks to his throat came like habitual reminders of just how quickly one grievous mistake could come.

After his mother came down with pneumonia and nothing the doctors nor her body did mattered, Francisco stood in front of the mirror on the day of her funeral. As if his hands were someone else’s, not the 15-year-old so desperate to have his final goodbye a perfect close to the life of his loving mother, he stabbed at his throat’s protruding cartilage with one of those rusty
blades. To this day, he could never answer why. It was not to join her or take some blame or punishment for the cough that he originally had that ultimately became hers. It was just an impulse. Something in the mirror gripped him, like Tom’s powerful hands in the dark, and forced his will toward an action of reflex rather than conscience.

Francisco didn’t need to tell Tom that he wanted to kill him. The silence was loud enough to convey his desire. But then he thought about his father’s razors and the fragility of his own neck. The unanswerable question came back to him, but it turned and twisted this time, morphing in front of him like a reflection in a mirror that had been stared at for too long. No longer was it asking how or when or by what means or even why or should. Francisco knew exactly the man whose neck he felt his hands could wrap so easily around. But in the clarity he stopped, and wondered from whom the life would be leaving.

Francisco summoned words that he didn’t believe. Maybe they, too, were from a body and a place completely unknown. One that was not his, but one both merciful and merciless, so that some semblance of healing could begin.

“Those with bibles, when they’re ready, begin with forgiveness,” said Francisco, his heart as far away from Tom as it was from his own chest. “I have no bible, nor the capacity to forgive. We were eagles in the sky, yet sitting ducks. No, God doesn’t speak to you up there. He doesn’t answer prayers. The only thing you hear from God is a backstabbing whisper when you drop your payload and shit on life. You call it the Japanese, the Germans, the enemy. You call it whatever the fuck you want, Tom. But I’ll call it like it is: your chance to kill one of my Mexican brothers—your angel—who did everything he could to answer your prayer. He gave you your chance when he flew overhead and you took his when you shot him parachuting down.”

Francisco stood. He ratcheted his leg back and readied himself to kick Tom in his side.
His foot flew forward, but just as he was about to land the blow, he bent his opposing knee and directed the pendulous swing of his leg to dive and drive the toe of his shoe into the soft earth below, missing Tom’s ribs by inches.

“I understand why you showed up drunk, Tom. I understand what it’s like to have no fucking reason to do something. And I understand what it’s like to do it anyway. I know where you’re at. And you’re buried there forever alongside him. And you’ll forever see him. You’ll see him in me. In Hector. In Sandalio. You’ll see him in the lady whose tamales you eat when you don’t think any of us are looking. But you can’t live there, Tom. So drink. And don’t expect my forgiveness, brother. Drink. Heavily. And somewhere between the neck of the bottle and the bottom—find yourself between here, this place that haunts you, and there, that place from which you can never return.”
There are constants and then there are consistents, and somewhere in the whole fucking mess are things that are persistent. Davion would constantly or consistently find time after the sun set, and his homework was done, to head to the park and shoot hoops. He would constantly or consistently have to hit the button on the light pole to kick the lights back on after 45 minutes. After ten o’clock, the police would consistently or persistently roll up for the third or fourth time and tell him that it was getting late and that he needed to head home. And Davion would consistently or persistently plead with the officers to give him another 30 minutes. Gisella on the other hand was just persistent, albeit consistent, and joined Davion at the park night after night to keep him company, even though her parents consistently forbade her. Or was it that they constantly forbid her? Or constantly forebade? Whatever the case, a shit-ton of Spanish interspersed with the very not Spanish of American racism would fly from their mouths whenever she was grilled on her whereabouts.

The three of us kind of had a whole Weasley, Potter, Granger thing going on, but damnit if we couldn’t tell who was who. Frankly, if I’m being completely honest, when our AP teachers became a bunch of Umbridges, the three of us summoned our inner Fred and George and very much thought that our futures would lay outside the world of academic achievement.

I, however, would be lying if I suggested that I was any kind of -ent or -ant. I was more of an -ate. For anyone hurt by me, I was clearly deliberate. For anyone who wanted me to ‘just stop’ I was obstinate. For those worried about me finding my way, I would forever ambulate. And long before I would ever understand or recognize how, I would repudiate, isolate, dictate, miscalculate, desecrate, alienate, segregate…

I pulled into the parking lot in my mom’s car, still livid from the tongue lashing my dad
had been giving me. There truly was no reason for my sister to jump in the middle and defend me, but the fact that she didn’t still irked me. Because of that fact, the deliberate me was half-wishing I was getting out of my mom’s car and approaching Davion and Gisella holding a pot of mac and cheese by the handle, eating it with the wooden spoon my sister had waiting to stir it with.

“Panda with a taco?” questioned Davion, grabbing his own rebound and putting the ball under his arm. “What the fuck was that about?”

“Come on. That’s like the oldest joke ever,” I said. “Black, white, Chinese, Mexican. It’s the most inclusive symbol the world has to offer.”

“The question wasn’t about not knowing the joke, which by the way was stupid,” said Davion.

“You laughed.”

“Everyone laughed, Andrew! That’s what we do. The smartest always laugh when others are at their dumbest.”

“Well, shit. If I wanted to get ripped a new one for how stupid I am, I could have stayed home.”

Gisella sat cross-legged on one of the cement benches behind the hoop Davion was shooting at. She had yet to look up and remained buried in her hardbound copy of Moby Dick that she had been lugging around all week.

“What did you want me to say?”

“You said exactly what I wanted you to say,” laughed Davion. “You said what we all wanted to say, though I would have modified motherfucker with the word racist. Gisella!?” shouted Davion.
“Misogynistic,” she said, her eyes continuing to track the words of whatever the hell Ishmael had to say of Queequeg—or whatever the fuck was happening in the book. Chowder. Legs. Whales. The measurements of said whales. Like it matters.

“So what’s the problem? Did I offend you or something?”

“Ha!” Davion burst out, before leaning in quietly to whisper. “Dude, you just missed it. Gisella’s parents were here, like, ten minutes ago.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, knowing how well Gisella’s family could conjugate a racial epithet.

“Please,” said Davion. “I may as well have not even been here. Seriously, I don’t even exist to those people. You want to console anyone, I’d talk to her. We were having fun busting your balls, but then this shit went down and now she doesn’t want to go home. I honestly thought they were going to pick her up and throw her in the back of the car.”

“They do know you’re just friends, right?”

“That’s twice now, Andrew.”

“What?”

Davion dropped the basketball and immediately stomped it down under his shoe before it had an opportunity to bounce back up. He rolled it under his Lebron, massaging the sole back and forth until the words came to mind. “How is it that you can say everything that is on our minds? You are like the voice of the entire school—until you’re not.” Over Davion’s shoulder, I could see Gisella look up from her book. She leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees.

“It’s funny,” Davion continued, “I was talking to my mom when I got home today. We were joking that you are like the one person who could actually say ‘I have lots of black friends’ as defense against some bullshit racist accusation and it would actually mean something. Not because you have black friends, or Mexican, or Chinese, you fuckin’ stupid panda,” Davion
chuckled, “but because we want to be friends with you. I don’t think you get that.”

My look obviously agreed, as did my immediate reflex. My eyelids dropped like a garage door failing to close, before my right hand zoomed over my head like a blank thought from my mind. The only thing missing was the stereo nyoom past my ears to punctuate my cluelessness.

“We’re the judge of character,” said Davion. “That’s external to you. Something about you is like the exception to the rule of being judged by your actions. What you say matters—and yet—”

“Yeah?” I said, trying to draw out the rest. Davion shook his head. He swiped his foot over the basketball, quickly snapping his foot back to catch the spin. The ball rolled onto the top of his shoe and he gave it a light kick, popping it up so he could start his dribble. “Yet what? It doesn’t matter?”

“No,” said Davion, turning his dribble into a bounce pass my gut was not ready for. I caught the ball with both hands as it dropped off my stomach. “It will always matter.”

“Then what?”

“Forget it. Let it go.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” said Gisella chiming in. “Elsa, Andrew is not.”

“Would one of you please tell me something specific so I can decide whether I want this really shitty day to get even shittier by getting piled on from my friends or from my family?”

“You’re like a match, Andrew,” said Gisella.

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Can we please go five minutes without a goddamn metaphor.”

“Simile,” joked Davion, whose reflexes were much faster than mine as I fired back the ball. He caught it like it was the last out in dodgeball and turned toward the hoop to celebrate his victory with a shot, swishing the ball through the net. The ball died as if it knew its final
moments were up, quickly bouncing to nothing before slowly rolling to the cement bench Gisella was atop and coming to a stop against it.

“Before my parents showed up and ruined a perfectly good ‘behind your back’ episode of Dr. Phil we were having about you, we were on a roll. I think we finally figured you out. And we decided that you are a match,” said Gisella.

“But without the head,” said Davion.

“I guess I’m stuck with friends to tell me how stupid I am to close out this shitty day.”

“It’s actually kind of a compliment,” said Gisella.

“So, I’m a stick.”

Gisella rolled her eyes from one side of her head to the other. When that didn’t bring a response, she took her head from shoulder to shoulder to dump out the answer. “Yeah, kind of,” she said, a little confused and surprised by the accuracy.

“I’m a stick. I’m a fucking stick! Seriously?”

“Could be worse,” said Davion.

One does not often have an opportunity to see themselves in the mirror when they are in mid-reaction or expression, yet it’s amazing how those same muscles twitch to pull off those universals among the masses. There’s the Do I look stupid to you? The What the fuck were you thinking?, which my parents were currently perfecting. The I so want that, when saying ‘I’m starving’ is an understatement, yet completely ridiculous because I’m pretty sure the look of actual starvation is a look of defeat, not a look of want or desire, as if sex is on the table for the night. Then there’s the You’re fucking retarded look, which is now inherently offensive, and is called upon to be wiped off of one’s face for how politically incorrect the expression is. So, it’s common courtesy to rescind such muscle contractions and amend the facial declaration to You’re
f’ing retarded. And as luck would have it, How could it be worse? pulls at those same anatomical strings that friends of botox love to target—because why learn stoicism when you can just poison your way to it?

My face asked the question clear enough and Davion did not fail to answer.

“You could be the stick up Rafferty’s ass.”

“Yeah. Much better,” I said sarcastically.

Gisella uncrossed her legs and put both her feet down on top of the basketball below.

“First off, I’m ignoring the metaphor remark, Mr. Panda with a taco and a side of hypocrisy.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me.”

Very few people could call me out on my bullshit without getting me all defensive.

Gisella had about an eighty-five percent success rate. Davion was pushing high nineties. I’m not sure by what metrics then who was the most successful. I suppose Gisella’s failures were in fact successes, striking a chord with me in some way. Though Davion’s failure to piss me off seemed to speak to him knowing me a little better and getting me right more often than not.

Now, if that makes a person think that I want to be surrounded by yes-men, then they can get in line behind everyone else who pisses me off for being wrong and not striking a chord. Or worse, one in which some asshole’s finger slips off my pulse, but continues to play that god-awful dissonance on me, like I’m some untuned piano.

I guess that’s why I could handle Gisella’s affectionate ribbing of love. Davion’s too. The affection wasn’t quite real, but the understanding and genuine concern for me were.

“Headless matches don’t start fires,” said Gisella.

With my two index fingers rubbing together like sticks, mocking Tom Hanks’ Cast Away
desperation, I filled in the rest of the *one-mime-show* with the requisite *Do I look stupid to you?*, followed by all ten fingers spontaneously bursting into a collaborative flicker of flames.

“Don’t get ahead of us,” said Gisella, that evil smile coming to her face when she’s got me dead to rights.

“I’m a stick,” I said, acquiescing with a kind of morbid curiosity.

“You’re a match,” corrected Gisella, “but without the combustible head.”

“You were in class today,” I countered, my facial expression stopping short of those universal ones, but very much on target.

“Again, don’t get ahead of us. Shoosh.”

“Shoosh? Okay, so ‘A’, this isn’t preschool. And ‘B’, who are you and what have you done with my friends who know silence is not in my vocabulary?”

“When I said that we are the judge of your character, somehow we’re judging the internal you,” said Davion. “Beyond any action or words out of your mouth.”

“Which is why we decided that you are a headless match,” said Gisella. “It’s not that you don’t burn, you actually do spark fires—well, more like spread them, into all of us, but you can’t start yourself. You’re not combustible.”

“Okay! Seriously! Were you in class today? Scratch that! You were. Period. Racist? Misogynistic? Motherfucker? Do none of these ring a bell?”

Davion moved to sit down beside Gisella. The two looked at me like a couple willing to wait out their child’s tantrum. It wasn’t the first time they waited for me to ‘let it all out’, but it was the first time I could sense a kind of ‘holy shit, what the fuck just went down today’ radiating from them. Putting aside today’s outburst, I’m usually not one to be rude and in general I’m respectful, but it’s no secret that I don’t readily dole out respect. Gisella earned it from me.
long ago when she took a page from my mother’s playbook and rejected her family altogether, biding her time for when she would go off to college and never speak to them again. Davion—Davion, as they say, was my brother from another mother. And yes, in the decade that I have known him, progressively, and in the right circles, using the word brother has become retarded.

I stole the basketball from under Gisella’s feet and plopped myself down on top of the ball in front of the cement bench, staring up in feigned anticipation for story time to begin.

“People are saying Rafferty wants you expelled,” said Davion.

Nothing. Not even a flinch from my face. And nothing without the help of botox, thank you very much.

“Now would be the time for the freak-out, Andrew,” Gisella said, pushing for the one thing I was numb to.

“You’re like the model student, so I can’t imagine what else they could do, but it’s still bullshit,” said Davion.

When the phrase came about that a lie could travel halfway around the world before the truth had a chance to put its pants on, clearly smartphones and social media were not around. More importantly, whatever dumbass came up with that saying obviously never spent a day in a high school. I got the ‘I can’t believe they suspended you’ text from Gisella before I ever had the ‘I can’t believe they suspended me’ reaction to what came directly from the horse’s mouth.

“Don’t you care?” asked Gisella.

I should have an eharmony profile photo that reads ‘D&D free—including botulism’.

“Oh, now you’re just being obstinate, Andrew! Seriously, make a joke, a face, go off. Do something,” Gisella said, running her fingers through her hair before pulling a handful back with a single, deliberate jerk, yanking her neck and sending her eyes to the stars above.
“Nice timing,” I finally said, as Gisella’s gaze came at the exact moment the court’s lights shut off.

“Careful, or I’ll motif, metaphor, and symbolize the shit out of this moment,” she said.

“Zipping it,” I said.

We all took a collective breath, but if Gisella and Davion felt anything like me, it was our eyes that felt the relief more than anything. Phoenix and Scottsdale have enough light pollution to keep anyone from feeling blind in the middle of the night. It wasn’t long before our eyes became adjusted and the distinct lines of our faces resumed their duties of being recognized.

We’d been friends long enough that prolonged silences weren’t uncomfortable, they were more like countdowns from some unknown number for one of us to bring the eye-roll punchline. Davion may have been our school’s star quarterback and the leading scorer on varsity basketball, but when it came time to go big or go home with the mother of all groan inducers in our little circle of three, that role was clearly left to me.

“Ooooh, now I get it,” I said. “Rafferty was right. Diversity does come from watching movies.”

“Don’t—” said Gisella.

“Please don’t—” said Davion.

“When you turn off the lights, everyone is black.”

“Oh my god,” groaned Davion. “This is why pandas are raised in captivity.”

“And why they don’t want to fuck each other,” added Gisella.

“Not that I ever cared, but I so don’t care anymore.”

“Our little headless match is growing up,” said Gisella.

“Definitely going through a rebellious phase,” said Davion.
“This is going to be the corniest thing you have ever heard, but it actually makes sense,” said Gisella. “Let’s say someone started a fire with hatred and another person started a fire with love. As a headless match—”

“Stick.”

“As a headless match, it doesn’t matter which flames touch you, you’re going to be consumed.”

“But this is where we come in and get to judge you as the exception,” said Davion. “When it comes to the love fire, you’re the stick—”

“Ha! Told you!”

Davion continued, making sure to emphasize the correction, “You’re the headless match that all of us see as fueling the fire.”

“But with the hate fire,” Gisella jumped in, “you’re like the controlled burn, or the tree.”

“Now I’m a tree?”

“Shoosh! Or the tree that’s sacrificed to stop the blaze from growing. And even if it was all for not, and the whole forest burns down, it’s impossible not to see you as the thing that burned inward.”

“It’s like you refuse to spread.”

“So I’m cold butter.”

“Headless match,” said Gisella.

“Guys?” I said.

“Yeah?” said Gisella and Davion in unison.

“What…the fuck…was that?”

“I said it was going to be corny.”
“Oh, corny I got. The fuck…is what I’m still waiting on. I mean, seriously, is there some particular reason why I had to sit through a veiled attempt at—I mean, shit, I don’t even know. You’re not even finished. You still have to explain why I’m apparently decapitated in this tripping-balls analogy about love, hate, fire, and sticks.”

“Headless match!” Gisella said emphatically.

“What’s the difference!?”

“It’s manmade! You ass!” screamed Gisella, her frustration cut through the night, casting shadows onto the darkness with her motions.

“I don’t mean to be picky,” I said, “but shouldn’t manmade be the poignant moment to stop on? Ending with ass brings focus to a personality trait, rather than a more serious character flaw.”

“Deliberate ass!” barked Gisella, stomping her feet into the cement and walking away.

“Where you going?” I asked.

“Home! At least there I know what I am dealing with!”

“Is she serious?”

“You can be a hard friend to like,” said Davion.

“Why, ‘cause I’m right?”

“Yeah, kinda. And that’s not a compliment against being a know-it-all.”

“Compliment against? Are you guys purposely being paradoxical?”

“Can you just stop for a second?”

“What?”

“No one can talk to you directly, Andrew. But this time we needed to. And, yes, we failed. But you have to understand that we were talking about this shit before you ever got here.
It made sense to us. For once—Andrew Salinas made sense to us. You don’t say it. You never say it, but if there is one thing that Gisella and I do get as your friends…it’s the exact thing that she just said.”

Gisella’s Ford Focus clamored to a start. Her lights kicked on then suddenly dimmed as the car clunked into reverse. The brakes squeaked as loud as they could, but were no match for the ear piercing squeal coming from underneath the hood as she backed up then pulled away.

“When we go home,” Davion continued, “we know what we’re getting. What we’re dealing with. More to the point, I know what she’s getting, and she knows what I’m getting. That’s why you’re not a stick. You’re supposed to have some fire, Andrew. Or at least the potential. Something should strike you. Rub at you and light that flame. That thing from inside of you. But you don’t have it. You have to be acted upon. And that’s the external judgement I was talking about. And that’s why we trust you with things you have no fucking business being trusted with. And you don’t even know why. So it’s just easier to say that you don’t start fires. You fuel the ones that need to burn—like today in Rafferty’s class. And although we have no proof of it, we all trust that if the time comes, you will burn up to save the rest of us from catching fire.”
Impetus

Sometime between the annihilation of an entire indigenous people, and the character assassination of a different, but not entirely dissimilar people, in an equally destructive massacre at the hands of men with access to paper, pens, colored brushes, and those media contraptions that make travel for knowledge obsolete to those who don’t care about the truth, Tom Sullivan convinced himself that his life beyond high school was best served to his country.

It shouldn’t have been hard for Tom to have felt worldly, neither his parents nor his teachers put much stock in his attendance. As long as Tom didn’t neglect his duties on the farm, which weren’t many, he was anything but truant. But for reasons that seem more in line with those species of insect that prefer to die on the branch than migrate to the next tree over, Tom found similar comfort in the familiarity of the ground beneath his feet. His first stolen truck never should have been for some perceived freedom and escape. It should have been his father’s, in the middle of the night, to run off with some friends, or to meet up with the girl he saw every week at the rickety general store down the long dirt road a ways.

The farm was to die with Tom’s parents. They wanted to be the last generation of sun up to sun down. Sell the farm to the deeper pockets champing at the bit for their land. Leave the work for the brown boys who were coming in droves for their way of life. Push their son to something else by not pushing at all. Force him to find his own way. But, like the English and composition he did so poorly in, Tom failed his parent’s open-ended test with spectacular precision. The similarities were remarkable when time ran out—a blank page in the classroom, and a blank stare and a blank mind as Tom watched his parents sign over the farm a day after his graduation. He slept on the porch that night, knowing the singular constant for generations would be gone by morning. And when his parents left, packed up the truck with no room for their son
or his belongings, upending his assumption that he would tagalong and at least keep that piece of himself together, Tom quickly discovered that buried deep inside himself he had a propensity to fight for those things he could never get back.

Unlike those blank pages that Tom was paralyzed to fill out when his teachers pressed him for answers, the desk at the military recruitment office was the perfect vessel for Tom to pour his life and soul onto. Thankfully, for the allied forces and the good of the world, it was not the Navy for which he was enlisting, as he would have sunk the entire fleet. When asked on arrival, Tom’s reasons spilled forth like those magnificent falls that require acts of God to seize entirely by ice or drought. Fortunately for Tom, the Army was less concerned with displacement and was content with his choice to eventually be on the front lines and either spill forth—or blood.

So began his vain attempt to retrieve those pieces of himself by becoming part of the whole. Had Tom been better in school, perhaps his attempt at a kind of bastardized synecdoche would have been apropos, but to believe that he had any plan—in fact, any wherewithal—to knowingly regain his land by fighting for it, is completely idiotic.

It’s funny what a dishonorable discharge will do to a man. It’s even funnier when he agrees with it. Damn near hysterical when he’s thankful. And a fucking maniacal laugh out loud riot when he’s rolling in a trench somewhere in the South Pacific screaming for it or death, because the only thing one of the worst history students in the history of history students could remember while under fire was some vague recollection of something once said by Patrick Henry.

This then comes as a surprise and no surprise at all that Tom Sullivan would lay eyes on Hector’s son and think to himself that he would be the one to enlighten the boy and provide him
with the education that he could only wish someone had offered him. The possibilities are endless should one decide to analyze this logic, so suffice to say that Tom’s conclusion was as sound a decision as it was to put a bullet through the body of an ejected Mexican pilot fighting for the same side as he was.

And as conclusions go, with no formal pedagogical training, starting Sandalio on the concept of forgiveness with Tom, himself, as the lesson’s example, was one of those failures that land in the column of ideas that never get off the ground and the garbage for being completely stupid. It puts the teacher in the unenviable position of being better off quitting and starting fresh with a new batch of students the following year. But, being bound to a contract, is therefore fucked.

To Sandalio’s credit, despite those shitty ears of his, he actually did hear Tom out, as opposed to walk out on the man. However, the problem for Tom was that his life—open book or not—was like answering questions for a novel he never read. Sandalio’s first question had Tom stumbling and flipping through the pages of his life for answers he couldn’t find (perhaps because he was the wrong book), and it only went downhill from there.

“What’s the difference between an American killing a Mexican and a German killing a Jew?” asked Sandalio, dropping a wrench onto Tom’s chest rather than squeeze and contort his hand around hoses to get it into Tom’s wiggling fingers.

Were Tom a different book entirely, the devil’s advocate would have spoke to his doubling-down on the defense of the American and German reason—reveling in how easy and worthwhile the argument was to make. However, as stated, whatever book Tom’s actions should have penned, got lost in translation and left the man scrambling for answers to the paradoxes and contradictions his life had written. He couldn’t even remember if his parents’ choice to sell the
farm was in response to migrant workers or those big businesses that hired migrant workers. Or was it that they couldn’t compete with migrant workers? Although it may have been that Tom remembered running afoul of a migrant worker and equated the trouble his parents had hiring additional help with that fact. The other possibility came in the form of a very bad meal he had that left him simultaneously shitting and vomiting down by the creek. In fairness, it was the butcher’s fault for not understanding the domino effect his prejudice would cause. His own daughter ended up in the hospital, where her life was saved from the tainted meat, and then immediately taken away when her father grounded her for daring to expand her palate and in turn her circle of friends.

Tom couldn’t remember. Maybe it had to do with a wooden stand and a sign for *naranjas* instead of oranges. Whatever the case, there was some logical reason in the back of his mind—Right?

Right, he thought. Somewhere there was a common denominator for not inheriting the farm; for having to grab *cincos* and *ochos* of “fuck if I know”; and for pulling that trigger. So, he went with the most obvious.

“Hey!” Tom yelled, kicking at Sandalio’s feet for dropping the wrench.

“Sorry,” said Sandalio, his ears ripening like tomatoes as he jumped to avoid Tom’s boots.

“Look, it’s easy to get mixed up in something bigger than you ever intended,” said Tom.

“What? That makes no sense. What did you intend?”

“Dali, it’s not about my intentions. There comes a point when you either do what you think is right, or you do what you think you’re supposed to do—but neither is what you intended.”
“And when do you stop thinking and actually do what’s right?”

“It’s not that easy. These things just happen. We get these bombs dropped on us all the time, but nothing is more destructive than those gradual things that act like cancers. Sometimes they don’t even kill you, they kill a way about you. Not even a way of life. And that’s the scary thing. It’s the death of that way about you that then kills that way of life. It’s the difference between murder and suicide.”

“You murdered that pilot.”

“And that was my suicide.”

Sandalio kicked the bottom of Tom’s boot. The sole to sole did little, but the knee-jerk reaction that drove Tom’s patella into the underside of the car was a satisfying and, coincidentally, unintended outcome that was far more destructive than the smaller punishment Sandalio thought he was administering.

“Fuck!” howled Tom. “Greaser punk!” he yelled, trying to shimmy out from underneath the car.

Had Sandalio, anyone else for a father, he would have been seen quickly stepping back, if not turning entirely and running for his life. But, with a man like Hector as father, a son, through personal experience, learns to distinguish the sounds and screams of those things painful, and of those things damaged. This was the latter, so it was simply a matter of letting the realization set in, rather than pull that back pocket card and play the sniveling bitch. Tom’s legs flailed wildly with a healthy enough kick to frighten even the fiercest of fighters as he ejected himself from below. But Sandalio knew better and watched with a practiced stoicism as the man began to lift himself up. Tom’s opposite leg was fine and it would be at this point that the fear of God would have given rise to the mea culpas. And yet Sandalio stood, along with Tom, until it was Tom
who was on the ground again for taking that next step. His knee gave out and he crumbled under his own weight.

And so continued the dictionary of terms that Tom thought he buried in the Pacific, and that he thought he atoned for with Francisco. Yet, as one epithet after the next spat from Tom’s mouth, each one drew Sandalio in closer, until he too was on the ground, nose to crooked nose with Tom.

“I can’t walk,” Tom quietly cried.

“Or do anything that’s right.”

“It was anger.”

“Just now? Or the war?”

“I don’t know.”

“Were these thoughts? Actions? Intentions? Or is calling me every fuckin’ name you got just a way of life?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you go to war to shoot a man?”

It was the way Sandalio asked it. The vagueness—that ambiguity that can be boiled down to anything. It twisted Tom, emphasizing his ignorance and his inability to answer anything about himself. Who was this man? But for reasons that remain in that same headspace as Tom’s solutions, Hector’s intangible grip on Sandalio failed to bring to the surface those same strokes that worked so effectively at eliciting answers from the boy. Somehow, in spite of everything else his father engrained in him, his son could reject this one methodology…

“I don’t know,” said Tom.

…and so, without the means to retrieve the answers, Sandalio stopped asking the
questions.
Here Lies… March 18th: 10:13 a.m.

My dad was pissed. My mom walked around with him, rubbing his back as one by one the mourners made their way to the open casket. I’m sure most thought that she was just being a dutiful wife in her husband’s time of need, but even my sister, who ran out of tears on the drive over, could tell that his labored breathing had nothing to do with grief.

He was pissed.

No one, beyond his two younger sisters, Alejandra and Lucy, had seen him in almost two decades, let alone us. Frankly, had my dad not had business trips to California, I doubt his sisters would have seen him either. So, we were the only ones who could tell what all the muted huffing and puffing was about.

The funeral home had done everything my father had asked. Everything, except for one glaring omission that was not their fault. Had my dad ever bothered to visit his mother in the last years of her life he would have noticed. But, the truth is, since before I can remember, if not for my mom, he would have failed to make every obligatory birthday and Mother’s Day phone call to her. So, what did he expect? He asked for makeup, they gave her makeup. He asked for nail polish, they gave her nail polish. But he never saw her, never knew what she looked like after all these years, so he never asked for them to take care of all the dark brown hairs lined up perfectly across her upper lip.

I don’t think I have ever seen him that angry before. How were they to know? It’s their job to be sensitive about these matters. Maybe she liked it like that. What were they going to do, call him up and be like “Um, excuse me, sir, your mom kinda looks like a dude, you want us to do something about it?” I have no sympathy. It’s his own damn fault. Unless someone tells you to, you don’t go waxing Frida Kahlo.
Look, I get it. It’s not as if my relationship with my dad is anything to write home about. We’re sure as shit not going to be the inspiration for some Hallmark greeting card. But at least I know it. No awards for father-son bromance of the year. No goodbye I love you’s. No weekend camping trips. No sports or hobbies to bond over. I’m not crying myself to sleep at night and neither is he. I don’t bite the hand that feeds me, and he appreciates my thank you’s. And if accepting that early on has made me a dick, then I’m a dick. Like father, like son, I guess. At least we have that.

So tough love when I say *fuck him*. He doesn’t get to show up out of nowhere and be the world’s greatest son simply because he was able to handle all the funeral arrangements from one state over. He was the executer of the estate for Christ’s sake. It’s not like anyone was surprised. His sisters had long since admitted it was all going to be too much for them to handle. Trying not to lose their shit when their mother died was burden enough.

Maybe I misread his emotions and I should have understood that true grief meant being all up-in-arms about his mother’s Bieber-stache. I mean, what else did he have to bitch about? That she was no longer alive for him to remain distant from? Oh, that’s right, that’s what his kids are for. Glad I can help in your time of grief by maintaining your preferred distance, dad.

Whatever the case, I’m getting ahead of myself…

Having never seen an open casket before, I had convinced myself in the car that it would be best to just treat it like a Band-Aid. So, when we first walked in, I immediately left my parents to be bombarded by condolences, along with my sister who also got the *we didn’t even recognize you* treatment and went straight to the front to get it out of the way.

Not that I had much of a memory of my grandma, Dani, from when I was a little kid, but she looked nothing like I remembered—not the vague recollections from when I was younger,
not even an ounce of herself mirrored in the photographs scattered across endless tables and standing sprays of white carnations, snapdragons, cremons, and roses.

The only thing I could tell, the effects of death on one’s beauty aside, was that she didn’t look like she was supposed to. Years of watching my sister battle acne with all sorts of pancake makeups, foundations, concealers, and god knows what else made her occasionally look like she got hit in the face with a sack of wheat flour. It was a look I had grown used to on my sister, but one that clearly punctuated my grandmother’s death.

My parents had tried to raise us Catholic, but it never stuck. My sister made it through baptism, first communion, and confirmation. With me though, I’m pretty sure I once overheard my mom saying, “Eh, two out of three’s good enough.” Despite their own Catholic upbringing, nuns and all, the 2000s did little to solidify my parents’ own faith. Each sexual abuse case meant a drop in our weekly attendance at church. We got down to Easter and Christmas before not going at all.

Standing at the head of the casket, I knew to be solemn and respectful, but that was about it. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. I couldn’t remember a fucking thing from my time in religious education classes. I literally didn’t have a prayer. So, I just made the sign of the cross and stared at her. It’s amazing how unreal she looked and it was not from the makeup. I’ve seen old, slumped over and motionless in a wheelchair just waiting for death, but even they look bound to the constructs of reality. Something about death took that from my grandmother and made her look like she was fashioned from a mold.

“I guess I’ve stood here long enough,” I whispered quietly to myself before looking around for my parents who were still getting swallowed up by family and acquaintances. My sister must have gotten roped into being babysitter, as she had a set of twins in her arms and a
look of disgust on her face when she caught me waving at her in delight. The glimpse didn’t last long though, as her focus was brought back to being pawed over by everyone Alejandra kept spinning her around to meet.

I embraced my anonymity and walked around looking at all the photos.

It’s rather cliché, I admit, to say that my grandma was very pretty in her youth, but she really was. The photos reminded me a little of Hedy Lamarr—a name and a face I had only recently learned from the film study class I was in. In looking at all the photos, I couldn’t help but feel a little hypocritical for noticing the obvious. I chuckled to myself and wondered whether Grandma Katherine would have had much to say about Dani’s children—they did, after all, have her same dark complexion.

Most of the photos I had seen before—duplicates we had in long forgotten photo albums stashed in boxes under the utility sink in our laundry room. One in particular did catch my attention though. I hadn’t seen it before. It was a wedding photo of Dani and my grandfather, Sandalio. It was just a photo of them holding a knife together as one, smiling for the camera, ready to cut the cake. As I stared at the photo, that thought of ‘smiling for the camera’ struck me. There was something off about the two. Their faces looked paralyzed. Their foreheads, eyes, cheeks, even their ears looked almost frozen with stoicism. It was just their mouths—as if someone said ‘smile’ and that’s all they did.

I had never met Sandalio before, but my parents assured me that he put aside his differences with my grandmother after their divorce in order to make my baptism. In fact, although they never remarried, they did rekindle a strong enough friendship to actually live together for a few years, before he decided he wanted a quieter life and returned to Bacanora, Sonora. I always found it interesting that my parents were none too shy about mentioning his
drinking as being cause for the divorce, but never said jack squat about it ending the second go-around.

I held the picture by its flimsy frame, careful to not get fingerprints on the glass.

“What do you have there?” asked a woman, sidling up to me as if I were her best friend.

“It’s just a wedding photo,” I said, putting the picture back down on the table.

“Are you a—you a relative?”

“Friend of a friend,” I said without even blinking, the introductions to my sister still coming feverishly from the back. “Moral support kinda thing.”

“Well that’s nice of you,” she side, the weight of having to console me clearly being lifted from her shoulders as she rolled them back and stood straighter. “I’m Denise. I’m the daughter of Carlos’ godparents.”

“Oh. Nice to meet you,” I said, shaking her hand a little too weakly, paying more attention to my hopes that she wouldn’t ask for my name in return. “It’s really pretty in here,” I added awkwardly.

“Yeah, they did a beautiful job,” Denise said, grabbing the wedding photo I had put back. “Speaking of beautiful, she really was a looker, wasn’t she?”

“Oh…yeah…no…she was definitely pretty.”

“I mean, come on, pretty is an understatement, right?”

“I…I…I guess. Yeah, sure.”

“Come on. Don’t be shy. You can say it. She’s gone. You’re supposed to say good, happy things about her.”

It took a few more thoughts from Denise, but it wasn’t long before I picked up the alcohol on her breath.
“She looks…” It took me forever to find the word. “Lovely,” I said.

“Like lovely lovely, or like love—ly lovely?”

“I…I don’t know.” I was beginning to second-guess not introducing myself to her, as a vision of me having to have an incestual conversation with this woman flashed before my eyes.

“Look how pretty she is,” said Denise, flailing the picture around in front of me, the frame barely holding together. “Did you see her over there?”

“Yeah.”

“No. Like, did you actually see, see her?”

“Yes, I saw, saw her.”

“Rrrrrrr,” said Denise, showing all her teeth and scrunching her face like she just smelled a fart. “Right?”

“Um—”

“It’s not what’s in the photo,” she whispered. “Should I go over there?”

“Um—”

Her face turned stone cold as she stared right at me. “I have tweezers in my purse you know,” she said sadistically, repeatedly squeezing her thumb and index finger together in front of my face.

“I think it will be fine.”

“Are you sure? Because I can totally do something about it.”

“I think we’re all good. No tweezers necessary. We can all just relax and pay our respects.”

“You’re so smart. You’re a good friend. You deserve someone like that.” Denise gripped the side of the frame, bending it slightly, as she tapped heavily on the glass to indicate she was
Referring to Dani.

The side of the frame gave out. The cheap metal fell to the floor as I reached to catch the falling glass, watching as the wedding photo slipped from the rest of the frame in Denise’s hand and glide to the ground face up.

“You have got really good hands. You should play baseball.”

“No,” I said firmly, accidentally chastising her like she was a toddler who said ‘fuck’ after already being told not to.

I picked the photo and the frame’s edge up from off the carpet, grabbing what was left in Denise’s hand to try to piece it all back together at the table in front of us.

The cardboard insert had gotten bent, so I slipped it out from the remainder of the frame, turning the insert over to try to bend it back smooth. But, before I could do so, I stopped. Taped to the back of the cardboard was another photo of my grandmother, but not with Sandalio and instead with another man, her face infinitely more elated than in the one that fell to the floor.

It almost looked staged, as both were facing the camera, but the scene around was real enough. If not for the plain clothes the two were wearing, the photo looked like it could have easily been the next shot after the kiss at an outdoor wedding.

“You okay?” asked Denise, a moment of sobriety somehow finding its way to her.

“You ever see this photo before?” I asked, wondering why my grandmother, locked in an embrace with another man, was hiding behind her wedding photo.

“Let me see,” said Denise, ripping the photo from off the cardboard. “Wow! I knew this photo existed, but I had never seen it before. Do you know who this is?”

“No,” I said, losing my patience, “that’s why I’m asking.”

“That’s Carlos’ dad.”
“Why did I bother to ask a drunk?” I mumbled under my breath. “No, that’s Carlos’ father,” I said, pointing to Sandalio in the other photo.

“No,” countered Denise, her momentary sobriety now gone along with her inhibitions. “That’s Lucy’s and Alejandra’s daddy,” she said pointing to Sandalio. “This sexy little piece of eye-candy I have in my hands here is Carlos’ papa.”

“How do you know that?”

“Everybody knows that,” said Denise, shooting me a look as if I was an idiot.

“Everyone?”

“Everyone.”

“Really,” I said contemptuously.
Sit and Take It

If not for the freshly tended flower beds and manicured lawn in front of Katherine’s home, and the pristine floors and handcrafted furniture inside, all loath to be defiled by slipshod investigators and coroners, his entrance, not two seconds earlier, would have been the moment when a hate crime normally would have occurred.

“Go ahead. Sit. I’m having the seats reupholstered tomorrow anyway,” said Katherine to Carlos, whose inhalation at her words was so long that one of his shirt buttons popped back through its hole.

Carlos looked to sit, fixing the button and noticing the chair he was offered—the one with the long set wine stain—was the only blemished seat in the living room.

“I’m sure you’ve picked enough grapes in your lifetime, Carl. I don’t think a few pressed ones will make much of a difference at this point.”

Carlos smiled, giving Katherine a gentle nod before sitting down, leaving her name for him uncorrected.

“Is Mr. Adler here?” asked Carlos.

“I believe I am more than capable of handling whatever questions you may have.”

“Mrs. Adler, I was not suggesting—I was just hoping—”

“To talk to my husband. I know. Paul’s out golfing. Is that a problem?”

“No, I just thought he was going to be here.”

“I know. And I thought it would be nice if he got out this weekend for a little fresh air. Get his mind off all the doctor’s appointments he’s been going to.”

Carlos watched as Katherine removed her knitting from the chair directly across from him and sat in its place. She continued on with the red scarf, the long needles quietly tapping
against each other as she sped through each row.

“I’ll pass along whatever it is you have to say,” said Katherine without stopping. She knitted a complete row and was halfway through a second when she suddenly dropped her hands into her lap and looked up to Carlos. “If you think you’re going to sit there all day and watch me knit until Paul comes home, you’ve got another thing coming.”

Again, Carlos nodded, but remained silent. He watched Katherine unravel and reknit her work to remedy a curl that was developing.

“Well, get on with it.”

“I was just thinking that given tradition, it may be best to come back when—”

“You just a lot of things, Carl. Three already. Two thoughts and one hope. Are you actually going to do something, or do you need to take one of your siestas before anything will get done?”

“Mrs. Adler, I would just like to say what needs to be said. Do this right, if you’ll let me.”

“Permission for permission. Ha! Carl, Carl, Carl. It’s a wonder you’re still alive. About the only thing I can count on you to do without asking is to throw up some hovel if it starts to rain.”

“Maybe we should start there,” said Carlos, the tone in his voice even softer than before. “I have my own place. And it’s not made of barrels, clay, or railroad ties. My apartment may be one bedroom, but it’s a lot nicer than many two or even three-bedroom apartments in the city.”

“It’s still no place for a family.”

“I don’t disagree, but I pay my way.”

“For now,” said Katherine, her voice raising along with her eyes as they rolled from one side to the other.
“It’s a means to an end. I’ll be in a better financial situation once I graduate. Doors will open for me.”

“And you’ll do what once you walk through?”

“Same thing as anyone. Pay my dues. Work my way up.”

“You’ll work the office like a day laborer. You see, Carl, there are those who will say that your kind take jobs from hard-working Americans. I don’t begrudge you work, it’s just that your kind is incapable of aspiring to something greater. It’s not that you’re spineless, it’s just that your backbone is meant to be hunched over in a field, not leaning over an executive desk.”

Carlos adjusted himself in the chair. He shook his head, scrubbing his tongue against his back molars, the contortion bringing further rise to Katherine.

“The truth stings, Carl. Yet, you don’t know what to do about it. You’d just as soon gnaw out your cheek until you’re choking on your own blood, then make another shed a tear.”

“If I raged, it wouldn’t change your mind. It would only confirm some other bias you’re looking for.”

“Truth. Your actions, or lack thereof, confirm the truth.”

“Why do you insist?”

“On what?”

“The Mexican thing. It’s a name. It’s my name, but it’s just a name. Yet, everything I’ve done has been as a Mexican to you. You call Mexican politicians my politicians. I don’t even know where to begin with that. I’m just this thing to you. Not Carlos. Not Mr. Salinas. Not a person or a human. Certainly not an American. I’m not even your daughter’s boyfriend to you.”

“Surely you’re not suggesting that you’re more American than Mexican. Oh, I know you’re not running down to your little Tijuana precinct and dropping your bean in the jar behind
the tattered Polaroid of the candidate who looks least like a criminal. I’m no fool. Even you wouldn’t be caught dead down there.”

Katherine watched Carlos as the pulse in his neck kept time with the incessant ticking from the clock on the wall.

“You’re a funny people, Carl. There are Catholics all over this world, but you folk, more than anyone, need a savior.” Katherine laughed. “I will admit, you’re all a devout bunch. I’ll give you that. Thinking he’s going to come out of one of your little villages. That’s some faith you got there.”

“Mexicans don’t believe that some politician is going to—”

“I’m going to stop you right there. What happens down there means little to me. What you do down there though—that’s another matter altogether.”

“I haven’t been to Mexico in over a decade.”

“But you have ties.”

“Family. Friends. Yes. It doesn’t make me any less American. I was born here. My mother was born here. What few ties I have to Mexico—”

“Then you understand my reservations.”

“Over what?”

“Marrying my daughter.”

“The only thing I understand is that you keep piling on. One thing after another.”

“So, we see eye-to-eye.”

“I would like to marry your daughter and only your daughter.”

“You marry my daughter; you marry into this family.”

“Yes, and that’s the difference. I see this marriage as being about the love between two
people—and about family. I wouldn’t think of this as marrying into America.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Carlos sighed and shook his head.

“I’m going to let you read into that what you will, because that’s the point. You think of this marriage as an invasion. It’s no mystery that you don’t like me, but I don’t define your daughter by it. I love Karen regardless. But with me, at best, I’m just some species to you. Worst, some country. You could at least choose to reject or accept me as an individual, rather than lump me into some stereotype.”

“I could easily oblige, but you give yourself too much credit. There are symptoms and then there are viruses. I don’t need to remind you of that.”

“You’ve made that abundantly clear.” Carlos closed his right hand, then pulled out his thumb with his left hand, before continuing on with the remainder of his five fingers as he made out a list. “One, I’m meant for manual labor. Two, I can take a desk job, but never rise through the ranks. I put my faith in others to save me. I’m not good enough for you or your daughter. And finally, I’m apparently either a flight risk or one bad day away from being a traitor to this country. Does that about cover it?”

“You’re petty, Carl. Just accept your place.”

Carlos leaned forward in the chair, resting his elbows on his knees. “I love your daughter.”

“I’m sure you do.”

Carlos took a deep breath and sighed again. Sitting back in the chair, his puckered smile did little to fight the strain necessary to keep his eyes open. His laser stare drained his muscles, while Katherine, and by all accounts her psyche, remained completely unfazed by his derisive
glare. She sat quietly, a contented look matched her raised chin and nose, her eyes became
dreamy as if she just stepped out into a cool breeze.

“I came here to do the right thing.”

“The right thing would have been to know your place.”

“I’m—”

“Going to marry my daughter no matter what I say. Go ahead, Carl, have your little piece
of the pie. You people either beg for it, or you steal it anyway. I can either get all up in arms or I
can turn to Corinthians. Does that mean anything to you?”

The blank stare on Carlos’ face was nothing short of a call to arms. Katherine stood and
walked over to the side table next to him. She pulled open its small drawer, removed a bible from
it, and dropped it in his lap.

“I imagine it doesn’t,” she continued. “10:13, if you can read.”

“I’m not illiterate.”

“Hmm.” Katherine walked around the living room, adjusting and readjusting the already
perfectly placed items. The ticking clock kept her company as she moved to the drapes, the
silence attempting to call someone’s bluff. “Tell me, Carl, what do you think of that?”

She pressed him. Like the silence, the bible could no longer be ignored. Again, his tongue
began to rub his molars, breaking the veil of stoicism his controlled breathing had been
manifesting over him.

Carlos rubbed his thumb down the gold-edged pages. Again and again, his thumb scraped
the side of the bible like a poker player fumbling with his chips, torn between raising or folding.

Katherine paused and stared out the window, the reflection of her eyes in the glass angled
to target the reflection of Carlos behind her.
“How much longer are you going to sit here and take this, Carl?”

Carlos sat quietly, staring, like a broken man, at the unopened bible in his lap. “He will not suffer you to be tempted beyond that which ye are able to bear, but with the temptation will also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

Katherine slowly turned and walked up to Carlos in the chair. She leaned over and took the bible from his lap, leaving her face inches from his. “You sound like that was written for you.”

“There hath no temptation taken hold of you but such as is common to man.”

Katherine dropped the bible onto the wooden coffee table; its slap, as it landed, snapped violently through the air. Carlos winced as the sound pierced his ears.

“Unfortunately,” Carlos said, “we’ve already established I’m not even a man to you.”
Session: And You're Out

“Andrew?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Dr. Linehan. Nice to meet you.”

“Hi.”

“In speaking with your parents, they thought it best if just the two of us spoke. Is that alright with you?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes, but did you want them to come in and join us?”

“I drove myself.”

“Oh. Do you have your own car?”

“Just the license.”

“Well, it must be nice to have parents who trust you enough to borrow their car.”

“It’d be shitty if they didn’t.”

“Why’s that?”

“My sister smashed three cars in one year.”

“Three?”

“The bumper of my mom’s car pulling into a parking spot and smashing into the bumper of the car parked in front. The door of my dad’s car, opening it up into a pole. And then the clunker they broke down and bought her because of what she did to their cars. Somehow the last one wasn’t her fault.”

“Well, that’s fortunate.”

“The truck that hit her in the middle of an intersection rolled over.”
“Was everyone okay?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“What’s your definition of okay?”

“Any injuries?”

“No, everyone was fine.”

“And, Andrew, what would the other definition be?”

“The driver of the truck went to jail. And even though the last accident of the three was not my sister’s fault, it’s not as if she was a slow and careful driver. So, now my sister is having to pay for her own car. It’s my parents’ way of making her slow down when she is driving, take responsibility, and be more defensive.”

“Is it working?”

“Three cars, one year. One car, two years and counting.”

“Are they giving you the same three strikes?”

“—”

“Andrew—”

“—”

“Andrew?”

“—”

“Andrew, where are you going?”
Wisdom

Tom unabashedly began coming to work on a daily basis with a bottle of whiskey in his hand, and a list to his walk that was as much about his knee injury as it was intoxication.

Hector, for his part, remained distant. The only thing he had to say on the matter was the same thing he originally told Francisco.

“He’s your responsibility,” said Hector, day in and day out.

Too nervous to tell Francisco and too scared to tell Hector, it was inevitable that when the science and the math of Sandalio’s dalliances finally caught up with him, that the young man would seek comfort in the one person too questionable to have any clear direction or side. The irony, of course, came when Tom draped his arm over Sandalio’s shoulders to impart his wisdom as the two took a walk. Tom’s free hand remained free, while the other, normally in charge of holding a bottle and getting the man drunk, instead had a firm grip on Sandalio. His wits about him, Tom poured what he could into the boy’s mind, having nothing to pour into his own mouth.

“Francisco’s going to ask you why, and for once, probably slap you upside the head just to see if your father was doing it wrong this whole time. Maybe twice to make sure he’s doing it right himself. Not that that’s going to undo a baby at this point,” said Tom. “Knowing your father, I wouldn’t expect any different from him, so be prepared with all the details—unless you want him opening wounds you didn’t even know you had.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You like this girl?”

“Obviously.”

“Don’t bullshit me. Given your track record, you’re not exactly a lover.”

“So?”
“Where is she?”

“What do you mean?” Tom slapped Sandalio on the back of his head. “Hey!”

“Get used to it. You’re gonna get a lot of that this week.”

“Not if I don’t say anything,” said Sandalio to himself. Tom’s next slap came as swiftly as the last. “Stop!”

“Don’t—”

“What?” Sandalio asked quickly, rubbing his head in frustration. “I told you first to avoid getting hit. You gonna help me out or not?”

“I am. Now answer my question and don’t be stupid about it.”

Tom watched Sandalio carefully. His questions were still unanswered and the silence floated down over both of their ears until the only sound remaining was the synesthetic truth spoken by the tone of Sandalio’s ears. Tom asked again, patiently waiting to discover Sandalio’s true colors.

“One, do you like her; and two, where is she?”

“I don’t know,” said Sandalio, the answer destined to get his teeth knocked in by his father, but one that embarrassed him to no end in front of Tom. Yet, no matter how red his face turned, those ears of his refused to budge and undermine his honesty. The time would come for Sandalio to have his convictions called into question by the mother of his child, but unless he found her, or she him, the only truth that mattered was the one Tom was after.

“Was that to the first question or the second?” Tom asked, trying hard to focus in on the boy’s ears for a hint of change, while simultaneously directing his eyes to perform a kind of exototropic movement so he could watch both ears at once.

“Both,” said Sandalio, dropping his head to watch himself kick at the dirt below his feet.
Tom grabbed him by the shoulders, turning Sandalio towards him. The boy’s ears were proof enough, and for the first time Tom hoped they were as good at grasping revelations as they were at liberating them.

“Don’t blindside your father.”

“Huh?”

“She white?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Tom caught himself before he could respond with something equally ignorant—a rarity, but not unheard of. Instead, he pulled from that pedagogical handbook of his and once again used himself as the example, staring as whitely as he could at Sandalio until the boy got it, rather than lying to him with some ironic response of Kid, you have no idea.

“No,” said Sandalio coldly, his disappointment unmistakable in the face of Tom, far too familiar with misgivings to overlook it.

“What are you missing? The checkmark? The conquest? Listen to me, kid, I’m not going to throw out some I’m older than you bullshit. Say that I know better than you. No one’s got their shit together enough to take on a kid, but they get by all the same. And so will you. But you know something and you’re not telling me. Where is she?”

“I told you. I don’t know.”

“So then what are you worried about?”

“We talked,” said Sandalio, dragging out the syllables to emphasize the obvious.

Tom laughed. “You talked,” said Tom firmly, knowing exactly what happened without having to ask. “Okay. So she knows everything about you, and you know nothing about her. Well, except for the fact that she apparently fits. They’re funny that way, aren’t they?”
“What?”

“Women. Somehow, no matter the man, the woman always seems to fit him. Maybe if you’d have learned that—what…three, five, ten girls prior to her, maybe you wouldn’t be in this predicament. What’s her name anyway?”

“Danielle. Dani.”

“Dani and Dali. Jesus, kid, I know it’s just a name, but are you sure you didn’t just fuck a mirror?”

“Very funny.”

“So, what’s the story here? You just guessing?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean what do I mean? They change the way babies are made?”

“No.”

“So, then how do you know?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t think I’m supposed to know.”

“Alright, kid. I don’t got time for this shit. Sit down and spit it out.” Tom pulled Sandalio over to the shady side of the remnants of a small wooden pump house. He pushed him into the ground, before joining, both their backs side-by-side against the rickety little structure.

“I stole a car the other day and drove out to see my mom.”

“Okay. Maybe not saying anything is a good idea. Where’s the car?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere near Topeka. I bailed before I got to town.”

“How’d you get back?”

“Hitchhiked.”

“Yeah, you’re definitely going to want to keep that to yourself.”
“Who cares? I don’t know what to do about this kid, but you know nothing about this family.”

“First of all, this kid is your family, so get that through your head. Secondly, I know enough to have you come to me.”

“Not enough to know what runs it. We wouldn’t be here if people didn’t give us rides.”

“Then why did you steal the car?”

“Dad took off. I took my chance before he got back. I couldn’t walk down the road without risking having him come up on me while trying to get picked up.”

Tom chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” asked Sandalio.

“Your father is going to kill me.”

“Why?”

“I mean, it’s his own fault, but still.” Tom elbowed Sandalio, “you’re a chip off the old blockhead,” he laughed.

“I don’t get it.”

“You’ve been hanging around me way too long. It’s the way of life all over again. It dies slowly without you ever knowing. But funny thing, Dali, sometimes the opposite happens too. It’s amazing how many things are born into us long after our births. You stole a car and had a fear of doing something your parents taught you to do.”

“So?”

“Alright, I take it back. Now I am going to tell you that I’m older than you and know better.”

“Whatever.”
“Not caring got you into this mess, but that’s beside the point. You ditched the car and went to see your mom. Where does this girl come in?”

“Mom’s been working cleaning churches.”

“Of what? Sins?”

“No. Some of the women she’s been riding with have disappeared. And a couple of the people she was working for even warned her. But the last house was the final straw. She didn’t feel safe anymore. Like it was a trap or something. They stopped talking to her. It was weird, she said that it began to feel like she could do whatever she wanted. Like, not even as if it were her own home, but almost like she was being treated like a wild animal to see what she’d do. So that was the last family. She’s been cleaning churches ever since with some other women.”

“But going home at night?”

“Yeah, I guess. Why?”

“Kid, I hate to break it to your mom, but there’s no such thing as sanctuary in this country. Even if—good luck finding someone willing to honor it. And what’s she doing going home then?”

“My mom’s not scared, she’s just not stupid.”

“Not in comparison.”

“Will you stop? I got a girl pregnant, it’s done.”

“Fine. Continue. How do you know she’s pregnant?”

“My mom began talking about this girl who started showing up in the church every day and would just sit there for hours. Eventually mom started talking to her whenever she saw her and one day asked her why she was there all the time. Turns out Dani lives in an orphanage.”

“You fucked an orphan! Dali, what the hell is wrong with you?”
“They’re still people.”

“That’s a whole other discussion.”

“What? And it’s not like I knew anyway.”

“Of course you wouldn’t know. You are your father’s son through and through. Your father talks to talk. Clearly your mother talks to listen.”

There is reason to compensate, at times reason to overcompensate. Given the effects of the sincerest and most genuine of apologies, the inherent good in these balancing practices are well-worth the failed attempts—including the benighted ones by those men hellbent on retaining the status quo. For Sandalio’s part, unfortunately, the boy began to live as if the former balancing act were not the goal, but that the level scale would come when he found that space between an inherent good and the status quo. When Sandalio chose to remain silent to Tom’s assessment of his father and mother, he wasn’t so much listening, as he was carrying the torch that illuminated a thing inherent in him, entirely devoid of good.

“That,” Tom began, “should have been something you knew about the girl before ever dropping your pants. Not that you would have stopped yourself apparently, but be that as it may. So your mom’s talking about an orphan, how does this get to her being the same girl?”

“The short of it is that she showed me a picture. Asked me to let her know if I ever see her.”

“Alright, confirmation isn’t necessarily a bad thing. You actually do know where she’s at. There can’t be that many orphanages in Topeka.”

“That’s the thing. The picture is from the orphanage. Someone gave it to my mom about a missing girl. Mom said Dani had been coming into the church to pray. She was thinking about running away when she found out she was pregnant.”
“What did you say when you saw the picture?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Jesus! That is a motherfucker of a coincidence. Must have surprised the shit out of her.”

“What?”

“That she’s going to be a grandmother.”

“I told you, I didn’t say anything.”

“A mother knows,” said Tom, his eyes darting madly between both sides of Sandalio’s head, wondering to what color this most drastic lie of omission changed Lupita’s son’s ears.

“Your mother must have one hell of a poker face.”

“She can be inhumanly patient,” said Sandalio giving pause. He had never known his mother to not know, and this sudden rush became way too overwhelming for him to summon any of his mother’s strength to fight it off.

“I should say so. Sitting out there in Topeka waiting for you and your father to come home.”

“Dad’s never going back to her.”

“You don’t think I know that?”

“I know you know. I just wish she didn’t,” said Sandalio, his voice cracking as he looked up to wipe away the tears he hadn’t intended.

“Jesus Christ, kid. And she didn’t say shit to you?”

“No.”

“Kept it together, and basically asked her son—who by the way, couldn’t fucking bother—to let her know if he happens to see the mother of her grandchild.”

“Yeah, I guess.”
“Kid, your mom’s a motherfucking saint. And you are officially as big of an asshole as your father.”

Somehow, despite Tom’s tenuous relationship with such life changing junctures as say, a call to arms, and more importantly, what action he should take at such a moment, the one thing a person could never do is fault Tom for finding inequity, even if it was hidden in the most trivial of places. And whereas Tom was always lost looking for sensible grounds to at least come somewhere close to justice for himself, the one thing the man always had clarity on were the cruelties people placed on others.

If all this made Tom a martyr, then the onus was clearly on him for taking that opportunity his parents afforded him to be whatever he wanted, and choosing castigated soul as his vocation. He excelled, for sure, but were Tom to self-immolate as a means to demonstrate mastery, no one would call his actions brave and certainly not instructive on the way to live one’s life. Why Tom would choose to bash his head in or put himself in the line of fire when those no more intelligent than he still managed similar sacrifices in similarly noble, albeit less bloody professions is, in truth, a mystery. In all the chaos that was Tom Sullivan, there was one thing for certain, although the man carried out his painful directives, he never felt he deserved them. Given that Tom could sacrifice himself or standup for another, perhaps the answer to why Tom acted is far more important than how.

Unfortunately, nuance was not one of Tom’s strengths, and finding that answer would require a capacity and a patience for the truth that were demonstrably outside his skillset. It did, however, make him quick to punch, so had Sandalio not already been firmly on his butt against the pump house, Tom’s words would have put Sandalio on his ass. Calling the boy anything resembling his father was clearly a jab. Labeling the two as one singular thing was damn near a
death blow and would leave Sandalio speechless, knocked from that balancing act he spent years unknowingly trying to perfect to appease his father—and miles away from discovering anything resembling a family.

With Sandalio defeated, Tom took his opportunity to try once more. “Dali, I’m going to ask again. Do you like this girl?”

Sandalio didn’t need to respond, his silence was long enough to give his answer, but he gave it anyway. “No,” he said, his head somehow dropping lower into his chest than it already was.

“Okay. That’s our baseline,” said Tom pragmatically. “Now you pick.”

“Pick what?”

“Who you’re going to sacrifice for.”

“That’s easy—”

“Stop,” interrupted Tom, “before you even open your mouth. It’s not the kid. It will never be the kid. Not in this family.”

Sandalio’s face grew pale, but he shook his head knowingly.

“Second thing,” added Tom, “for as many women as your father has been with, either he’s one lucky son of a bitch, or your mother is one tough woman. And from what I know, I’m going to go with the last.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your father’s about as lucky as you—and just as responsible.”

“What are you saying? You think I have brothers and sisters I don’t know about?”

“Just the opposite,” said Tom, finding a way to remove the life from the air the two were breathing with just his voice. When time, carried on a wave of silence, provided the necessary
proof that Hector’s boy knew nothing about his father, Tom leaned over with his arm to give him the same shoulder wrap he’d provided earlier. A strange resurrection occurred with this touch. Tom could feel the electric pulses twitch through Sandalio’s body. They were going to turn the boy towards him. It was unmistakable, so much so that Tom lifted his other arm, ready to embrace the boy who would call, through action, for Tom to comfort him. But his twist grew upward, rather than around, and instead of finding solace, Sandalio summoned a spine. They both shifted off the house and looked distantly toward a horizon whose soul promise was a storm.

Sandalio sat pensively waiting for the life to return to his body before reconsidering who’d he sacrifice it for. “Then my mom,” he said, standing up and walking back towards the parts shop alone.
Session: Cold Butter

“And what was it that didn’t work for you with your therapist this morning, Andrew?”

“Doesn’t matter, I’m not going back to him, Dr. Rutter.”

“It matters to me. I think trust is important and I would not want to do anything to jeopardize that. I’d like to be helpful and have our time together be productive.”

“ Asking about something I’m over is not productive. It’s nothing—not important.”

“It’s important enough for your parents to find someone else for you to talk to today. Especially after whatever happened this morning caused you to walk out on your session. I think it says a lot that they were willing to call around for a same-day appointment. Even do a little begging and arm-twisting to get you in after-hours. Sounds like they don’t give up on you.”

“Sounds like they’re just picky.”

“Okay. Since you brought it up—we can talk plainly. Your parents aren’t willing to send you to just anyone. That must count for something.”

“If they picked you so that you can praise them, then maybe I should just go sit out in the lobby. Have them come in here instead to hear your glowing review of how wonderful their therapist selection was for their son.”

“And what good would that do, Andrew?”

“I don’t know, Dr. Rutter, you’re the expert, you tell me.”

“Let’s start here. Why do you think I’m here with you, an hour past my normal scheduled appointment times?”

“Because you care about the well-being of all your patients, and when it comes to kids and adolescents, you’re more than willing to sacrifice your time to help someone in need.”

“I’m going to make you a deal, Andrew. If you don’t bullshit me, then I won’t bullshit
you. I haven’t had room to take on new clients in months. And, yet, here I am with you. So let’s, neither of us, bullshit the other, and sign this deal now by you telling me the unfiltered truth that’s on your mind. Why am I sitting here with you, when I could be halfway home by now?”

“Seriously?”

“All I ask—no bullshit. Why am I here with you?”

“Glory.”

“Whew—”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“And your smile?”

“That’s one hell of a baseline for us to start with, Andrew.”

“You wanted our time together productive.”

“Alright, so let’s dispense with the small talk. Where do you want to start?”

“What got you to say yes? Was it the motherfucker? Or the bullshit accusation that I was going to shoot-up the school?”

“You’re halfway right.”

“So, what is it?”

“You’re pretty astute, Andrew. This time you tell me.”

“You didn’t answer me before. You just asked an unrelated question.”

“So, how are you going to get your answer?”

“I’m not.”

“You’re shrewd, Andrew. Don’t waste it by walking out on me too.”

“So was it the walkout and the motherfucker, or the walkout and the accusation?”
“Sit back down and I’ll tell you.”

“No bullshit?”

“No bullshit.”

“Fine.”

“Thank you. The first.”

“Hmm.”

“Would it make more sense for me to be interested if your actions were reversed? Walk out on your English teacher, curse out someone you don’t know?”

“I’m not that far yet.”

“Good.”

“Taking pride in being smarter than a seventeen-year-old is pretty pathetic.”

“Andrew, the good was for being honest with me and trusting that I wasn’t going to judge you for not knowing something right away. So again, thank you.”

“If you want to avoid any more misunderstandings in the future, I suggest you stop praising me.”

“I can respect that.”

“But can you do it?”

“Can? Yes. Will? No.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“Not bullshitting each other.”

“But I don’t want you to praise me.”

“And I don’t want to fail to tell you when something important has happened.”

“I don’t care.”
“Andrew, as an AP student, I find it really hard to believe that you have issues doing the hard things in life. It may not be calculus or running a marathon, but therapy is never easy. At least not for anyone who is serious about making progress. Why don’t we start with that next time?”

“Because you already made your point.”

“So what would you like to start with?”

“Butter.”

“Butter? Tell you what, let’s end with that tonight.”

“Okay.”

“This one’s all you, Andrew. I’m the one who’s not that far yet.”

“What’s least likely to spread? A fire with no fuel or cold butter on bread?”

“What kind of bread?”

“White bread.”

“Toasted or untoasted? And is toasted white bread still white bread?”

“How much are my parents paying you?”

“It’s not the money that has me interested in helping you, Andrew.”

“You can’t fix this.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Bullshit.”
Here Lies… March 18th: 10:54 a.m.

Whoever said ‘knowledge is power’ is full of shit. If anything, it rips out tongues or at least causes the owner to bite down so hard that he may as well chew and swallow, never to speak again. Knowledge is the great emasculator—that, or I just don’t know how to use it.

I don’t know why I saw my father differently. It was, after all, his father, not the man I knew for the past 17 years that was pulled out from underneath me. But they all became collateral damage. My father, his mother—I trusted that. That was unmistakable. Their teardrop eyes, their crooked smiles that could not rise as high on the left side of their faces. The Elvis lip when only a half-smile was needed. The level teeth, not a one higher than the other. The tongue that wanted to peak out when they forgot the nuns had spent years slapping them to keep it in. Their stubby fingers, the ones with no great dexterity, the ones that tore corn tortillas for chilaquiles rather than fumble with a kitchen knife. And the flat feet. The same feet I watched him use when he finally turned from those consoling him. That was real. They were real. They were mother and son, but I couldn’t look at them the same. My father especially.

The knowledge shut me up and I found a pew to sit in, alone, away from everybody, and just watch him. Like a weary groom down the aisle, his steps were unsure. He left my mother, turning momentarily to a sculpture of Jesus on the cross for affirmation that his approach towards the altar, and ultimately the body, was acceptable. His steps became less firm, degrading to that shuffle in order to tread through the force that was keeping him from the casket.

I wanted to stop him and ask him exactly what she meant to him.

A moment flashed when I would pull him away from her and chastise him—question his intentions; forcibly hold him down and demand to know why he was here. It was why and nothing more. If he could tell me why, then maybe I could understand that morning before
school. But the moment never came and through cautious steps, he finally approached the altar.

Despite my indignation for such customs, it was difficult for me not to notice the fact that Denise had found a pew of her own, kneeled forward, and had tightly wrapped a rosary around her left palm and proceeded to make a two fingered sign of the cross with the same hand. No one seemed to care about this, so I resumed my secluded reproach of my father.

Like me, he didn’t know what to do. I had stood there, practically counting the seconds while looking at my grandmother, wondering how long was too long, or not long enough. I swear, if I didn’t know any better, he was doing the same—not that I’d admit that to him. It was like he was too young, too immature, and too unsure about himself and his place with her. Yet, he stood waiting as if he knew the time would come. Nothing more. Just waited. This wasn’t prayer or homage. It wasn’t him reminiscing about all that she had missed. He wasn’t even paying his last respects and bidding farewell. No. He was simply waiting with no one by his side as if to become her eternal watchman.

My father would not move. Through all the comings and goings of hands to his shoulders and arms around him, I sat motionless with prying eyes, my body refusing to join the list of people who would come to him.

Sadness eventually transformed him to stoicisim. He was more still than she, but for the external movements of his emotions welling up within him and protractedly casting themselves from his body down upon her. I counted each one as it glistened in space before dissolving into her breast. My stomach sank as the tears kept streaming, and violent hiccups of sorrow, trying to impede his breathing, overthrew his calculated inhalations. I felt for him. I could only imagine what he was feeling and only wished that I could have allowed myself to express such sadness for her.
My father’s grief soon subsided. His breathing became controlled again, luring back the stoic and manufacturing a strength beyond my own. He walked away and I would never see him cry again.
¿Qué, Sir? Real Surreal.

Having a black friend should never induce nightmares. Having a racist grandmother on the other hand…

They had gotten worse as I grew older instead of fading away. The nightmares became more vivid and the daydreams more hallucinatory.

I loved meeting up with Davion when we both arrived at school. But, as we walked towards each other, my stomach would start to twist, fearing some unsubstantiated genetic bond would summon my hypocrisy. I could just see her, my grandmother, one of a million Katherines, taking my place in that hall, and yelling at the truest friend I have ever known to Back away!

And at the end of the school day, Davion would give me his two pats on the shoulder man-hug, before running to catch his ride, leaving me alone in the hall to chase away the memory of a nightmare that would always wake me up in a cold sweat.

“Stop turning, Andrew,” my dad quietly mumbled through gritted teeth into my ear.

“Sorry, Dad.”

“¡Para!”

“What?”

“Stop apologizing and just hold the damn bat.”

As I squeezed the plastic handle, the yellow bat from my twelfth birthday morphed into a wooden one. Its weight was more than my wrists could handle and the barrel of the bat drooped down onto my right shoulder.

“¡Para!”

“Sir?” The word left my mouth like a flying cockroach. I wanted to throw up. Tear open my belly and figure out where it came from. This foreign word I had never used before. One that
was never demanded or said. A word that neither my sister nor I had in our vocabulary. He was Dad. Daddy, when my sister wanted to wrap him around her finger.

“Stop turning.” His fingers clawed into my shoulders, pressing down so hard onto me that my feet dug into the earth. “Face straight and just swing.”

“But—”

“Don’t move your feet. Do something for this family. Show some pride. You’re just as much my son as you are your mother’s. Now swing.”

“I can’t lift it.”

Exasperated, my dad crouched down behind me, placing his hands underneath my elbows, and lifting my arms and bat up toward the piñata. “Keep your feet and just swing!”

The command came like the voice of God, stabbing me with what felt like cursed adrenaline, boiling my blood, and inverting my vision. The sun and scattered clouds formed black chasms across the dark orange sky. My body tensed and spun full circle, the bat slowly falling as my feet twisted below. My dad’s head may as well have been on a tee. The wooden barrel struck his temple, caving in the side. The bat fell out of my hand as he crumbled to the lawn.

Stunned. I stood paralyzed, looking for my mother, the one pillar for seventeen years—twelve in the dream—and I couldn’t find her. I had no control. I couldn’t summon her. My mind would not let her absence die. And I couldn’t bear the thought of seeing what I had done to my father. Couldn’t even resurrect him in the one place possible. So, I had no choice.

I turned and locked eyes with my grandmother, only to find her head nodding in approval.
Halloween

The first and only time Gisella and I kissed was in the second grade. We rushed home after trick-or-treating and dumped out our plastic jack-o-lantern bags onto the floor of her parents’ family room. Paola and Luis made an honest attempt to do the adult thing and verify that our mouths weren’t about to be shivved by some razor-laced Snickers or Milky Way, but our feral tear through the night’s bounty was the greater danger, forcing them to think better of it and driving them backwards onto the couch to avoid losing a hand—if not an entire arm.

Gisella and I sorted and traded for the better part of an hour, half of it being used to figure out how we were going to eat the next piece of candy—then the next and the next and the next—without throwing up. We eventually had our piles of “Touch these and I’ll kill you”, “Completely edible for a sugar fix”, “Trade at school”, “Money”, “Fruit and homemade shit”, and “Miscellaneous toys and junk”. In all my years of trick-or-treating, those miscellaneous things tended to be few and far between, but definitely enough to remain in mind. Vampire fangs, party poppers, super balls, marbles, loose jacks, pencil toppers, foam gliders, the list goes on, all the way down to wax lips.

The good ones, whoever they are, don’t have to—or at least no longer have to—explain themselves. Their experience and track records are proof enough that there is a method to their madness. Those responsible for them, stop defending them, and eventually begin touting them instead. When the door gets knocked down and someone runs in all up in arms demanding to know what’s going on, apologies remain locked away while statistics get released and used like bullets to mow down any and all accusations and blow off every digit used for finger-pointing. Generally speaking, this is all metaphorical. It tiptoes around the actual question marks that deserve answers and frustrates anyone who knows when something is not passing the smell test.
I don’t know what a second grader knows, or should know, about any of this, but I do know that when Gisella and I unwrapped the wax lips we had both placed in our junk piles and tried them on for size, Paola and Luis’s departure from off the family room couch felt as awkward and strange as the bite my teeth had to make into the backside of those wax lips to hold them in place against my own.

So, it’s here that, to this day, I ask myself whether Paola and Luis were the good ones or not. I’m not about to get into a pissing contest with myself over how my mother managed to avoid her own mother’s shortcomings and whether or not her father had anything to do with it. If I’m going to start putting faith in the influence of one’s father, I may as well start selling all my possessions now, as I’m going to find myself in a psych ward with no hope of release. So, Grandma Katherine can go fuck herself for whatever she did or didn’t do in order to write herself out of this discussion.

It doesn’t make her Goldilocks running from the house to save her own ass or escape with some new sense of morality. It doesn’t even make her one of the bears—though the argument is there for her being the one most like that mother-fucking grizzly in The Revenant.

No, somehow my mother’s mother demands those philosophical extremes, and their in-betweens, condescendingly reduced to the three options of porridge one would like forced down their throat to avoid starvation.

Paola and Luis were much less philosophical. They didn’t ask those leading and loaded questions. They just shot their shot. Didn’t ask questions. Sure as hell didn’t elicit them. Simply made known what the definitive answer was to a black and white problem—or should I say black and brown? More black and fallow really, though if we’re getting down to it and embracing the semantics, then Cassel earth and fallow. Van Dyke brown and fallow if you really want to get
cute about it. Nothing cuter than the parents of one friend reducing that friend to tears over the color of another friend.

And maybe this is the method to the madness. This is the just right porridge. Anything more, Gisella would have submitted and flipped her switch to stop the pain. Anything less, and she would have slowly been indoctrinated by drips and drizzles until she was full of a hate she never saw coming. Paola and Luis could just as easily be right for the wrong reason, as they could be wrong for the right reason. I don’t claim to know how the if/then statements work in the minds of those who have a method to their madness—and whether those causes and effects in a mind’s flowchart translate exactly in practice, or if some entirely new butterfly effect occurs. Maybe I don’t care. Not directly anyway. Maybe what I care more about is that disconnect between the vision created from mind and intent, and the actual thing that manifests when one’s actions play out.

Clearly, whatever Paola and Luis were doing—whatever they thought it would intend—was not resulting in the predicted vision. Only a fool would assume otherwise—graced with the knowledge of psychology, or not; fortunate enough to have that polygraphic finger on one’s pulse, or not. I can’t imagine what they were seeing that would lead them to believe it was working. Or if the truth was moot—that personal failure was both hallucination and the drug necessary to spawn the tangible lie, as if one’s brain could simply code an extrinsic reality like some programmer capable of a godlike genesis.

So, putting aside that they’d rather have a dead Mexican daughter, then one who was alive and well, albeit best friends with a black jock destined for Stanford and perhaps the pros, I’m left only with the image of Gisella and I, alone, in her parents’ family room. It’s not exactly an image one forgets—two second graders with collagenesque porn lips staring at each other
with no fucking clue what to do.

So why would they get up and leave?

Logic dictates that the Gisella’s parents were simply just assholes and that since such orifices have shit for brains, they assumed that we knew what to do. How that makes it any better is beyond me. A similar logic, giving credence to a wherewithal, would be that their fecal neurons triggered an understanding between the two that confirmed, indeed, that we had no fucking clue what to do. So, leaving us alone in the room was no more a risk, than if we were left on the floor trying to figure out a jigsaw puzzle. So then why get up at all? And it’s here where I stop. I suppose I could be just as much of an asshole as they are and recall some wildly racist stereotype I overheard my grandmother say. Write her back into this discussion with her views on how all Mexican girls become pregnant before they reach high school—half of whom have no idea who the fathers are. Of course, that assumes Paola and Luis were even wanting such an outcome for their daughter—and were dumb enough to think we’d figure it out ourselves, let alone have the biology as second graders to have the ability to do anything about it. I don’t know if that speaks more to Gisella’s parents or my grandmother. What I do know is that whether it’s them or Grandma Katherine, the requisite outcome for such a truth confirms a long game approach on their part that demands a level of patience that is downright diabolical.

It’s maddening to know that waiting for an I told you so holds greater value than an immediate selfless intervention. If that means that Paola and Luis left us alone so that we could go fuck ourselves, so that others could prove a point, I don’t want to live in this world anymore. I’ve discovered far too many answers lie in the hands of others and it doesn’t help matters that my two best friends doubled down on that truth on my behalf. As a rule, I don’t do this destiny and fate bullshit, and so it puts me in the unenviable position of having to answer for actions I
can’t possibly reason out. It takes the method to one’s madness and their hallucinogenic reality and splits the two to establish a truth. Keeping one and sending the other into the mind of someone willing to believe it. It creates validation and in turn a kind of plausible evidence, for it fabricates an existence outside its creator. It means the ability to exist as both child and adult. That potential is no different than a realized existence. That past and present, present and future, and future and past, coexist in ways beyond my reach. That in the case of Gisella and me, we are the parents Paola and Luis wanted us to be, the ones Grandma Katherine predicted us to be, and the children that we could no longer be.

Gisella and I stopped staring at each other—stopped laughing behind our paraffin mouths, closed our eyes, and made ourselves believe we were someone else. It was awkward—not that we were being something different and new, but that we would… Yet, no matter how hard we pressed, no matter how much the wax softened and our lips deformed, the plane of red—that artificial line we elected to keep in place—stole something from us. Our fingers had interlocked and even I could feel the pulse, not the beating of her heart—though that was there along with mine—it was that electrical signal which could not be captured that made itself known to the both of us.

It crossed over our prophylactics and to this day I don’t know what that means. I don’t know how two impossibles work to create a feeling, one that is by definition tactile. We were not electric eels or sock wearing foot shufflers across a carpeted room, yet somehow the shock was real. Something intangible from inside me and inside her crossed over, despite our intentions, and gave the other an insignificant piece, so small it could only be felt, not seen. Our lips pursed then softened and rolled about with virginal ignorance until we were nearly breathing each other in, if not for the suffocating wax. It wanted to bubble, fill her mouth then mine like some cherry
flavored gag when we didn’t breathe through our noses. But had we dared—had we the
conviction to breathe the other in, sacrifice a little more, it would have popped, and she would
have rushed inside me, and I, her, and something sustaining would have filled our lungs.

Instead, we choked. Gasped for ourselves. Broke from each other and stared in shock,
realizing that to ever be that close again would kill us.
Lesson Learned

Were Tom more skilled with his words, he would have sat Sandalio down, written the word *forefathers* somewhere for the boy to see, and proceeded with another one of those heavy-handed lectures that are so outrageously on the nose that they skirt the line between ripping one’s heart out with truths and simply shitting all over the floor with blind accusations.

When it comes to fathers, that’s just one mystery that loves remaining unsolvable for those who like telling stories with family trees—so much so that it really is a shame that words like *unsolvable* don’t take suffixes like *-philic* very well. Of course it’s just as awkward to say a word like *unsolveablephilic* as it is for Lupita or Dani to talk about the fathers they never knew.

So, there should be little surprise then that both Lupita and Dani, unbeknownst to the other, would come for Sandalio, looking to resolve the only relationship with a man they could, and forcing Sandalio to question how on earth two fatherless women could have possibly been found by two fatherless men.

“That makes no sense whatsoever,” grunted Sandalio, struggling to pull a tire from off its rim.

“You’re never going to get it off doing it like that,” said Tom, watching over the boy’s shoulder from such a distance that it simply screamed collateral damage if he were any closer. “Do it like I told you to.”

“What do you mean I don’t have a father? He’s been kicking my ass my whole life.”

“Yet I’m the one teaching you. Get ‘em deeper under the lip.”

Sandalio adjusted the metal crowbars he was using, and with all the growling, spittle, and throbbing red skin he could muster, won half the battle and got the front side of the tire free.

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked Sandalio, catching his breath. “If I
wanted to be a surgeon, it’s not like I would go to you—or him.” Sandalio took a deep breath then bent back over the rim, grabbing the loose tire from the back end still encircling the metal wheel. He tried to wedge his fingers between the rim and the rubber. “You and Francisco complain all the time about how much I talk, but you guys are way worse. At least what I say makes sense. All you say is blah blah blah, stuff that doesn’t make sense. Blah blah blah, therefore it’s important. Blah blah blah, the more you’re confused, the more meaningful my shit is.”

“You’re going to rip the skin clear off your knuckles if you do it like that,” said Tom, watching as Sandalio began to curl his fingers, trying harder than before to get the tips of them under the backside-lip of the tire. “Do I need to do it for you—Again?”

“No, I got it,” said Sandalio, pouring oil from a can onto the rubber. He slammed his boot onto the rim with his good leg then clamped down on the tire with both his hands. He counted to three, took a deep breath, and gave the tire a hard yank. It came flying off, sending Sandalio backwards over his shoulders with the tire like a black halo around his leg. One of the crowbars launched into the air towards Tom, but with the distance, it gave him time to duck and watch it sail safely over his head. “Ha!” Sandalio shouted triumphantly, before cracking his back with a grimace to realign his spine as he stepped out of the automotive hoop.

“I don’t even want to know what kind of bruise your leg’s going to have tomorrow morning.”

“Can’t be worse than anything else my dad!” exclaimed Sandalio, “has ever done to it.”

“Jesus Christ, kid, you are a fucking pain in my ass.”

“Why are we even having this conversation?”

“Because you’re a father, Dali. Or at least you’re going to be. And you seem to think that

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there’s a difference.”

“There! There it is. Told you! You just proved my point. You say stuff that you think has meaning, but it doesn’t mean anything,” Sandalio rubbed his inner thigh before hobbling, more than normal, towards Tom who was approaching him as well, holding the crowbar that took flight in his hand. “What does that even mean? You either are or you aren’t a dad.”

“So which one are you?” asked Tom, pointing the crowbar at the boy.

“You’re a dick,” said Sandalio quickly turning his back on Tom.

Tom caught the collar of Sandalio with the claw of the crowbar, an audible *guh* squeezed from the boy’s throat, stopping him in his tracks. Tom unhooked the bar and turned Sandalio around by his shoulders. “That didn’t answer my question. Are you? Or not?”

With Tom constantly on his back or hunched over an engine compartment, he had failed to notice, until that moment, just how quickly Sandalio had grown up. Even with their walks, Tom’s attention had been elsewhere. The boy wasn’t quite his height, but with the number of spurts that had been hitting Sandalio in his sleep, the revelation was a punch in the gut when Tom caught the boy staring him directly in the eyes and daring him with his silence to break the standoff.

Sandalio remained fixated on Tom’s pale blue eyes, but still reached forward and took the crowbar from his hand. It slipped so freely from the man’s grip that a tiny smirk twitched out of the right side of Sandalio’s mouth, catching Tom’s attention, and breaking the stalemate.

“Not if she shows up,” said Sandalio, his nose inching closer to Tom’s.

“And would that be to the *are* or the *not*?” asked Tom slowly, his breath of exasperation at the end only encouraging Sandalio’s smirk to grow.

“Oh, you don’t know? Does my answer not make sense to you?”
Tom’s face grew red as he bit down on his front teeth. It wasn’t long before the subtle movement of his head from left to right and back again grew more pronounced with its perpetual motion. He needed something to say to Sandalio, but out of respect to the woman he had never met, he wanted something far more accurate than the son of a bitch that came to mind to call Hector’s son.

“Guess I learned from the best,” said Sandalio, dropping the crowbar at Tom’s feet and finally turning back to leave.

“Best at doing what?” asked Tom. “Walking away?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Sandalio without losing step.

“I know I’m too late,” Tom said louder, making sure the boy could hear.

“Don’t know what that means,” said Sandalio, matching Tom’s volume as he continued to stay in stride, distancing himself from the man.

Tom watched hopelessly as Sandalio kept walking. He closed his eyes and wished he could stop himself from asking. “How long ago did you tell your father?” shouted Tom.

Despite causing Sandalio to stop and turn around, it was of little comfort. The answer was obvious and as if the boy’s shit-eating grin wasn’t enough, Sandalio added insult to injury. His overly dramatic shoulder-shrug, arms wider than the crucified, falsified the truth. Saying he had no idea would not have made the lie any better, but the silence did make it worse. The knowingness immediately began to eat at Tom, and without the wit to counter, could only grasp at straws.

“What about your mom?” Tom yelled, as Sandalio opened the door to the parts shop.

The boy paused at the doorway, then stepped through. “What about her?” he said, closing the door behind.
Here Lies... March 18th: 11:39 a.m.

There’s a pretty strong argument for a piece of someone dying along with the one they loved. Unfortunately, for my father, I’m pretty sure that piece was just his nut sack. Like, not even his testicle—left or right—just the sack. In watching my dad and everyone around him for almost an hour and a half, I couldn’t turn off Davion’s commentary going on in the back of my mind. Something about the judgments of others onto an individual clawed at the back of my skull. Actually, it may have been more of a pecking, because it felt like it was drilling into one spot. Then why not call it drilling? Here’s the thing, be it ever so brief, pecking provides that momentary reprieve before the pain arrives again. And again. And again. And again. Drilling does nothing of the sort, it just keeps going. And if the bit binds, there’s a chaotic twist so violent that not only is the material destroyed, but the drill itself—not to mention the cheap bastard whose wrists get absolutely wrecked and who spends the next six months in physical therapy regretting ever shopping at Harbor Freight for the only tools he could afford at the moment for the project ‘that just had to get done’, as opposed to wait for something of quality to go on sale.

Or the smarter thing, which would be to avoid doing the project altogether since not having the right tools means not having the requisite skills and practice to begin with. Even with insurance, six months of hand and wrist PT is infinitely more expensive than some reputable name brand drill—if only from Home Depot—and this is all before the cost of materials, half of which gets destroyed when the binding happens and the drill is dropped, expletives fly, and the other half of which sits in an Arizona garage summer after summer, until it too is destroyed by the punishing heat.

I’d like to think that if I outlived the love of my life, it would be my heart that would go along with her, and that I would turn into some miserable fuck because of it. And everyone
would know—Davion, Gisella, Kole…hell, even Rafferty, if he was still alive, would see me prodding people like cattle with my cane to get the fuck out of my way and think, “Damn, he really loved that woman.” And in the case of my own mother, not that I want to consider the death of her, but perhaps a lung or a kidney, or better yet my iris. Not lose an eye or go blind, but have my brown eyes die and go blue. That’s the dream. The reality is that my father can’t fix shit and destroys anything he puts his hands on. Kills it, or fails and lets it die. I suppose it’s fitting that he is completely incapable of working with his hands, he was, after all, incapable of even picking up the phone to talk to his mother in the years leading up to her death. Like the lawn chairs in our backyard, or his failed projects in the garage, Dani, his own fucking mother, was relegated to some hospital room, untouched by her son—‘cause what good are any of his digits?—to wither away, unloved, to nothing.

So, good choice, dad. Send your mother off like everything else in your life. The nut sack makes sense. Let it dry and shrivel into some kind of air-fried testicular chicharrón. Pack it neatly in the box you’re putting in the ground tomorrow. Let it crumble alongside your mother until the only things remaining are her bones and the aluminum frames of those chairs in the backyard.

But Davion kept pecking at me. That ‘internal you’ that he and Gisella claimed they knew so well about me and trusted. Everything about my father was external, as if I were the one doing the pecking, hoping to see what was at the center. But I knew the truth of my ‘external father’… the only thing I’d get would be the other side of the man. And by that definition alone, the more I dug, the more superficial an answer I’d get. So, I probably should have been watching him more from the moment we walked in, for no other reason than to try to catch a glimpse of some surface of the man I had never seen before.
I tried to make up for lost time, pulling my attention off of everyone else and putting it back on him, but then I didn’t notice anything. The pinhole through the paper gave me a son, and no one else. Like Garfield minus Garfield, I was watching Jon Arbuckle wade through existential moments of nothing—not even for nothing, just nothing. So I dropped it, removed my focus off of him, and looked around.

I could not believe how many children had shown up. Cousins and cousins of cousins, nephews and nieces of cousins, and godparents, and undercard boxers who I swear I’d seen on HBO or Showtime, and some midday Telemundo extra, and another, clearly famous, just not to me. And still others, who weren’t, but were one or two steps removed from someone who would have needed a detail had they shown up, so respect and condolences arrived in the form of aunt-who or great-aunt-who, all of whom I could only keep track of momentarily until someone else would grab my attention. The sharply dressed man whose cologne and hair I could smell from the other side of the room—and miraculously distinct, the spice and leather of one, followed by the earthy floral of the other. And then the polar opposite, but damnit if his effort didn’t seem exponential in its reverence and solemnity. His shoes were falling apart, and the foam soles were so worn down from his pronated gate, it looked like each foot was landing at 45 degrees and that his ankles would break with the next step. Whatever white, gray, or blue his shoes had been new, was now some shade of tan and brown with scuffs of black. His blue jeans were only mildly better, they had survived any permanent markings, but they were worn all the same. At best it was his white shirt, striped, but yellowed after all these years, that drove the point home that he didn’t just walk in from off the street. It was his work shirt that he had on, but today it was for my grandmother.

And then out of nowhere it was like we were all at a totally different wake. All the big
names were still there: my dad, his sisters, obviously grandma—but two hours in, something happened. There was a flood of people who arrived as if they were on time, if not entirely early. Now the lingering acquaintances of cousins of cousins who were once seen walking a dog in the background of some telenovela felt like immediate family. This rush of people, young and old, looked like they were straight out of Central Casting. I knew my father had the capacity to be a blowhard, but even this would have been way out of character. We had a lunch we would eventually be getting to, but I never in a million years would have thought my dad to be one to make that extra phone call, after every other arrangement had been made, so that later at the restaurant he could stand and make some toast about how his mother’s wake was the biggest.

No. This was natural. An unplanned schedule. Practically noon—like some obituary was run in the *L.A. Times* for people to come whenever the fuck they wanted—and by that, I mean all together, two hours after everyone else arrived, did their thing, and either left or were about to. And yet my dad, a man who never said shit about his family, recognized this one and that one. And when introduced to another question mark, it was a quick proof of the six degrees of Kevin Bacon that brought about the a-ha moment of understanding as to why any of these people were pouring in and their connection. And if I am being honest, the only thing I wanted to do was kick in the teeth of Rafferty and every other teacher who popped in a DVD the day of my suspension.

None of my teachers were right, I’ll go to my grave on that, but the colors and the sounds and the smells and the voices were so familiar because of that day…this second round of family and friends and people representing definitions of ties that will never mean anything to me, not because of a failure of desire, but because of my inability to translate. It was all untranslatable—not just the words. Seventeen years and all I had to show for it was the dictionary definition of *grandma* and a woman I’d never see again, as if that were any different. Yet round one *and*
round two showed up and spoke to it. Said things to each other and my father in the language of their bodies as fluently as their tongues and it infuriated me how natural it was for my father. How purposeful he was at trying to shove a glove onto my hand as a kid. How deliberate he was at grabbing my ankles and squaring them up to a tee or a plate. Everything I knew from him was forced—including our relationship. And here he was in literal embrace of the goddamn stereotypes I thought I was right to ignore, because that’s what he taught me by teaching me nothing at all.
Session: Conditional Response

“Why I’m here? The obvious answer is that my return to school is conditional on you signing off on me not blowing up the school or something, because apparently my word isn’t good enough for the principal, but somehow it will be good enough for you which will somehow make it good enough for him.”

“Is that what you really think, Andrew?”

“No, I’m lying to you.”

“So then why do you think you’re here?”

“I just told you.”

“You said you were lying to me.”

“Oh my god. If you can’t read sarcasm, then this is not going to go well for me.”

“Andrew—”

“Let’s just give up now because there is no way I’m getting the okay to go back to school.”

“Do you want to go back to school?”

“Can I help speed this whole psychological evaluation up?”

“What do you mean?”

“I am sure that everything I have seen on TV and in movies regarding therapy is complete garbage and is nothing but a Hollywood depiction. But, regardless of whatever bullshit I have been exposed to, the one thing I do know is that the sooner I confess all my deep, dark secrets to you, the sooner you can pass-fail me as a Klebold, Roof, or Lanza wannabe.”

“Do you look up to them?”

“If you’re about to accuse me of having murderous idols, we’re going to get nowhere
“Most people your age don’t know the name Dylan Klebold.”

“Most people my age don’t know what a noun is, let alone a proper name. More to the point, most people my age are half-asleep, texting, taking selfies, or playing some stupid game on their phones while some poor mother who lost her kid in one of a hundred school shootings is pleading to a gymful of students to make a connection with someone new so they don’t turn into the next Eric Harris—and yes, I know his name too. So, shoot me for paying attention to a woman whose entire life was changed in an instant.”

“Andrew, do you find these talks worthwhile?”

“Between you and me? Or the grieving mothers?”

“The ones with the parents who have lost a child. Are they informative for you?”

“Okay. Stop. My AP English teacher spent three weeks on Lou Gehrig’s farewell speech—”

“Are you uncomfortable, Andrew, talking about people who have lost someone close to them?”

“Three weeks. He spent three weeks on a frickin’ speech. Three weeks on a speech that is less than three minutes. So, if you think I’m not going to pick up on ‘informative for you’ versus ‘informative to you’ this is not going to work out between us.”

“No one is accusing you of anything, Andrew.”

“No, just searching for something to— You obviously know the difference between to and for.”

“Because it’s important to you.”

“Oh, whatever. Don’t even—”
“What else is important to you?”

“Making it clear that if I were an idiot I wouldn’t be here.”

“Would you rather be less intelligent?”

“If the only questions you have for me are the ones based on the words I give you then guns, murder, infamy, involuntary celibacy, racism, video games... Am I missing anything?”

“Andrew.”

“What!?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Apparently I’m going to shoot up a school.”

“Andrew.”

“What!?”

“You’re not going to shoot up a school.”

“Duh.”

“No, Andrew, listen to what I am saying. You—are not going to shoot up a school.”

“Oh— So, we’re good?”

“I will fill out my forms, sign off on them, and once the school does their thing, you’re free to go back.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“There’s nothing else—? What? What’s with the look?”

“You made it sound like you didn’t want me using the words you gave me.”

“I guess curiosity is going to make me just as guilty.”

“In what way?”
“Whenever my mom wants me to say something that I don’t think she wants to hear, she says ‘humor me’. I guess I said something I didn’t want to hear. Humor me.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Is there really nothing else?”

“Yes.”

“Why does that not match with everything else you have shared with me?”

“Because I’m not an idiot.”

“Andrew.”

“Honestly?”

“I would hope.”

“Because you’re an idiot.”

“Why would you say something so hurtful?”

“Why would you ask something so stupid?”

“That’s not a fair assessment, Andrew.”

“Disagree.”

“Then what is it?”

“Nothing.”

“You and I both know that’s not true.”

“You don’t know it’s true.”

“Andrew, if I may... Why not help speed this whole psychological evaluation up by actually telling me something? Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing! Nothing is wrong! Nothing, as in nothing. As in space, emptiness, a void—but
those would be something.”

“__”

“What!? This is so fucking frustrating! See! Now you got me fucking welling up over nothing!”

“Nothing.”

“Yes, nothing! Nothing is wrong, because nothing is something, you idiot!”
Got Your Nose

Sometime between Amanda Salinas’ third and fourth birthday, her father picked up the godawful habit of trying to be funny. Worse still, the man, who was not all that keen on washing his hands after going to the bathroom, would take his daughter’s nose and place it in between the knuckles of his index and middle finger. Tugging slightly as he released his grip, Carlos would then tuck his thumb between those two knuckles and tease his daughter, proclaiming, in no uncertain terms, that he got her nose.

The problem with such parlor tricks, besides the potential to instill a kind of body dysmorphia into one’s daughter the next time she looks into the mirror and questions whether her father put her nose back on straight, is that its punchline can be interpreted in two vastly different ways and is highly dependent on whether the audience saw the father/daughter act from start to finish, or just walked into the room the moment the declaration of nose ownership was made for all to hear. So, unless sadism is the first thought that comes to mind when watching a father interact with his daughter, misconstruing Carlos’ words to mean that he is literally in possession of his daughter’s nose is embarrassingly idiotic.

As for the notion that genetic traits are bidirectional and are passed up the bloodline as easily as they are down it—now that’s a misunderstanding that’s not without some intrigue. Granted, still a little ass-backwards, but then history has proven so were most of the Salinas men.

So let’s test this theory by running it through that box of contrivances that Andrew so desperately clings to so that he can find order and reason in that first-world problem of his.

The issue with Dani, whether sixteen and pregnant, or six-feet deep, is that the girl looked every bit the part that Andrew would have expected her to look. Neither the girl, nor in turn, her son—in that specific ancestral direction, mind you—that is to say, down the family tree—ever
gave their own look a second thought, let alone each other’s. But like those rare birds that don’t fly and therefore lack that top/down perspective, Andrew could only look up, and in doing so, he noticed. If only the myths were true about such flightless birds, then perhaps Andrew would follow suit and bury his head in the sand with the rest of them. ‘Course the problem with myths is that they don’t exist—not in the literal sense anyway. And just like most Salinas men, they too are backwards, engendering love for confirmation bias so as to never love the truth.

If myths were true, we’d have a lot of dead ostriches. In truth, if myths were true, we’d have no ostriches, and a glut of hungry cheetahs. Allegorically, we’d also have a dead Andrew—but at least he would have died knowing what got him.

And ain’t that a bitch!?

Some people are going to hell. Some people are living in it. And some people are Andrew.

The kid would be doing himself a favor if he’d just get over it, but there are just some people who look up to the stars at night and simply cannot appreciate their insignificance down here on earth. They are completely incapable of deep-breathing that shit, and again, would be doing themselves a favor if they would literally just suck it up. But no, the Andrews of the world have to grapple with their place in it no matter how insignificant it is. Worst of all, in their quest, they’re no better than the mythology. An ostrich with its head in the sand is just as likely to get its ass wrecked by some apex predator as some dip-shit teenager staring up into oblivion wondering where he goes from here. Whatever the hell Andrew has running through his head is beyond the pale, and he should just knock it off because the fucker’s gonna get destroyed either way if he doesn’t.

To not know is already killing him. In fact, to know that he doesn’t know is killing him.
And now he wants to know what he doesn’t know. Needs to know it. Jesus! What he really needs is a life-goal or at the very least a hobby. If he’s so smart, become a doctor, a lawyer, anything other than this. The irony in his disdain for the nothingness of ignorance is that by tilting at this windmill, he’s only diving deeper into the abyss. How much more quixotic can he get? They don’t make a knight-errant for this shit. This is the definition of a fruitless endeavor—to become or understand something you can never be...let alone know. And when the wannabe astronomer discovers that realization, how fucked is that gonna be? Or should I say him?

There are just certain things that never come to light no matter how badly the urge is to know. Take drunken Denise, the daughter of Carlos’ godparents for example. First off, lesson one is to never take the advice of a drunk. However, being that Denise tends to spew the truth when she’s wasted and not advice, one would be a fool not to listen. But—and this is one hell of a but—the truth is only the truth in so much as it is the truth.

It’s true that nearly everyone heard that the mystery eye-candy lover who slipped so easily from the back of the wedding frame that Dani held so dearly, had also slipped just as easily into her. And so it’s also true that however long Dani and Mr. Eye-candy’s lovemaking was increased tenfold and then tenfold again through each telling until lovemaking was loving, loving was loved, and loved became the love of her life. All of this is true, in that the story of the story is true.

Therefore, it is no less true that Carlos’ real father is contained in that story—that is to say the story of the story. And there’s the rub. Whatever facts or realities are added or removed, indeed, whatever facts or realities shall remain in perpetuity, are amended or attached to the only story accessible to those who tell it. As it happens, the accessibility of this story—the only one of the two—is also the same for those who choose to write it.
So the truth is both written and told in that even those who tell this story have no idea who the fuck Mr. Eye-candy is. Whether story the second, or story the first, what is true, what is fact, what is reality, what is the story, is that that is not Carlos’ father.

And ain’t that a bitch—for Andrew. And, yes, he’d never know the difference. And in that difference he’d finally find his place—himself—within the same story as everyone else. And what a shit argument to make—that being in the know is the same as a genetic code, or that blood is the very code necessary to be in the know, as if in some irony of ironies his family wouldn’t tell him otherwise. Not even Andrew is that desperate for the truth to be blinded by the fallacy. No wonder the kid looks up and not around, he already knows it’s not coming from his mother or his father. *Sucks to be you* doesn’t sting Andrew because it’s mean, *sucks to be you* stings Andrew because it’s true.

There’s a time and a place for every digression. Frankly, the more made here, the deeper the hole and fucked up the labyrinth, which doesn’t help Andrew worth a shit with his story, but for anyone with an ounce of empathy, it’s at least an informative well, *I’ll be damned* for the kid. Since walking a mile in his shoes isn’t going to do much for him either, dropping to the bottom of Andrew’s chasm just to prove the insurmountable exists is yet another exercise in futility that he can handle on his own without dragging the rest of the world down with him. So, like the stories his family tells to itself, the story of Andrew’s void is equally empty and, as such, completely relevant.

It’s fascinating how one false claim in the court of law can undermine an entire case, yet those blind justices have owl-like vision when compared to the observational powers of a family. How anyone knows who anyone is, for as blind as they all can be, is another mystery left for the ages. The oversight simply screams incompetence and satirizes the eyes’ inability to pass the
smell test, which, as it just so happens, makes Carlos’ proclivity for removing the noses of his family all the more interesting. If he weren’t so preoccupied with holding onto them, he might actually find that the nose he’s “got” is not the one he’s had all along.

The problem with family is that, unless something about it looks funny, there really is no point in questioning any of it. It’s like rat shit in a box of cereal—if you start asking too many questions, you’re going to keep yourself from all of it and starve yourself to death. Andrew would do well to sit down like those government agencies, who have kept him alive and well this long, and decide exactly what proportion of his family’s shit is an acceptable amount to consume. Mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, second cousin twice removed, doesn’t matter, if Andrew’s threshold for it all is zero, he won’t need to wait for that mystery slayer of family dreamers to take him out—he will write himself out of the story and be nothing more than another dead Harlow monkey. It’s Captain Obvious, but zero tolerance is no tolerance at all, and if the kid’s waiting for history to stop so he can redact the unknown in one fell swoop, he’s got another thing coming. Whoever trained him to hold a scalpel and not a brush did Andrew no favors. Lies of omission are like noses, front and center for all to see, and no matter how many Andrew’s father plucks off, the family’s bound to hold on to them.

Shit show aside, there is something fantastic about the thought of sitting Andrew down and forcing him to come to terms with the fact that there is no difference between excising one’s schnoz with precision tools and ripping the damn thing off bare-knuckled. Oh sure, there’s the argument that Andrew views these things as cancerous and that Carlos’ actions are simply benign, but fifty bucks and a hearty handshake to anyone who convinces Andrew that his ideology is no less malignant than the virulent outgrowths he believes these things to be.

As for Carlos, the thought of one’s life as is—and forever as is—as a kind of preexisting
condition in the eyes of mother-in-laws, brings genetical histories to the present and allows for the arbitrary placement of noses onto faces, regardless of who was responsible for their growth. Whereas no one in their right mind would eliminate Dani from this equation, or even dare to challenge the order in which her maternal place became cemented, sewing discord with paternal anomalies fits nicely with the family’s MO. This, of course, is the moment when everyone hopes to God that anyone with the power to certify someone insane and lock them up forever does not happen by and see them laughing maniacally on the ground over the hypocrisy of the Salinas way of life. When juxtaposed nicely with the universal truth that what is good for the goose, is good for the gander, those in the know can’t help but be reduced to fits of hysteria.

There was, and is, no real good reason for Carlos to take a step back from his daughter, put his thumb up like a painter, and calculate the proportionality between how she looked to him and what he saw in her. Unless either of his children came out darker than him, Carlos was wont to avoid speculation. Though, ironically, with his mother-in-law down his neck, the lighter his children turned out, the more relieved he would have been. It’s hard to suppress a devilish grin at the thought of his wife, Karen, fucking another man as a means to comfort her husband, but this smirk grows exponentially at the audacity with which this fucking family has moved around their truths for generations. They keep their houses like carnival booths, confidence games at the ready, with moms and dads being master magicians at the cups and balls trick. Where the hell Andrew got the idea that he needed to play this unwinnable game is a mystery and a half. Maybe he has a need for following objects cloaked by other objects. Maybe that need is reinforced when undetectable objects of desire are constantly moved again and again to undermine their permanence in space and time. *It was here today*—and, oh, how that fucks with Andrew. But that inevitable evil, delightful as it is to watch, is still around the bend, when a ball, much like a nose,
whose place can be nowhere else, is removed through sleight of hand and upends the only possible reality. What wonder and awe, magic and spectacle. How unbelievable and mind-blowing it is to watch resignation allow the truth to remain slipped from view, then be placed back when surrender guarantees it never be uncovered again.
Mothers and Fathers

Dani entered the parts shop looking like a thief with no understanding of how subtlety aides the profession. She took liberties with every car part or farming piece she could safely lift off the shelves over her enormous belly, inspecting each one before putting it back down. If over eight months of pregnancy didn’t make the front of her so perfectly round, her actions would have summoned the whole shop to come tackle her and grab whatever it was she slipped under her dress.

“We don’t get very many pregnant teens in here looking for carburetors or belt pulleys,” said Tom, cutting through countless inferences and getting right to the point as he approached her. “I’m guessing you’re Danielle.”

“Dani,” she said, the worried look on her face losing out to her need to correct the record. She looked down at her stomach and contorted her face before rolling her eyes in recognition of the truth, and the sure as shit odds for Tom to know who she was, given everything she gleaned from the loudmouth she had sex with.

“That’s too funny,” Tom said, cracking a smile.

“What is?” she asked, standing up even straighter and taking a half-step towards Tom.

“And that is hysterical,” he added, looking down at the girl whose face now demanded an answer. “You. I like.” He extended his hand to her. “Tom Sullivan,” he said, introducing himself with a grin as Dani extended her hand as well. Her eyes lit up and an otherwise impossible smile appeared as they shook hands.

It’s disingenuous to say that Tom would never act out of spite, the preponderance of evidence shows otherwise. But, anecdotally, evidence does suggest that a willingness to take a large metal object to one’s own skull has the potential to knock some sense into an individual,
even if that individual is only Tom Sullivan.

There was just something about the girl. It wasn’t that Dani was pregnant, or that she was pregnant with Sandalio’s child. It wasn’t that that child would be Hector’s grandchild. It wasn’t even some opportunity to flip the script on the fears Tom had instilled in himself and this time corrupt a Mexican child, infecting it with Americanism, and sending it back home to spread like wildfire. The two just clicked, and save for the fact that neither he nor Dani knew where their parents were, Tom refrained from any conclusions as to how this kinship happened so immediately. It wasn’t as if the handshake transferred his story to her. The information was one way—albeit from someone else—but their bond symbiotic, nevertheless.

That, dinner that night was awkward, is not the story. Saying so would be burying the lead. Since leaving Lupita to fend for herself, whenever Hector and Sandalio had sat down for dinner at home, it was two plates as usual. So, having taken the day for himself and not gone into work, Hector had expected no different. Whether the shock was more to Sandalio’s heart or Hector’s is debatable. What’s not is that despite the cosmic destinies of Lupita and Dani, the two remained as stoic as strangers, leaving both father and son stumbling over the reality of how on earth they were having to set four plates for dinner that night.

Sandalio had no choice but to bring Dani home with him after work. As for Lupita, the choice to show up at the house out of nowhere is best left to those inexplicable reasons synonymous with Salinas fathers. However, in this case, the non-answer, or more accurately, the unanswerable response, is in fact the correct one. Whatever wedge came between Hector, Sandalio, and any sense of responsibility to each other or anyone else, was countered in spades by the two women sitting across from them in silence. And although Hector and his son had the thought plastered all over their faces as to why the mothers of their children were right there in
the flesh, neither had the will to ask this most important, yet astonishingly idiotic question. So, until they could excuse themselves to bed to save whatever remaining face they had left, they sat there simply dumbfounded.

With the boys in bed, the women took to the porch with its wooden chairs to enjoy the cool night’s breeze and nature’s silence. Her quiet was a welcome reprieve from the one they had been enduring inside the house, and with only nocturnal creatures to interrupt, the women were assured they could speak at length.

“Dali has told me everything,” began Dani. “Sitting inside with him…with you…your husband—his dad…I don’t know what difference seeing it makes. I don’t know how his words eight months ago are any different than sitting inside that house just now and experiencing it for myself. Or if it’s all the same.”

“It is,” said Lupita, leaning in and placing her hand on Dani’s knee.

“Then why do I still need to hear it from you?”

“Whatever it is, just ask,” said Lupita.

“That’s just it. It’s all right there—here. You. Them. Me. I don’t know what there is to answer.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“I don’t know,” said Dani. She looked out to the stars on the horizon. Her eyes wandered into the distance, traveling through the night’s expanse, actively seeking something. But soon Lupita could tell something was wrong. She had never seen herself in the mirror when her own soul had been torn from her body, but even in the midnight blue of the evening, Lupita saw Dani and knew. The young mother was no longer traveling on her own will, but instead, carried away by a compulsion seeded in the dark.

“Hmm?” she said, returning her eyes back to the porch and then to Lupita.

“What were you looking for?”

“I don’t know.”

Lupita took in a long breath and exhaled a slow and steady calm into the air. She did it again, but this time louder, confessing to herself and her God the cruelty of what she was about to say. “Dani, if you came here looking for the father of your child, I’m sorry, but you didn’t find him.”

It took a moment, but the girl finally answered. “I know,” she said, exhausted.

“So then ask me.”

“Will I?”

“No.”

“Will I find his father?”

“No.”

“His mother?”

It started as a stuttered exhalation, a rapid succession of pulsating air until Lupita’s lungs were drained entirely. A sudden gasp filled the dark and then she began to cry. Dani knelt at Lupita’s feet and summoned her embrace until she, too, joined the girl on her knees and they held each other’s hands in silent prayer.

“But you found a grandmother,” said Lupita, opening her eyes and kissing the girl on her forehead. “Your child will have a mother and a grandmother. I promise you.”

“Tell me I at least found your son.”

Lupita nodded. “Yes, my dear. He is my son. That is one thing that no one can ever take
Dani pulled her hands back and crossed her arms over her chest. Lupita leaned forward, but Dani leaned back further herself. She tried to come off her knees as Lupita extended her arms, but the motion to stand without falling into Lupita was too difficult, so she watched suspiciously as Lupita moved her crossed arms down from her chest to over her pregnant belly.

“Your heart is here now,” said Lupita. You just don’t know it yet.”

“Then whose hearts am I?”

Lupita sighed. The urge was there to repeat the things the nuns and priests had told Dani countless times before, when Dani’s age made her old enough to ask. But Lupita couldn’t convince herself that those words were true, having lived with Hector, knowing that even with his son growing up right in front of him, the man could still give him up. He would sacrifice his heart, not so his son could be loved, but so he would not be burdened with the need. Lupita simply refused to say what could not be said. She even caught herself, when she thought about the man in the diner all those years before. Had she died that night, she thought, perhaps her son would have grown to be a better man, having never known his father. “I can’t answer that,” said Lupita.

“Then who am I?” asked Dani.

A flood of resignation washed over Lupita, numbing her will to comfort with the belief that pain would be Dani’s greatest guardian. “You should have never come if you wanted to know that. You should have stayed in that church and prayed for the answer.”

“You wouldn’t be a grandmother if I did.”

“Nor would I be had you been foolish enough to come here months ago.”

“I guess we both know dangerous fathers,” said Dani.
“So that’s why you’re here.”

“No. I don’t know. I don’t want it to be. I want to believe that I would be here, even if it weren’t. Or that’s what I thought I wanted to believe.”

“How long have you been gone?”

“I don’t even remember. I started showing so early and I had nothing to wear to hide it.”

“You made it this long out there. Now you’re here and not somewhere else. That has to answer something.”

“Not what I want it to.”

“What happened?”

Dani got off her knees and Lupita joined. They walked out into the dark, shuffling slowly along the dirt road leading away from the house. They made it all the way to the main road before Lupita stopped Dani from walking towards that distant space the girl was so desperate to fade into.

“Please,” Lupita urged, gently taking the girl by her hand. “What happened?”

“You can’t get more pregnant,” said Dani, coldly, her body like a stone in the middle of the road.

“Oooh…no…I…”

“Don’t say you’re sorry.”

“But I would have—”

“Never known,” interrupted Dani. “One cross is enough.”

“It’s not for you to decide what I can bear when you never had the choice yourself.”

“Well, I had one choice,” said Dani.

“Don’t minimize this.”
“Then don’t pretend that I just let your son fuck me like some priest with an ultimatum. This conversation is awkward enough without going into the details of either.”

“Okay,” said Lupita, softly. “I understand.”

“Do you?”

Honestly, maybe I don’t. I was able to push back against Hector when he found out I was pregnant. He’s a little man with nothing behind him except his mouth.”

“And his punches.”

Lupita chuckled. “Hector uses his heads with women, and all his other body parts with men. He’s a man who likes to sleep and any sense of paranoia keeps him up at night.”

“You threatened to kill him in his sleep if he did?”

“Ha. No. Big dreamers, and even bigger talkers, bring those thoughts on themselves. Stay tonight. Don’t go. See for yourself.”

“Then what?”

“Then nothing.”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t? Can’t what? Stay? You said leaving the church answered something, but not what you wanted it to. What did it answer? And what is leaving here going to answer?”

“I won’t know until I leave,” said Dani.

Lupita sighed, shaking her head as her chin dropped to her chest. “I’m not going to fight you on that, but at least tell me what came from leaving the church.”

“Would you have left to save your child, or would you have left to save yourself?”

“That’s just it. Don’t you see? Leaving accomplished both.”

“Do you think I’m that stupid to not know that?” asked Dani.
“Of course not, but what are you saying then?”

“I understand every action has an effect. I’m not denying being part of that. But, what I am has yet to give reason to anything I’ve done. I don’t want to hear that I am a mother for staying pregnant, when the choice to not be was not a choice at all, had I stayed. Or that I have some great strength because I ran away with nothing into an unknown in order to save what little soul I had left. Don’t tell me those are choices and that I am defined by them. I’m about to give birth to a child that has no choice but to survive. I was dropped off at that orphanage—no different than the baby inside me. So, go ahead, tell me what I have been missing this entire time. Tell me the exact moment when everything changed for me, and I got to be like your son or your husband. I dare you to find that moment, just so I can bet my life against you, and pray that you win, so that I can finally be free. Nothing I do allows me to leave this all behind. I have to leave, but I can’t!”

“For what!?” pleaded Lupita.

“For me! What does any of this answer? You’re exactly right. Stay tonight—and tomorrow, nothing. Because this is it. My only hope is to write a future, and I can’t do it anywhere here in the past.”

“And your son or daughter?” Lupita began. “You don’t think that everyday you’ll look into his eyes or brush her hair and see today or yesterday? You can walk to the ends of the earth and you’ll be no closer to tomorrow or farther from today. You write your tomorrow without us, and you may as well drop your baby off on the steps of that orphanage. Then you’ll have your answer, Dani. Then you’ll be just like the people who abandoned you.”

“Go to hell,” commanded Dani, as she stepped between Lupita’s legs, narrowly avoiding kneeling the woman and head-butting her at the same time as she thrust her shoulders and
forehead towards Lupita, who was already mortified and recoiling.

   “Oh, Dani, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. I meant it. Every word.”

   “That’s not an apology!”

   “I know. Forgive me for wanting the same thing as you and never finding it. Forgive me for thinking this was it.”

   Dani stepped back, dropping her shoulders and then her hands to cradle her belly. She gently massaged her stomach, curling herself to grab at a pain then straightening again before speaking. “This is not the same. You want a past that was taken from you. I want a past I never had. Even if you can’t walk back into that house and get it, you at least know what it is, or could have been. What am I supposed to do, just imagine it?”

   “No,” said Lupita, quietly.

   “So answer me. Why do you get to pretend that you can grab at my child and magically fill in all the blanks? And what does my son—yeah...now more than ever, I’m convinced that God, in all his cruelty, allowed another little man inside of me to grow. So, what...what does this boy do? Give you a son? Give you husband? Give you a father? Exactly what do you think you can put on him? What blood and soul can you suck dry from him just so you can feel complete!?”

   There are certain events in one’s life that simply refuse to remain binary, and Dani having her water break at both hers and Lupita’s feet, heavy as it was, all but assured that those mythic creatures in the night would be recounting this moment as the point in time when both women were cleansed of their animus and bound by the trace amounts of blood at their feet.

   “Come,” urged Lupita, wrapping her arm around Dani as she tried to escort her back to the house.
“No,” cried Dani, refusing to move. “Not here, not with them.”

“Honey, you don’t have an option here. This baby’s coming whether you want it to or not.”

“No.”

“Um, yeah,” Lupita chortled. “It may not be tonight, but this one you don’t get a say on.”

Dani grabbed Lupita’s shoulder, weighing her down to one side as she clung firmly to the woman. “I don’t care, just not here. Take me back.”

“Where?”

“Home.”

“What?”

“Take me home.”

“Where’s—”

“Take me back!”

“You’re kidding.”

“Now!” yelled Dani.

“Dani, it’s hours away.”

“I don’t care!” she screamed.

“Honey, you’re not thinking straight.”

“I will not have him born inside that house and never be free of it. I’d rather die walking—”

“Is that what you think?” interrupted Lupita.

“With him inside of me,” continued Dani. She began walking the main road. Stunned, Lupita watched the girl carry on until the night began to slowly erase her from view.
“Dani, this is insane, you’ll never make it!”

“I don’t plan to!”

With that, Lupita ran to catch up with her. “Fine,” she said, “not here, but whoever picks you up is taking you to someplace nearby. You’re crazy to think they’re going to drive a girl in labor hours away to a hospital in Topeka.”

“I’ve been fighting pains longer than you know. I’ll lie, and we’ll get there, just as I got here.”

They played stupid, swallowing their pride to emphasize their need for the kindness and compassion of others. Took their lumps and let slide the poorly veiled insults to their intelligence just so they could make their way. About the only thing more appalling than the ignorance they feigned, was the confirmation that a man would believe two women were capable of such stupidity.

“It’s a good thing I happened upon you two,” said the driver of the truck as the three headed east into the night. “Last thing this state needs is two dead women on the side of the road. Word get out to your Mexican boys that this is how you women are trying to get around without a man or a prayer, we’re going to find ourselves to the gills with little Mexican girls like you—no daddies and no place to go. I don’t need to tell you how dangerous that’ll be. I’m surprised you made it this far along.”

“Thank you,” said Lupita, eyeing Dani and wondering whether it was the man’s words or the pain inside her that was making the girl grind her teeth.

“Don’t go thanking me like I’m some good Samaritan. I know how your boys work. You give ’em one, they take two. Pretty soon it’s four then eight, next thing you know they get cocky when they run outta girls like you. Come walking around my farm asking for work, when I know
damn well they’d break their back for weeks on end just for a chance at my wife and my daughter. I don’t know how you girls put up with them. Damn near shot one over a decade ago. Ruined my first marriage and haven’t spoken to my girl since.”

“Next time don’t miss,” said Lupita, preemptively looking to curry additional favor should the need arise.

The man laughed so loud the women’s eardrums nearly popped as he fought back choking on his own spit. “You’re my kind of gal,” said the driver, clearing his throat. “Truth be told, I never actually pulled the trigger. One look at the barrel end and the little greaser pissed himself and ran away.”

“I’m sorry about your wife,” said Lupita.

“Yeah,” said the man. “Once she left and took my girl, that was it for me. I’d walk the fields at night. Started hearing voices howling in the wind. Kept imagining it was him lying down with one of them in the stocks. Ended up selling my farm in Texas and moving here just to keep from losing my damn mind. Truth be told, I wouldn’t think twice, though, if I saw that bastard again.” He reached back and touched to confirm the shotgun wedged in place behind him. “I’d shoot him once for each offense, then again to kill his ghost for haunting me all these years.”

“Texas?” asked Lupita.

second-guessing everything.” The man beat both his hands on the steering wheel and turned his head so sharply to face the two women, it was as if the truck would drive itself. “Do you know, it got so bad that I started believing that I imagined the whole thing. I had that asshole’s pants for God’s sake! But by the time it was too late— By the time I couldn’t tell truth from fiction— I was convinced I bought those pants myself.”

He started laughing, turning back to the road, but roared with such hysteria that Lupita instinctively grabbed the wheel and fought to counter the driver’s wild jerks as he rolled over himself in fits.

“How! Could you imagine?” the man said, finally gaining his composure. “Me? Buying another man’s pants. What’s next, dinner and roses?”

Lupita released her grip. *Could it have been?* she thought. She was certainly no stranger to coincidence. Were she to deny such fates, she may as well jump out of the truck right then and there, as the whole evening had come about by the most extraordinary of chances. If she weren’t willing to believe, she should throw herself out onto the speeding road below and wake up unharmed and free from these unimaginable circumstances.

“I never believed in any kind of voodoo magic. And besides, I always thought it was just those jigabooos with their spears who played make-believe with potions and herbs. Whatever happened to you folk with your crosses and your beads? Tell me the truth, is it all a ruse?”

Lupita pulled at her collar, rolling her thoughts around in her mind. Even if she did the unthinkable and sacrificed Dani for an answer, what would turning the truck around accomplish? At best, it would mean that there were at least two men, Hector and another, who threw away everything for their own selfish desires. At its worst, it would be as if she were pulling the trigger by lining Hector up squarely in the eyes of her driver. And for what? What father, what husband,
what past would return as Hector’s life spilled from his body?

Lupita exposed a small cross she had hidden under her neckline attached to a thin, unremarkable chain. She showed it to the driver before tucking it back safely.

“That doesn’t really answer my question,” said the man, amused by the gesture, but still very much interested in the truth. “Come on. We can be honest with each other. I know you all have your path to the dead—you light your shrines with your candles. I’m not dumb. I may not get it, but I’m not dumb. So, is it true? Is there something else? ‘Cause there is no logical reason for what happened to me. No God-fearing person can take a man’s life like that and still leave him breathing.”

“Don’t count on it,” interjected Dani sternly, intent on being disengaged from the conversation by making her declaration toward the window she was staring out of. She remained steadfast through the awkwardness as her words remained trapped inside the cabin of the truck for hours as they drove in silence through the night towards Topeka.
“All I am saying is that sometimes therapy feels like a means for you to smash open another piggy bank rather than fix one that is already broken.”

“Andrew, the first time we met you said that I was interested in you for glory. Don’t you think that caring more about money would be counterproductive to achieving that end?”

“Professional athletes.”

“Okay. Fair enough. That’s a good argument.”

“You actually know what I am talking about?”

“I believe it was that same meeting that you called bullshit on me and said that I knew exactly what the problem was. If I know what the problem is then it stands to reason that I would understand the entire underlying condition—and as such, the trains of thought associated with it.”

“Maybe—”

“—”

“—”

“Andrew?”

“—”

“Andrew?”

“Hmm?”

“—”

“—”

“Andrew, why aren’t you asking?”

“—”
“For someone in search of the truth—but let’s use the word answer for now—your reticence to ask for the answer is an obstacle to achieving it.”

“I’ve been given enough answers to last me a lifetime.”

“Andrew, that statement is in direct opposition to the reason why you are even here.”

“If I lie to you, I will be giving you an answer. And a lie of omission is still a lie. What you just said couldn’t be farther from the truth. It’s the only reason I’m here.”

“Then let’s work towards that. How about we start with the three truths plaguing this room right now? What happens if you get the answer? What happens if you don’t? And now that you know some other answer exists, what’s keeping you from asking about it?”

“What difference does it make? What am I going to do about it?”

“Andrew, with some individuals, I have to find a delicate balance between saying what needs to be said and not being insulting. However, that’s on me and what standard of professionalism I want to hold myself to. Most of the time, those patients don’t have the perspective to be insulted by an obvious truth that any other individual would be well aware of. So, although it goes without saying, because I know you know this, I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that if both those questions didn’t matter to you, neither would the truth itself and your desire to know it.”

“My sister buys lottery tickets and leaves them in her car for months without checking them.”

“__”

“Oh! I thought we were just sharing stories.”

“Andrew, this is by far the most transparent deflection you have initiated since we’ve met.”
“I wasn’t afraid to ask my sister about it. Winning nothing—losing a dollar, two dollars, ten dollars—is the same to her as winning back the amount she spent or a little more. It doesn’t change anything. Winning a hundred or five-hundred is nice, but changes nothing. Five or ten-thousand would be put in savings for a rainy day—but she doesn’t need it. Just like she doesn’t need the jackpot. She wants it. It changes her life forever.”

“Yet she doesn’t check them for months.”

“Sometimes they will have even expired.”

“There are dozens of things I can say about finances—a penny saved is a penny earned; about fear of failure or fear of success; about delayed gratification; about the unknown; about possibility and potential; and about a hundred other things. And not a single one of them would matter more than what I am about to ask. How does your sister’s reasoning make you feel?”

“Subtle with the cliché. Real subtle.”

“There’s no way around it, Andrew. That is a mirror and you are way too self-aware not to recognize it. So, how does it make you feel?”

“You’re right about one thing. She likes the feeling that comes with driving around with a life changing potential. To never check and to never know keeps that feeling alive.”

“For 180 days until it expires.”

“What if we could all buy a potential?”

“You ask with optimism, but that I would ask with misgivings.”

“Fault can be found in anything, Dr. Rutter. Even you aren’t going to waste our time together on the inevitable evils in literally everything.”

“True, but this one deserves some time on. The answer, or in this case the truth, is that your sister’s actions require her to deny herself the truth—the very thing that could give her
exactly what she wants.”

“Yep.”

“Does this make you stop and think about yourself? About how not asking is denying you what you want.”

“Just because I want the truth, doesn’t mean I know what I want it to be.”
Fatherless

Diego Salinas was born in the spring of 1954 in Topeka, Kansas at 3:53 a.m. in the company of a mother, a grandmother, and a father—the latter of which was not his. The boy would be no savior, but his arrival did fire a warning shot at God that humble beginnings are relative, and that if He wanted to give a second son a chance to do what the first one could not, He would clearly need to do better with the next plebeian birth.

Dani was in good hands, though if the driver of the truck had wanted to place her in a more unenviable position, he would have been hard-pressed to find one. It wasn’t that the bed of the truck was the worst place in the world to give birth to a child. It certainly would permit Dani to sculpt the truth with brevity and provide Diego with the belief that his birth was, in fact, in a bed, surrounded by those bound, profoundly, to each other, while being most decidedly vested in the health and well-being of both mother and child.

Not the worst story in the world.

Not the most romantic story either, but then neither were the circumstances.

For a man familiar with shoveling shit, if not eating a bit of it too, Dani and Lupita’s driver had a funny morality about the inside of his truck, and he refused to have it desecrated by the arrival of the only individual among the three, soon to be four, who had yet to sin. It’s not fair to call the man ill-prepared, but if one is so inclined to pick up those on the side of the road, having faith that a shotgun is the only supply necessary to be at the ready is one hell of a middle finger to the hierarchy of needs. There’s not much to say on the subject of shelter, other than at that moment, when no amount of willpower was going to keep Diego from entering this world, Dani was forced to choose between the hood of the truck, the bed of it, or the dirt and gravel she nearly fell upon stumbling out of the passenger side in unending pain. Not a one of them
addressed the issue should the sky begin to fall, but bigger fish have a tendency to appear, often miraculously, to invalidate legitimate concerns.

And so Dani, again without option, made her choice by having it made for her, and gave birth to a son under billions of watchful eyes, cold and distant, incapable of being anything more than witnesses and guides to the mother’s and child’s souls were they to abandon their carceral bodies for a chance at something more. Like all children whose lungs fill to capacity, Diego made known that while his body was free, his soul, along with his mother’s, was unable to free itself and leave this world behind. Dani and Diego yowled into the night until both their lives were silenced by resignation and their beating hearts registered as compulsory.

There was nothing to wrap Diego in, and despite his questionable chivalry as the women’s chauffeur, the driver neither offered, nor did Lupita or Dani ask for, the shirt off his back. Lupita carefully tore what she could from both hers and Dani’s dresses, leaving some semblance of decency for the two, before swaddling the infant, and handing him to his mother. She cradled him, her arms as indifferent as a basket—functional and inanimate—serving like furniture for the child as she finally gave in to her exhaustion.

It was almost evening when Dani woke. Her driver was gone and for the first time in months her own body was cradled, blanketed in suitable bedding, and lying within a house, masquerading as a home. Her eyes adjusted and a relief rushed over her. She would not need to answer to doctors in a hospital; the girls at the orphanage; or the clergy, whose whispers among themselves promised a fate for her worse than the one she had already endured. Lupita would ask how she was, but Dani’s silence served to question more than answer. This was not a house for a single woman. Nor was it one of a mother of a teenage son. It was one of hope—or incredible loss—and it was impossible for Dani to tell the difference. It wasn’t blatant. The house didn’t cry
for children. There was no crib in the corner. No plaintive clinks of empty nursing bottles in some anthropomorphic milk crate, mocking the woman for her jealously and gratitude toward their function. It was as if Dani had woken in a playhouse, yet she could not tell whether this place had been staged for years waiting for its actors to arrive, or if Lupita had feverishly dressed the humble dwelling while she slept.

There was no fear. Lupita’s truth was still fresh in Dani’s mind and that the woman chose her—the orphan, albeit mother to her grandchild—over her own son, said more than any apology or explanation about the house’s dressings ever could. So the out of place toys and blankets, nipples and teethers, bonnets and bootees, and elixirs for conditions no woman should have, all stood out like sore thumbs to Dani as her eyes passed from corner to corner of the little house.

Despite his vocal lungs, Diego was a quiet infant and he trained Lupita and Dani to let go of their character judgments, break from building walls, and from choosing mistrust as their default for any relationship old or new. His silence heightened their senses forcing the pair to be ever more vigilant and work in tandem to care for the child and ensure his health and safety. It was as if the boy was born to suffer in silence—not by choice or indifference, not out of stupidity or lack of faculty, not even out of laziness or some innate sense of entitlement that guaranteed him that others would do any and everything for him. That they would dote on him hand and foot and be so dedicated to his every need that he would have it before ever learning how to desire it.

No, Diego was more mother than father. More grandmother than grandfather. Even while he slept, he revealed these truths—peaceful in his slumber in a make-shift crib out of a dresser drawer, not restless, yet squinty-eyed, as if the weight of the world was bearing down on him, and it took all his strength and concentration to not be crushed underneath. Whatever dreams appeared in his mind were more than just images and the effects of neural networks reasoning
out the day’s stimulations. Life came to Diego as existence and it buried him. In infancy he knew no better and just as he did on the day he was born, Diego resigned himself to the first experience, accepting it as a universal and one of constancy rather than something susceptible to change. He would not cry when he was hungry, merely feel the pangs as they were and lie motionless in Dani’s or Lupita’s arms, or quietly in his paltry crib until one of the two provided him the nourishment—from breast or bottle, of touch or tenderness—that he could not acquire himself. He’d suffer through bumps and bruises and inadvertent scrapes and scratches, all of which elicit trilling screams in other children and bring out the sympathetic faces and voices of the mothers and fathers who love them dearly. Cause octaves higher apologies and softened features ready to kiss the pain away—and make all better everything that had been done to them.

But not with Diego.

Even through the wettest and foulest diaper, Diego remained the stoical creature, sound in mind, but silent in body. Despite Dani’s objections and impassioned pleas for Lupita to stop, the elder mother pushed the child, nearly marking him permanently or making him bleed in order to ensure he was not a terminal dimwit. And yet it was Dani who cried, running outside with her blood curdling screams to avoid the inevitable, but necessary pain.

For the first two weeks, even while he slept, Diego was always under one of their watchful eyes. By month’s end, Dani and Lupita had mastered their rotations, finding schedules for their own sleep that solidified their love of the boy rather than escape for peace. They felt the boy, making their connection and ensuring he was okay—touching him all over as if his body were their own, finding his needs through some invisible pulse between their skin. Hunger, warmth, chill, fever, loneliness, emptiness, boredom and body and bowels, both mother and grandmother stole away by addition and subtraction those very things that caused him pain, and
brought to him what blood and life could not. Theirs were the stories that mattered, whispers as they were while his eyes grew heavy; or they stood with him over the stove waxing on and on, Lupita in Spanish or Dani in English.

The grandmother would let slip her trade secrets on recipes and ways to mend damn near anything. She would tell stories of her own mother and childhood, her grandfather on her mother’s side and how handsome he was. How he was the model of a man and the one she wished the boy to grow up to be. Discussed his hands and the hard calluses her grandfather had. She made sure Diego knew no matter how hard, no matter how thick-skinned they could be, that he could still feel and not only treasure a gentle touch, but provide one in return.

“I could feel him, just like this,” whispered Lupita, gently stroking Diego’s cheek with the back of her finger.

Dani, resting quietly in the corner, watched as Lupita caressed her child and a strange jealousy rushed over her. How had countless grandchildren been born and in doing so made mothers and fathers, and grandmothers and grandfathers, out of everyone? How had strangers come to be so close, purely by the carnal acts of others? And to that point, why would her son grow to cherish Lupita, while she would struggle to simply understand this woman and trust that this invisible bond between grandmother and grandchild—the one which, through heredity, bypassed her—was genuine and not some apocryphal creation? How was it that she, the generational middle, was not the keystone that connected the triad? How, by birth, did Diego trade places with her, exiling her from this middle ground so that he could become the hinge that linked the two women and pivot them to open or close?

Lupita carried on talking, dipping her finger in the evening’s soup she was preparing and instilling in Diego this new taste as his mouth latched on to her finger. Again with it, pot to
mouth, she teased the boy’s palate, slowly developing an awareness for him he’d call upon later when he would be old enough and have teeth.

Something offended Dani. It wasn’t her stomach or her heart that formulated the disgust. It was outside of her. It had to be, she thought. She loved her son, as foreign as that seemed to her. This was not a violation of her own free will. Nothing about this love felt imposed. New as it was, she forced herself to fend off any misgivings and dismiss those cogitations that would have normally convinced her that this love was undeserved. Diego was hers, as would be his love eventually, just as her love was growing exponentially before her eyes. She loved this love and how it spilled freely from her. She loved how love begot love. That the more she gave, the more it revitalized. She loved the power of it all—that this child’s life brought her life rather than drain her of it. It was strangely okay. Just okay. Simple. Trivial almost. This love was okay. And it was the greatest affirmation for her to know this. That something, for once, was okay.

Yet it spread through her like cancer, a kind of viral infection that hit her organs one by one with some disease of passion she could not control. It would transform her and make her into something she was not. And yet, that too was okay. The time would come when she would look in a mirror and see how something entirely outside of herself had done this thing to her. Not for good or evil, because it had no intent, but as a certainty whose only end was its own resultant—a thing within itself—undefined, neutral, and without conviction. It was she who would make something of it, and that’s what ate at Dani.

Had Diego died on the side of the road, they would have all disappeared—the family and its infection. This strange parasite inside her would have devoured her heart then slowly moved onto her soul until only fragments remained—enough for her to live, but not enough to sustain itself. It would have moved on, just as she would have had to, until the tangible affair had
progressed to memory and could only be given life with her voice. As Dani sat there watching Lupita move about the tiny kitchen, transferring the boy from arm to arm as if he were an extension of herself, Dani wept quietly to herself, having now known the difference.

This was family. This was the thing she never had and it hurt incredibly, and while her love for Diego grew, so too did her jealousy. Lupita had done nothing. Outburst aside—nothing wrong at least, and yet it was as if she were the one to have gained an entire life and not just a child. With the birth of Diego, the dam broke and a flood of histories beyond this one swept Lupita up with it. Her stagnation dissolved, as did she. Her fluidity in the torrent cut through the mysterious layers she had never been privy to and deposited pieces of herself, minute as they were, into the wall of this forever canyon of histories Dani struggled to cling to. It was as if the only thing Dani could touch was the boy. He was her only hold, taking her out of the orphanage, away from the church and miles—further—from an unknown woman and man whose place with Dani was no place at all. Diego positioned her where no one ever had, and whether it was for her or for him, this was the beginning.

She couldn’t hide her tears anymore and the young mother burst. “I want my son,” Dani cried.

Lupita turned from the stove and brought the infant to her, placed him in her arms, and watched longingly as the girl fed him from her breast. How strange the feeling to nourish him from within herself by this involuntary production, but that still required her own free will to transfer herself to him. She could have just as easily starved him by keeping him from her heart, but something pulled him toward her—or was it that she was pulling him; or that this child, physically incapable, could bring himself to her through some other force than his own?

“Does it always feel like this?” asked Dani, keeping her eyes as fixed on Diego as Lupita
was on the two of them.

“Does what?”

“This feeling that he is more to me than I will ever be to him.”

“Infinitely,” replied Lupita.

“And that you will mean more to him,” said Dani, glancing up to the grandmother.

“No,” said Lupita, her breathy denial exhaling her belief.

“That wasn’t a question,” added Dani as Diego continued to suckle.

“He will love you.”

“As easily as you,” said Dani coldly.

“I can’t—won’t—deny him that,” Lupita confessed.

“And I—” began Dani, cutting herself off as Diego spit up.

Dani calmly offered the boy back to Lupita and reached for a towel to clean herself. Lupita followed suit with Diego before placing him back in Dani’s arms. She held him upright, his back against her forearms and head cupped in her hands. “I will never be enough.”

“A mother is always enough.”

“A mother,” said Dani slowly, stripping herself of importance and allowing the singular letter to carry all the weight she had been bearing for the past nine months. “A mother, he has. And somehow I can say the same for myself and it means nothing at all. Tell me—tell me the truth. What is a mother? Is a mother a symptom or a cure?”

“Dani, don’t do this to yourself.”

“Or is she a disease?”

“Stop this nonsense.”

“Maybe she needs to be cured. Maybe she needs to be quarantined. Maybe the further a
mother is from her child the better—to keep him from being infected.”

“Never.”

“And yet…” said Dani, again finding Lupita’s eyes and demanding a confession.

The words pierced Lupita’s skin, the first through her heart, the second, her mind. Never…and yet… And yet…never… Never could she say never and have it be true, and yet here she was counting silently to herself the distance she was from her son while he gripped her heart as an electrical spasm, impossible to remove without severing herself from this world forever.

“What am I supposed to believe?” asked Dani. “That she is still with me and I am with her? When did you cross?”

“Honey, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know more than I ever will. When did it happen for you? When did you become part of your son’s life? How are you in Diego’s now?”

“These questions, Dani. What kind of madness are you letting take over you?”

“I’m not. It’s not. No matter how hard I try to give in. This disorder won’t take me. I’m immune. I love him more than anything and that’s enough.”

“Yes, that is enough.”

“No—that’s enough—for me, and it makes me an outcast. I can’t seem to get caught up in all of you.”

“This is all new. Give it time.”

“No,” said Dani calmly, shaking her head slowly as she calculated her thought. “It’s like—I watch you and it’s like a sickness has taken you. You have a kind of fever that spreads like a fire and it engulfs everything. Consuming me—Diego. Burning Hector—Sandaliio. I don’t understand how it works. You are the one to let the madness take over, not me. How am I
magically a part of all of this?”

“We’re family.”

“Lie.”

”Dani—”

“Lie. You can’t give me a single reason that answers me.”

“You?”

“Yes, me. What are you going to say about family and a mother and a father that answers me?”

“Dani, this extreme—like you don’t matter. You have to stop. Family is not some continuous string, it’s a puzzle with no edges. Sometimes, Dani, even then— Sometimes the pieces slide right into place and complete the image. And sometimes— Sometimes—You have a blue image and a red piece— And you take the side of your fist— And you come down on it so hard that you break something— And it’s mostly you that breaks— And sometimes— After fighting that piece— Sometimes that red piece in the sea of blue fits tighter and more permanently than any other piece that’s supposed to be there.”

“And yet it doesn’t belong,” said Dani, standing up and placing Diego over her shoulder as she walked back and forth about the cramped quarters like some goldfish, desperate for a bigger bowl to appear, only to be turned away by some invisible barrier.

“Honey, I can’t undo what’s been done, but that doesn’t make you any less part of this family.”

“This family…” said Dani, trailing off as she traced the frame of the only photograph in the house with her finger. “What did I do?” she whispered to herself, Lupita’s absence from the picture of Hector and Sandalio now more conspicuous to her than it had been when she first
arrived. “You were right,” said Dani, turning her back on the photograph. She shuffled along the floor, careful not to wake Diego whose faint growls sedated her as she made her way to Lupita. “I’m glad I could give birth to the family you couldn’t,” said Dani, handing Diego to the grandmother before storming out of the house in tears.

It’s possible that the Hectors of the world know not what they do—in that they don’t know what they do to others. That they are humans without psychopathy and that their lack of empathy is actually pure honesty. That they are not without lies, but that there lies simply validate the truths about themselves. If true, this, alone, is enough for others to start laying blame, but then such accusations begin to unravel the mystery behind the most honest actions of these men. They undermine the argument that there is nothing wrong with them, and in doing so posit that there is a solution—that a remedy or a cure is around the corner if only they could be forced to acknowledge that there is a way for them to be something—someone—that they’re not.

Maybe that’s why Dani made it all the back, leaving Diego behind with Lupita, to force something with Hector and Sandalio that Lupita was never able to accomplish. Diego may have been the hand that finally forced Lupita into the lives of her husband and her son no matter where she stood, but nothing was keeping either of the men from excising her from the puzzle neither wanted her a part of. So credit’s given where credit’s due, and although Dani marched back into Hector’s parts shop with a round piece for a square puzzle already completed and permanently affixed, it was her fist, ready to make the addendum that was to bring about the change in her life. She would never find her place even if it existed. No “X” on a map. No spoon-fed answer. Nothing that was buried would ever come to light. And nothing that was illuminated would ever be more than some apparition to her, long dead and intangible.

And to the future—that paradoxical present in front of Dani that neither the father of her
child, nor his own father, could see themselves in—how ineffectual hubris is at writing it, and curious how the present justifies the vainglory of men for realities yet to come, and present futures bound to change. For once in the girl’s life, it would have been nice to say that things went Dani’s way, that one of the most consequential decisions in her life had materialized the very thing stripped from her at birth. That she would have punched herself into the lives of these two men and put together a mosaic that, with time and distance, if nothing else, would at least outline the shape of this family and place her along the border between the emptiness within and the richness beyond.

That’s the dream. Then there’s reality.
If Andrew deserves credit for one thing, it’s that the kid understands the limitations of knowledge. When every other desperate fool is running to 23andMe for the answers to where they came from, Andrew remains consumed with where he is at.

These unfinished people spit for their answer, hocking time traveling loogies at scientists so that they can spell things out for them without ever having to do the work themselves. They want lab coats to give them answers they could not find for themselves—worse, they want answers for questions they don’t know to ask. This uncommunicative lot expects the opposite in return. As for their own opposites, the rambling ones who find their rambling kind to fill their voids in their waking hours—they believe that that, alone, makes all the difference. They equate information with experience and assume that it, just like family, is passed along like some genetic code or virus and that by simply being told that, that they are now part of the discussion.

Andrew is more consumed with the spit itself, sitting there alone in his mouth, speaking for itself in parts-per… He in his dimensionless quantities that cancel themselves and leave him isolated as a singular one. Despite this isolation, it’s actually not that hard to piss him off. It doesn’t require the stars aligning in a perfect fuck you formation with the constellations Dead Grandmother, Dissociated Family, Piss-poor Pedagogy, and General Angst. Any come to Jesus moment in a book or movie will do the trick. It may not provide the same fireworks display that went off in Rafferty’s room, but rest assured that the subdermal eruptions are indeed going off. Nothing flips that kid’s switch faster than a story involving some well-placed relative, in-depth journal, or home movie that sheds just the right light at just the right time and makes everything better for the lost son of a bitch—or at least palatable—so that he can go off into the sunset alone. So it’s no surprise that Andrew found great pleasure in turning on PBS and hate-watching
episodes of *Finding Your Roots* and *Antiques Roadshow*. Absolutely masochistic and counterintuitive, but it sure as hell beats yelling at himself in the mirror, and is definitely the preferred alternative to those educational outbursts that pull his unsuspecting peers, and worse his parents, into a loop of insight that can only be described as an awakening.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” said Andrew, talking to an episode of *Finding Your Roots* on the television in his room as if he were part of a *Zoom* meeting. “Jesus Christ, Henry, how many fucking times are you going to ask people how that makes them feel? Like they’re going to be stupid enough to not at least feign empathy. So,” continued Andrew, trying out his best Henry Louis Gates Jr. impression, “how does it make you feel knowing that your relatives were slave owners?”

“Fantastic,” said Andrew, switching voices. “You know it’s just so hard for people to make it by working their way up from nothing. And to hear that not only were they able to have land of their own, but to be able to afford for others to work for them—that just brings joy to my heart. Work smarter, not harder, that’s what I always say.”

Andrew paused the DVR, the host’s face frozen in a perfect still between a genuine interest he was giving his guest and a look of bewilderment that the freeze-frame captured. “What? What did I say? Why are you looking at me like that? Oh! Oops. I misunderstood. I thought you said my distant relatives were slave owners. You said they were slaves? Oh. How does that make me feel? Why, fantastic! Good thing that wasn’t me! That would have sucked. Better them than us, right?”

Andrew rested quietly on his bed until the frozen picture illuminating the room got the best of him. He moved to the foot of the bed to sit like a hunched athlete during a timeout studying the play the coach was drawing up on the clipboard. Elbows on his knees, he could not
take his eyes off the screen. At speed, the video showed one truth, but frozen in time, it revealed another. He rewound the video again and again, noting with every play how seamless the host’s interest was as it flowed over that singular moment in time when some other truth was being told. Andrew finally stopped the replay and found the split-second that he had before, this time taking it in like those deus ex machina storylines whose sins are only slightly less offensive to him than those bullshit profundities that arrive to right the misunderstandings between generations.

“How do you hide that?” asked Andrew, looking at the host’s face frozen on the screen.

“Slavery? Or my shock at these people’s ignorance?” asked Andrew, trying to improve his impression of the man.

“God. Fuckin’ Ian Malcolm,” said Andrew to himself. “You didn’t earn the knowledge for yourselves so you don’t take any responsibility for it.’ Fucking dinosaurs. Like there’s a difference. It’s all genetics. Dead and buried for someone else to dig up. You’re just handing these people a T-Rex, what the fuck do you expect them to do with it?”

There’s not many who think that Andrew would actually shoot up his school. Even Rafferty’s argument stems more from his own ego being bruised, then anything Andrew is actually capable of, let alone willing to do. However, because those in the minority listed their concerns with bullet points, their heavy-handedness is a little hard to ignore. Normally the physical structure of one’s argument does not weigh on the decision-making process, but when it simply screams at all costs, it’s best that those who are responsible for just verdicts understand what’s being thrown at them and by whom. Once someone impartial identifies the who and the what, the why often comes to light in such a way that the accused is best seen as the injured party and not the one looking to cause harm. This is Andrew to a T. He has no interest in the law, but a
deep respect for the motives of those lawyers who never ask a question that they don’t already know the answer to. He doesn’t deny his own ignorance, but he also doesn’t hide his affinities. And despite the passions that are beginning to get the best of him, the kid never wants to hurt anyone.

“Fuckin’ Ian Malcom,” Andrew repeated to himself. “‘Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, that they didn’t stop to think if they should.’” He grabbed the remote and clicked off the TV, tossing the controller with little care onto the desk in the corner of his room. The back popped off as it bounced off a book and both batteries fell out as it ricocheted off the wall and came to rest.

There are easily a hundred different things that Andrew can be faulted for, but giving people the benefit of the doubt is not quite one of them—emphasis on not quite. To use his own words, Andrew’s got a bit of switch problem here—a two-way one. He’s got his own, but whether he likes it or not, there’s another that is also directly wired to the rest of his family. They work, but aesthetically it’s not exactly pleasing to the eye, as they all have to embrace a counterintuitive system to function. The permutations of up or down eventually leaves one out of place, or puts them both in the same position that is either completely at odds with the given outcome or completely at odds with the desired one.

Although Andrew has no interest in acting like his parents by keeping information from them, he’s got that debilitating thing in his head called logic that does it for him. What sweet joy it would bring to tell him that he’s no better than anyone he decries, but the fucker would come right back with the holdup being about the questions and not the answers, and for that he wouldn’t be wrong—not quite anyway.

Kudos to Rutter for picking up on the family’s tenuous history with truth and
communication without a word of it being spoken—the irony is impressive. What a difference experience makes. For engrained as that history is, the man would damn near have to change the past to break through that barrier though. Pull that off, Rutter would deserve all the glory history had to offer. Only issue is that it would prove Andrew right on both fronts, glory and the problem with handing people living fossils. The kid would have no idea what the hell to do with the latter. Correction, the kid would only have one: get eaten. Faced with the prospect, it’s a hell of a way to go to avoid a conversation—or to start one; although the alternative in the eyes of his friends is not exactly any better. Given the choice, most teenagers would elect not to immolate themselves, though the difference between being devoured as food, or by flame, would appear to be nothing more than semantics.

Good luck at cracking that nut, Rutter. When suicide is a viable alternative, metaphorical as it may be, that’s one hell of a convoluted circuit the family has created in order to bring itself into—and survive in—the 21st century. Don’t think you can rely on Freud with this one. Maybe Marcel Marceau… although whether that positions him as the theorist or the case study—the verdict is still out. How far can you push a mime before he talks? Logic dictates that all waterboarding would do is wash off the makeup, then you’re back in Andrew-territory of white bread and toast and whether a mime without makeup is talking, or if it’s just the man underneath. Without many fears to speak of (take that for what it’s worth) Andrew’s more inclined to piss himself than save face by revealing some truth, and at that point, you may as well just rattle off a half-dozen piss idioms to summarize Andrew, starting with *no pot to piss in*. While you’re at it, summon some alliterative options to shove down his throat like *past is present* or *past is prologue* and see how much he can take before throwing it all up. Good luck trying to convince him of any of that. Kid’s about the only person on this planet whose void is selective—filling it
is about as plausible as trying to bridge it. There’s a thing called stuck, and until Andrew’s done with where he’s at, place and time within the void don’t matter.

Rutter’s got a list of patients a mile long who have a problem with saying no. Frankly, the guy could be forgiven if he let slip one day that the only reason he took on Andrew was to break from monotony. It wouldn’t be true, but if it were, it would be forgivable nonetheless. Andrew’s got a problem with a pesky little contraction that loves to infect his verbs, and whereas Rutter is no epidemiologist, with nothing more than a handshake, the man very quickly traced its origins to the Salinas house and a tiny receptor turned on by a plague of silence.

Andrew’s suspension is evidence enough to suggest that this is all complete bullshit and that the kid can say whatever comes to mind. Though it’s also possible that Dr. Rutter is not above playing fast and loose with hypotheticals to keep Andrew so preoccupied that he has no choice but to cross every boundary the man constructs for him. The kid may not want to cross them, but Rutter’s not about to give Andrew enough space and time so that he can tell him he can’t. His life since birth living in his parents’ house has already proven what that leads to. N’ts got him into this mess and now he can’t ask the questions to get himself out.

“Off to your appointment so soon?” asked Karen as Andrew walked into the kitchen.

“The lasagna is still cooking, but I’ll leave a plate for you in the oven for when you get back.”

“It’s therapy, mom,” said Andrew bluntly. “Please don’t sugarcoat the fact that you guys are sending me to a shrink.”

“Andrew, I don’t know how to respond to that. You made your bed, now you have to lie in it.”

“Did I?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Seriously? Do you seriously think that I created this mess?”

“You’re the one who flew off the handle at school, Andrew. Your father and I raised you better than that.”

“Oh my god! Don’t even!”

“Andrew, if you’re father and I are such awful people, then please tell us, what did we do that was so wrong?”

“Nothing, mom. You did everything you were supposed to do and protected your family at all costs. You and dad are the model for what parenting should look like.”

“Andrew, I completely respect the process for how therapy works, so don’t expect me to violate that by asking what is said between you and Dr. Rutter.”

“Oh, I don’t expect it at all,” said Andrew, all at once contorting his face into every version of irritated he’s ever put on.

“You got something to say, young man, then say it, but don’t go patronizing me by dancing around whatever issues you got going on in your head and expecting me to read your mind and magically fix them for you.”

“I’m going to repeat what I said before, mom. I don’t expect you and dad to do anything. I got friends at school who would kill to have parents like you. So pat yourselves on the back for being better than everyone else.”

“Andrew, if you think this is some twisted way to get your father and I to turn on Dr. Rutter and pull you from therapy, because you think we’ll start believing that he’s going to convince you to blame us for all your problems, you got another thing coming. I know what it’s like to have a mother to blame, and you don’t see me going around undermining my relationships because of it.”
“How could I? She’s not around!”

“You’re welcome! You think that was an easy decision to make?”

“You’re listening to yourself, right? Your very example suggests that if you and dad weren’t perfect, then I should just reject you!”

“Then according to your friends, it’s a good thing we are perfect, I’d hate to lose you.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

Let it never be said that therapy doesn’t help. Granted, those who need it most can’t afford enough of it to ever summit the mountain, but at least they can work their way up for a mildly clearer view.

“You know,” said Andrew, “I take it back. That is the point.”

“There’s a difference.”

Andrew chuckled to himself, shaking his head as he picked up the car keys on the kitchen island. “I gotta go.”
On the morning of Dani’s return to Hector’s parts shop, Tom Sullivan woke from his own dreams—the familiar ones to him that are none too kind to his psyche and whose persistence in his waking hours make the man particularly thirsty for drinks that burn going down. This was nothing new to Hector, Francisco, Sandalio, or anyone else in the shop who were, by degrees, shades darker than Tom. Unfortunately, for a man who has chosen to duck responsibility rather than embrace it, the ill-suited desires of a drunken Tom Sullivan tended to be in stark contrast with the actual ones of the lucid man. However relieved the Salinas men were, all those months ago, when they woke the following morning to discover Lupita and Dani conspicuously missing, the absence of that peaceful looking gaze was equally conspicuous when Dani suddenly appeared at the parts shop like some congenital disease long forgotten. Tom Sullivan didn’t necessarily have to be drunk to make matters worse, the die was cast for nightmare scenarios regardless of whether the man was asleep or simply living out his life. The more pressing matter was how on earth Hector’s and Sandalio’s holyshit-eyes were able to convey any more astonishment when life for everyone in the shop was taken from completed puzzle to shattered pieces in a matter of seconds.

It’s possible that had Tom been any less inebriated, his desire to buck responsibility would have come on so strong that the agents who arrived at Hector’s shop to clear America of anyone who didn’t look American, would have reversed course solely to avoid some incomprehensible lecture by Tom on how they were destroying his American dream. As it happened though, Tom was anything but, and whatever latent desire, or perhaps hatred, Tom had buried within, came flying to the surface and expelled itself with such vitriol that even the government agents, whose job it was to do their job, had to calm Tom down and assure him that
all the racial epithets in his present company—the names that even made the agents blush—were getting bussed to Mexico never to be seen again.

“Get ‘em all outta here!” exclaimed Tom. “Every last one of ‘em! Look at this place. Think I want to see so much—so much—grease walking around here? Got enough on the shelves. How am I supposed to keep this place running when I can’t get one goddamn decent speaking American to come in here and help me out? Gotta come in seven days a week, open to close, just to make sure nothing gets stolen out from under my nose. And for what I pay. To hell with all of you!”

There are any number of moments in life in which the events that take place merit the use of you had to be there in order to emphasize the humor, sentiment, or sheer poignancy that can come from humanity. These moments tend to avoid Tom like the plague, which is rather ironic in that Tom’s unfiltered presence has a tendency to communicate a widespread virulence—indeed an unchecked pestilence. It’s funny how easy it is to unmask a man and spread his disease, while others are left in stunned silence, forced to endure the ramifications of his barefaced antipathy. This was one of those antithetical moments, though, in which Francisco would have expected nothing less from Tom; Hector charged the door to save himself only to be caught; and Sandalio once again saw his father’s true colors.

And then there was Dani. Had the girl ever wanted sympathy, that moment would have come sometime between conception and birth when millions of opportunities other than her could have occurred. She would have pleaded not to be pushed forward and asked for some other inevitable to take her place. Since that never happened, almost two decades later and three sheets to the wind, Tom calculated it was finally Dani’s time to be spoken for and flawlessly sum up the indignity of the moment for the girl and everyone else in the shop.
“Except for that one,” Tom said, pointing to Dani with the single-handed trifecta of finger, bottle, and cigarette in her direction. “She can stay.”

Now whether Dani could stay because it was true, or because Tom said so, mattered about as much to the men in uniform as the uterus of the girl’s mother did to the thrust and onslaught her father sent its way all those years ago. Constitutional capability aside, Dani’s silence, much like her son’s, spoke far louder and more volumes than any of the men surrounding her in that moment. Perhaps no record is a record just the same, and with no history to speak of, her confidence in the truth and honesty coming from her mouth meaning anything to anyone, other than herself, was as meaningful itself as the probability that she should have ever existed to experience this moment to begin with. So what difference did it make who she was, she had been moved about and spread at will like a vector. This was just one more transmission in her history. Another trace of her to be erased. One, that this time, would leave a piece of her behind.

She went without complaint or tears, slipping free, ever so briefly, to break her silence into the ear of Tom, before being torn away and corralled with the rest outside. Tom finished the cigarette, and in time the bottle, and when he woke the next morning, on that familiar spot of his in the middle of the parts shop, he finally had everything he wanted, by having nothing—and no one—at all.
Session: The Other Side

“Andrew, what about your mom?”

“What about her?”

“We haven’t really discussed her much.”

“What’s to discuss?”

“For starters it sounded like the issue in English class would not have come to a head if it weren’t for your mother’s side of the family. Is the death of your father’s mom allowing you to give your mother a pass?”

“You ask me so many ass-backwards questions. If anyone is getting a pass, it’s my dad—not that he deserves it.”

“And yet it was the tragedies on your mother’s side of the family that got aired out in English.”

“Yeah, so how can you say I am giving her a pass?”

“Not with me. With her.”

“She kept my father, my sister, and me away from alcoholics, racists, and alcoholic racists. What the hell else was she supposed to do?”

“Intervene with some motherly explanation as to why.”

“Hahaha! Hahaha! Hahaha! Haaaa!”

“Why is that so funny?”

“Clearly you do not know my family.”

“What’s to know?”

“Haven’t we already been down this road before?”

“We have. But, Andrew, barren as it may seem, at some point you need to pick up the
rocks and see what’s underneath, ask about the markings on the cliff walls, and more importantly, discover who was there before you, and why the road is there to begin with. There is no slowly walking you to this epiphany. Facts are facts and at some point you need to walk this road yourself.”

“I’m working on it.”

“How’s it going?”

“I said I’m working on it.”

“What’s step one?”

“Intervene.”

“Alright, that’s enough. What happened?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not doing this whole call the other’s bluff bullshit with you, Andrew. What happened?”

“She actually talked.”

“And?”

“I didn’t make it much past step one. There, ya happy?”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Do you ever?”

“Not really.”

“So why would your lack of progress make me happy, Andrew?”

“You’re wanting me to get to the bottom of this, information is progress, right?”

“__”
“What?”
“—”
“What!?”
“What are you doing, Andrew?”
“Nothing.”
“Well, that’s an understatement, but more to the point, what are you doing?”
“What are you getting on me about!? Nothing fucking happened. I got pissy with my mom before I came here and nothing that I didn’t already know came out. So other than be a dick to my mom, what the fuck did I do that was so wrong!?”

“Nothing. You did absolutely nothing. You didn’t do the hard work. You didn’t ask the questions you’re afraid to ask. And the biggest sin of all is that you stood there waiting for answers to get revealed to you, when you and I both know that that infuriates you more than anything else when others expect answers to just fall into their laps. Which is what irks you most about your family in that they’re incapable of dropping any information even if it’s right there for the world to see. So don’t go sitting here and telling me that information is progress, when it’s something that you already know. More importantly, it’s information that you already know, but has never been spoken.

“I have a patient, Andrew, and she is on the verge of a divorce after ten years of a happy marriage because her husband asked her how much she weighed. Not because he wasn’t attracted to her—he married her when she was over three-hundred pounds—but because two years ago she finally decided she wanted to do something about it. His question was merely out of support and wanting to celebrate the success that she has made so far. Her response to him? ‘I’ll never share that information with you.’
“Now, I’ve been working with this woman for over five-years to help her be comfortable with her body image regardless of what she weighed. But her husband’s question out of the blue broke her. It brought back a history of histories that have plagued her since childhood. I am back to square one with her. That marriage is as good as dead, because asking that question, was like introducing a virus into an already compromised system. And here’s the issue with it. For fourteen years they have known each other. Dated for two, happily married for ten, separated for the past two.

“Here’s what she cannot get past—the truth. She actually doesn’t have a fear of looking in the mirror. Petrified of a scale, but not a mirror. She doesn’t like what she sees in the mirror, but she can look in it. She wears dresses, skirts, shorts, bathing suits, jeans, goes into saunas with nothing but a towel, has stripped down massages, gets waxed, posts to Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and prior to the question that her husband asked, had one of the healthiest sex lives of any of my patients. Her weight was in plain sight of her, her husband, and anyone who has ever seen her. The only difference was that it was not spoken. Her weight, that is to say, the number, is a truth—it is seen; it is felt; when she was her heaviest, it was even heard in her labored breathing—it is fact. But despite that, it was also invisible. It was constantly in two states—a state of truth that was seen and a reality, and the second, a state of nonexistence because it was never spoken and acknowledged. And it’s that latter point that she may never come to terms with to bring harmony between the two states and who she is.

“You’ve mentioned that therapy is a vicious cycle, and that doctors like me move our patients from one problem to the next then the next just to keep the money flowing. Couldn’t be farther from the truth, Andrew. It’s situations like hers… situations like yours… that the cycle continues, not because truths don’t exist, but because we create boundaries with ourselves,
others, places, the truth itself, and the list goes on, and the cycle goes on, because we are
convinced that these boundaries are created as a reason to protect ourselves—or at times, others.”

“__”

“__”

“__”

“The truth has existed long before your grandmother died, Andrew. So, I’m going to ask
my question a little bit differently. Why— *Why* are you giving your mother and father a pass?
His Story

“Don’t worry. We’ll get this sorted out,” said Francisco, unsuccessfully pulling Dani’s attention from the window of the bus and the desert landscape passing by. Very little kept Dani from obsessing over how, once again, the actions of others had undermined her own desires. The only thing that was keeping her sanity on a bus full of immigrants being shipped back to Mexico was that she wasn’t having to do it in a seat next to Hector or Sandalio. Both father and son were, thankfully, many rows behind her.

“I fought for this country and you shouldn’t even be here,” continued Francisco. “Trust me, this is just an authority problem. Not a single one of these guys have a say in what they’re doing.”

“I’m sorry. Do I know you?” asked Dani turning, shut the fuck up written all over her face.

Francisco chortled, “God, no wonder Tom could not shut up about you. What the hell were you thinking coming back anyway? You were free of them.”

“They were free of me.”

“And this was worth it—to spite them?” added Francisco, looking around the bus at all the worried faces.

“If the men who put us on this bus don’t have a say on what they do, then no one on this bus does. And we’re driving to god knows where without anyone in control.”

“You are one broken girl,” said Francisco slowly. “Try being a prisoner of war and then come talk to me about having no control.”

Dani cocked her head and tightened her lips. As the realization came to light for her, she nodded knowingly. “Oh, you’re Francisco, aren’t you?”
“The goat fucker, nice to meet you.”

“Why?”

“You said it yourself, Dani, I have no control. Why else?”

“Self-respect.”

“You do know—”

“Stop,” interrupted Dani. “There is not a single thing that Sandalio has told me that I believe to be true. I will never believe anything he says.”

“Then why did you come back? Don’t tell me you expected Hector to correct the record.”

“No.”

“You’re not going to tell me self-respect are you?”

“As if I couldn’t have it?” accused Dani.

Francisco contorted his face in disagreement and shook his head in further defense.

“Other than Lupita, you’re the only one in this family who has self-respect.”

“This isn’t a family.”

“Whatsoever you want to call it, it’s yours now.”

“No. I’ve got more self-respect than you.”

“Being called a goat fucker doesn’t make you one. Denying it doesn’t change the belief of others. And saying this isn’t your family doesn’t make it true either.”

“I didn’t say they weren’t my family. I said this isn’t one.”

“That’s convenient.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That which isn’t, cannot be. Too bad it fails to recognize what the truth is, which also happens to be the reason why my self-respect is in no way impacted by what this family says or
thinks of me.”

“Nah, just what they do,” said Dani, pointing out Francisco’s gnarled left ear.

Francisco smiled. “Ah, so there is at least one story you believe.”

“Dali didn’t need to tell me. I can see it.”

“You’re telling me that this ear,” said Francisco, rubbing the mangled cartilage, “tells the story of a man named Hector Salinas who became so infuriated by a man named Francisco Guerrero that he tried to knock him out with a single punch. Without lips or a tongue, this ear is telling you that story. Is that what you’re saying, because if you are, you’re no better than Hector or Dali.”

“That’s not what happened?”

“It’s exactly what happened. But you tell me, what makes the story true?”

Here’s the problem with Andrew’s mother-fucker Rutter. The guy’s actually a good teacher. Pedagogically, the man’s got a better understanding of how to be a facilitator of learning than damn near anyone. He can pull off a constructivist approach with even the most concrete of thinkers. But, it still doesn’t mean he’s not flawed. A great actor, athlete, scientist, or humanitarian can still be a little rapey. Since humans struggle with the fact that two things, at once, can still be true, there are those who would prefer a cure for rape before a cure for cancer in order to eliminate the potential of an unacceptable savior. Push these people on the issue and it will surface—the percentage who has issues with the rapist and the others who have issues with the rape. Just like cancer, neither are acceptable, but only one will always be mutually exclusive from the cure.

Some things don’t translate, some things don’t scale, and some things you just can’t teach. Rutter’s approach to education hits all three and is why he will never be teacher of the
year. It’s not because of what he does, it’s because of what he doesn’t, and data is only as sexy as
the package it’s presented in—and no one wants the challenge of presenting the intangibles.
Rutter strips off the paper and bows and all the colors and shiny objects before anyone knows to
look for them, absolving himself of any responsibility by putting it all on his students. It was
only a matter of time before it came to a head. Failing to indoctrinate doesn’t mean it doesn’t
happen. The English teacher, of all people, ought to be aware of how double-negatives work.
When the students ran out of characters, humanity, and then themselves to analyze, where the
hell else did he think they were going to turn? The guy’s been tempting fate for decades, but it
doesn’t mean he’s not a great teacher—and pyromaniac. Unfortunately for him, his confidence
with fire only grew, because the wind always blew away from him. This time it blew towards
him, and he foolishly stayed put, convinced it was nothing more than what it had always been.

Had Andrew a teacher like Francisco, junior year may have been a little more formative
by paradoxically being even more abstract. Rutter believes that when the blind synthesize, their
product must inherently be pure. Fuckin’ guy never accounted for the fact that a student could
show up knowing he’s been blinded. For better or worse, Francisco thought that everyone was.

“So why did you come back?” asked Francisco.
“I wanted my son to know.”
“You…uh…forgot the son part. You were pregnant, right?”
“I left Diego with Lupita.”
“Hmm.”
“What?” asked Dani, her breathy question filled with exasperation.

As if a bus filled with people, whose lives were pulled out right from underneath them by
a group of armed men, needed any more palpability in the air, Dani’s demand for an answer did

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little to alleviate the problem. Refusing to speak to prove his point, and further draw the girl’s attention away from the more serious issue at hand, Francisco responded by flipping about his ear with his index finger.

“He’s a baby,” said Dani. “And besides, look what would have happened had I brought him with me.”

“So experience doesn’t matter, except when it does. And I’ll just tell him the story, even though I don’t expect him to believe it when others tell it.”

“I’m beginning to understand why Hector punched you,” said Dani, turning back towards the window and the land speeding by, growing redder as the sun began to set. It wasn’t until the lights were on and the world outside was black that Francisco found himself comfortable enough to ask the girl the question that had been eating him all day.

“They’ve had me next to you since before we got on this bus. I stopped counting the hours by your side when I realized they weren’t going to let you free—something I think you came to terms with the moment they barged through the doors. But in this entire time that I’ve been next to you, never once have I seen you shed a tear.”

“What do you want me to do?” said Dani, her faint reflection barely visible in the blackened window. “Perform for you?” she continued quietly. “Tell you lies by showing them? You want me to make up a story about Diego? Drip by drip from my eyes as I cry so you know it’s real? And then tell you why I am crying so you know it’s true?”

“No,” said Francisco gently. The girl’s stoicism, hidden as it was in the night, became unmasked as she couldn’t help but wipe her eyes.

“Are you more like Tom or more like Hector?” asked Dani, turning back, her long breathy exhalation struggling to stop her tears.
“Jesus, they’re both awful people. Why are—”

“Good,” interrupted Dani, throwing her arms around Francisco and burying her face in his shoulder. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to be between no place and nowhere at all? To want more than anything to be just as scared as everyone else on this bus, for no other reason than to know that wherever I was going was not home, and not just someplace else.”

“I’m sorry.”

“When I first met Lupita, she tried to make me laugh. Made a joke about the benefits of being an orphan,” Dani hiccuped, the brief gasp recalling a moment of levity. “She said I was lucky. That no one else gets to pick they’re family. That it’s forced upon them at birth. That unlike everyone else, I had all the options in the world.”

“Dani—”

“She lied.”

“Dani—”

“It can be forced upon you beforehand.”

Francisco sighed, adjusting his embrace to mirror the girl as she squeezed him tighter.

“You keep your truth, Dani. It’s not mine to know.”

“Tell me,” said Dani, releasing herself from Francisco, “how do I give my son what I never had when every being of my body wants me not to tell him anything?”

“You know the answer I am going to give you,” said Francisco, trying to read the girl’s eyes in the dark. His hand, this time out of habit only, reaching to rub his ear as if it had signaled to him that it was time to recognize for himself what everyone else could see.

“I don’t have the scar you do,” said Dani, reading Francisco’s gesture.

“No,” said Francisco in agreement, “yours can tell its own story. Will be able to, I should
say.”

“No better than your ear can. Not without me.”

“Wanting not to tell is different than not wanting to tell,” said Francisco, careful to ensure his mind and mouth were on the same page. “Don’t confuse a desire for nothing with no desire for something.”

“I would never want this life again, but I also wouldn’t trade it just to know my parents or the truth that my father did the same thing to my mother. What am I supposed to tell my son?”

“That’s a question only you can answer.”

“And if I tell him nothing?”

“Two things can be true without both being known. They can be true without either being known.”

“And the story I tell him?”

“Will be his.”
Here Lies... March 18th: 12:55 p.m.

I don’t know who my father was giving a giant middle finger to while at the restaurant, but he sure as hell was using Spanish to do it. In truth, it’s a little hard not to take offense when the man never spoke a lick of it to his son or daughter, but threw it around to dozens of people with drinks in their hands like it was his native language, and then had the audacity to wink at me as if I was supposed to be impressed with the fact that he’s still got it.

Fuck you!

And don’t get me started on the restaurant—actually, let me start with the restaurant. Don’t get me wrong, the food was amazing, I would go back in a heartbeat, but talk about finding your roots—who the fuck did he think he was kidding? At best, the man’s palette is barely familiar with the menus of any one of a half-dozen xxxbera’s he drives through on the weekends when he’s too lazy to make himself something to eat while my mom is out grocery shopping for the food she’s going to end up cooking him the rest of the week.

The fuck you’s implied.

Again, with all due respect, kudos to the chef, because the place was amazing, but what the fuck, dad? People, myself included, were closing their eyes and letting their fingers drop at random onto the menu and hoping for the best. There were relatives from so deep into Mexico it took them and their car troubles a week to get up here, and even they were scratching their heads at the menu and shooting looks across the tables at each other with expressions that simply screamed, ‘the fuck!? ’ when my dad started rambling on about how the menu was exactly like how his mother used to cook—and what he’s passing onto his children now. Even my mom was torn between the double-take she couldn’t hide with my father and the look of death she gave my sister and me—that if we ruined his moment by calling bullshit, she would kill us both when we
got home. But the more my dad talked about shit he knew nothing about and things that never happened between him and his kids—and I am damn sure his mother too—the more everyone flipped their menus over to the back side and started reading about the history of the restaurant and the chef, and how the inspiration for his dishes came about after he stumbled across an article on the diet of 15th century Aztecs. Maybe I do have a deeper connection with my relatives than I think, ‘cause… yeah… the fuck!? The man eats Frosted Flakes for breakfast.

It’s not like I didn’t already see at the wake what I saw at the restaurant—and I get it, I’m not stupid, there are first world problems that are asinine to bitch about, and then there are asinine problems that only a first world person would think to bitch about. But a problem is a problem, whether you asked for it or not, made it up or not, or are just bat-shit crazy. Call it what you want, but the one thing that is fact is that I didn’t fuckin’ ask for this. So either I am bat-shit crazy, or there are dimensions that exist within families that only theoretical physicists, with their alternate universes and hidden realities, understand.

There was much too much talking going on anyway to hear anything distinct, let alone understand the shuffled decks of Spanish and English that were going on around the private dining room. But I do have eyes, and to watch my father navigate complete fucking strangers with the ease of a brother to every last mother-fucking one of them, when the man walks around the goddamn island in our kitchen, so he doesn’t have to say ‘excuse me’ to me to get by, is fucking maddening. I mean I understand there is such a thing as familiarity, not to mention over-familiarity, but if he’s going to make that argument, he’s got another thing coming. At least I have the decency to admit that the majority of what I know about the man is superficial and calculated my distance accordingly. He floated between these people like some handsy sophomore with a magic touch for kinship, and with or without a dead mother, let his affections
flow with such vigor that my sister and I should have been jealous if we didn’t, paradoxically, already know the man.

*Of course he would do that* should not be the answer to the actions of your father, as if *Don’t you dare* was given up on long ago, and *How could you?* was not worth the effort. I have never seen my family’s coat of arms, but I’ll recognize it immediately by the one-word motto: *Resignation.*

It’s possible that if a person only saw my father for the one time while he was at work, or at the hardware store talking to the guy behind the counter, that he’d be mistaken for someone who grew up wearing a straightjacket—or that the nuns who taught him were way too quick with their rulers on the students if they moved anything other than their mouths when called upon to answer their questions. Most people are pleasantly surprised when some delightful revelation occurs with someone they thought they knew everything about. There’s a kind of symbiotic joy that takes place—and why wouldn’t it? Such a revelation and happiness takes two people and a shared experience, otherwise they’re forced to rely on imagination, trust, and a kind of empathy that most individuals do not know how to summon. Even if they could, their efforts are too busy being thwarted by the disbelief tearing apart their trust and imagination over the fact that something so out of character up to that point could have been kept secret for so long.

So to the point, my dad never moved his hands when he talked. He wasn’t a corpse, but I suppose a body that was still twitching after being hit by a bus does have movements analogous to my dad’s when he’s talking to others—random and spastic and doing nothing to help alleviate the disconnect between the words coming out of his mouth and the minds of those listening, trying hard to hide the *I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about* written all over their faces.
That, of course, was up until lunch. Then Mr. Winks-a-lot, the twitching corpse who apparently must have summoned himself back to life, showed up.

I have a lot to say about Grandma Katherine and at the same time nothing at all. I understand my mother’s motives, but in the same breath am willing to acknowledge my own hypocrisy just to call her out on not doing the hard thing. I’ve long since given up on expecting anyone to change. Like I said, that coat of arms will be unmistakable. But I’m also willing to argue that the hard thing, binary as the choice may be to do it, is not, itself, in isolation. My mother failed at changing her mother, by choosing not to or by lack of effort. She rubbed her mother’s nose in it by marrying my father and having no one on her side there to witness the ceremony. She expected that to be the lesson for her. That you be part of this family my way, or you don’t be part of it at all. Let her show up once or twice to see if she actually learned her lesson, and when my grandmother proved otherwise, my mom showed her mother what happens if she calls her bluff. And in doing so, my mom took the easy way out and no longer had to tell her side of the story. Erased it all like it didn’t matter, because it did. Took the clusterfuck reasoning of these two things being true—her actions and the actual truth—and made her decision on the basis that it was the only way to protect her family, as if my sister and I were incapable of doing the same. As if we couldn’t know the truth, but act, alongside our mother, in defense against this woman and her story my mother refused to tell.

Maybe it wasn’t the nuns. Maybe it wasn’t a straightjacket, or at least not an actual one forced upon him in the room of some asylum. Maybe, like my mother, my father learned to act, and quickly, because of his mother-in-law. And maybe, with the death of his own mother, he had one less person to protect from a story that would never see the light of day.

I’ve never seen a Broadway play, but have always wanted to add the stage alongside my
affinity for TV and film. Rutter’s welcome to analyze that for what it’s worth, but I’m not about to listen to anyone else’s pop-psych bullshit on me and my regard for acting. What I will say is that I have found time over the years to stream some Broadway soundtracks, and would be lying if I didn’t say that Avenue Q made me laugh out loud hysterically and shit my pants too. I absolutely hate the word ‘triggered’, but I don’t fear it either. There’s got to be a better word given my suspension, but for now, it’s all I got.

I’m not denying that my mother’s story all but epitomizes every racist cliché there is, but then how else would they come to be if there weren’t assholes like Grandma Katherine working hard to fully realize these stereotypes? This is why it does me no good to not be unabashed about my own realization. Fight fire with fire, I suppose. If I’m not seen laughing while listening to Avenue Q’s “Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist”, it’s because I’m sitting there caught up in a spiral of descent, spinning into more worlds than I can keep track of at once, as the song continuously fucks with my mind. I could probably sit down and figure it all out piece by piece, world by world. Sort through each reality and all my grievances, and bring proof of their existence by committing them to a page in a notebook and not just an intangible one in history. For seventeen years my father presented himself to me as simply an American man. Nothing less, nothing more. He never told some American dream. And whether he has been living one himself or not, sitting there in that restaurant and watching him, there was no denying that he not only knew, but that he deeply understood, the stories of everyone else in that room who were living their own, had it taken from them, could never achieve it, or wanted nothing to do with it and why.

I don’t know why his knowledge made me hate him, but it did. For almost three hours that resurrected corpse flailed his arms around the dining room like some Spanish speaking poet. He knew everyone, whether they knew him or not. Where any of it came from, I have no idea. It
was like he had his own Cyrano in his ear, feeding him language and stories that were impossible
to watch. He was another man entirely. Now, he wasn’t even my father. This wasn’t a double
life, pretending like some CIA agent at the behest of the government. He was a thief, having
stolen everyone’s stories for himself. Three hours gave me more than enough time to
contemplate the mysteries of the universe—and now more convinced than ever of the
multiverses those physicists speak of. If Robin Hood exists in one to steal from the rich and give
to the poor, my father exists in mine, to steal from me that wealth from my family and keep it for
himself. I have always found my father selfish, and by the time the bill came and he paid for
everyone’s meal, I had conclusive proof that he was.
Torn

Dani dodged responsibility, not because she was like Tom Sullivan, but because she had the opportunity stripped from her by the very men who entered her life and thrusted responsibility onto her. Unfortunate for her, since these incongruous acts and antinomies mattered little, if it all, to these men who would never, or hoped to never, hear from or see of her again.

How Tom managed to have responsibility thrust upon him as well, was a mystery of mysteries when he woke the following morning with a hangover, the likes of which he had never had in his entire life. Laying there in the middle of the parts shop, questioning whether that much vomit by his side could possibly be his own alone, the singular relief that came to his throbbing mind was that if this was not a dream, that history had proven that he was more than capable of grabbing something off one of the shelves and smashing it against his head in order to put himself out of his misery.

By the time he was able to get himself upright and moving around, only two things remained pounding in his head—the startling realization that the shop was his until someone put two and two together and did something about it, and as of yet, a second thing that seemed even more important, but that the splitting headache was keeping him from recalling. Fortune never struck Tom, despite the current events, and to claim that God intervened is to test just how violently Tom would reject such a belief—and the strength of the chin of the person with the audacity to make such a statement on his behalf. Fortunately, as has been mentioned, Tom Sullivan is not the most learned of individuals, formal education escaped him, and as such, one can get away with suggesting that providence (proper, or as stated) intervened without fear of reprisal from the man. It matters little here, other than the fact that something beyond Tom’s
neural network was working to have that most important second thing come to mind—and as quickly as possible. It took a steady stream of urine into the dirt outside and a prolonged dunk of his head into a galvanized tub of water to wash off the vomit and its smell, before something intervened and had Tom sprinting to his truck and barreling down the road with zero concern for the fact that all his faculties had yet to return in full.

For the remaining hours until the swerves in his driving straightened out, Tom kept his foot firmly placed on the gas pedal, and his mouth repeating over and over the location and direction Dani had whispered into his ear.

Call it luck. Call it providence. Call it Tom keeping his word to a girl he never had the opportunity to respond to. Whatever it was, it had Tom scaring the life and soul out of Lupita when he burst through the door of her tiny home and grabbed Diego before the grandmother could even finish her scream.

“Dani,” he said, catching sight of Lupita in the corner of the room, a knowing look of resignation slowly working to calm her nerves. The grandmother nodded knowingly, that whoever this stranger was knew more than she and that his knowledge of the girl’s name alone and the child hiding within, was enough to trust this man with Diego’s life.

They wouldn’t come for Lupita for days. Didn’t find her sitting alone simply waiting for the inevitable. Didn’t attempt to undermine some sanctuary place. They found Lupita and others, of all places, on a bus, and moved her from it to another, never to return to her home again.

What’s to say about a man who didn’t put stock in education? There is a lot to say, if not for the fact that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. From the moment Tom Sullivan returned with Diego Salinas, the boy would find himself—exposed in every way to every bit of knowledge that Tom could muster. He didn’t know when Hector and Sandalio would return, or
even if, but he was determined to plant that seed his own parents failed to do, so that if or when the time came, all it took was some kind of illumination to trigger its germination.

Perhaps if Tom had known Hector’s past, he wouldn’t have tried so hard. In truth, had Tom known any of it, he probably would have been better off kicking up his feet and letting nature take its course. But he went with what he knew, and that was nothing. Oh, there were signs left and right that would have given him all sorts of clues that such genetic propensities for mind over matter, and working smarter not harder, ran through the veins of Hector and his son, but far be it from Tom to have set aside his prejudices and see such truths, thereby alleviating himself of the only responsibility he ever demanded he take on.

The red tape and obstacles of a nation are one thing. The closed doors and sealed or non-existent records of a church are another. Marry those two at a time when a government doesn’t want anyone crossing its borders under the guise of protecting its own people, and an institution disavowing you for a wholly different, though not dissimilar, reason, and you’ll find yourself clinging to a man named Francisco in Mexico for more years than either of you anticipated.

Three things happened in the first three years of Diego’s life. Sandalio finally learned Spanish from his father. Dani learned it from Francisco. And Diego, too young to understand the motivation of others, began learning how to learn, despite Tom Sullivan’s shortcomings as his teacher. Tom made it clear to the boy at every turn that he was not his father. He refused to have the child think it or even feel it. In fact, he never even taught him the word. Tom was Tom, and Diego was the child of Sandalio and his mother, Dani.

“Dani is my mother,” said Diego one morning.

“Yes,” said Tom, dressing the boy.

“Sandalio is my mother.”
“No,” said Tom, deliberately avoiding the correction.

“No,” said Tom, again. “Remember what I said. Your mother is Dani. You are her child and the child of Sandalio.”

It is at this point impossible to ignore the fact that Tom’s cure for whatever disease he thought the Salinas name carried, was far worse than the supposed affliction itself. Fortunately, Diego, at the age of three, was already immune to such additional contagions and was far more adept at parsing the English language than Tom and his decades more exposure to it than the child. Be that as it may—in that Diego was quick to learn the proper names of the men in his life despite their complete absence—it was Dani and Lupita with their respective mother and grandmother designations that brought a curious smile to the child’s face whenever he stopped to think about it.

Some vague recollection of these women did something to Diego. A feeling would wash over him and a distant comfort would touch the boy, injecting him with an ease matched only by his disposition. Of all the possible children in the world for Tom to have been left with, the statistical absurdity that a boy like Diego would be left in his care make jackpot lotteries and lightning strikes on a single individual seem like daily affairs. Karma is supposed to be a bitch and yet somehow Tom Sullivan, a man guilty of deliberately executing friendly fire, was in essence handed a gift of the best that the world had to offer. Any other child would have screamed bloody murder in those first two years that Tom was left alone to figure out parenthood himself. In spite of the people he hired to keep the parts shop running, who took an equal interest in the nurturing of Diego, every night the village went home and the boy was left at the mercy of Tom’s incompetencies. Yet every bump, bruise, drop, slip of the mind, or slip of the child,
provided Tom with further evidence of just how wrong he’d been.

This is obviously exciting news for those stupid enough to believe in the inherent goodness of man and his ability to change for the better. Unfortunately, it fails to take into consideration that this is Tom we’re talking about and a man who is haunted by more than just dreams. Killing him with kindness is not so much an idiom and a tenet for all to live by, as it is a kind of playbook or recipe to literally accomplish that very thing. Before anyone imagines Tom in those first two years as the pillar of strength for Diego, it’s best just to pull the rug out from underneath everyone immediately, and document for the record that night after night, when a bedtime story should have been told to the boy, Tom was holding Diego above his head, squeezing the child’s ribs far too tight and screaming at the silent infant to stop accepting him for who he was. But as was the case with Diego, the only thing he was accepting was that this was his life, and nothing Tom did to change the boy was going to change the circumstances. The terrible twos were best left to describe those first years with Tom, and not the child himself.

When Diego turned three and his affinity for the word ‘why’ kicked in, Tom found himself quickly running out of answers and began talking about Hector in much the same way as Hector spoke about Francisco. For better or worse, it was just easier. And easier still…for whatever reason, Diego was more interested in the elder Salinas, saving Tom from having to have euphemistic conversations about the boy’s father.

Not that ‘grandfather’, ‘grandpa’, ‘pop-pop’, or ‘gramps’ had easier workarounds—and Tom was way out of his league to try muddying the waters with something like ‘abuelo’. But Hector—Hector the name and Hector the man—he was atmospheric. Like a mystery of conditions, Tom could speak of him in moods, having him be around, but never physically having to place the man.
“Where did he go?” asked Diego, eating a piece of bread with jam on it. The mornings before Tom headed into work with the boy were Diego’s most inquisitive times. No matter how much Tom attempted to run around frantically, grabbing one thing or another, the kid insisted and Tom couldn’t resist.

“He went home with Sandalio.”

“Why?”

“Because he had to.”

“Why?”

“This wasn’t his home.”

“Hector lived here?”

“Not here-here” said Tom, pointing to everywhere and nowhere at the same time, as he failed miserably at explaining positioning to the child, while failing just as miserably at making himself coffee, spilling grounds and dishes all over the floor. “Hector and Sandalio lived all over the place.”

“Like camping?”

“No…well…sometimes, not by choice,” said Tom, getting onto his hands and knees to clean the floor. “Hector’s choices sometimes made other people make choices for him. When Hector chose to do one thing, sometimes other people would choose to do another thing to undo the thing that Hector chose to do.”

This is when any other child would blurt out ‘What!??’ with a priceless stink-eye slapped onto their face. Tom, however, had a kind of premeditated instinct that both sabotaged and salvaged, ultimately resulting in a draw in which both parties walked away expressionless, and sometimes a little dirty. Countless mornings were leading up to this one, where jam met bread,
and day by day the slapdash breakfasts became heavier and heavier with fruit. Hector’s response should have had Diego inquiring with all sorts of judgments coming from his mouth and face, but instead an inordinate amount of jam slid off the bread and into Diego’s palm like a ball of the very thing it was.

As sloppy messes go, Tom’s explanation and Diego’s jam problem were just about equal. So when Diego got up and managed to get the entire mess back into the jar without making it worse, any cause for celebration was immediately snuffed out when Diego screwed the lid back on the jar and stared intently at what he captured inside.

“You haven’t said anything. Does that make sense?” asked Tom, working his way up off the floor.

Diego flipped the jar over, watching the ball of jam flop onto the underside of the lid. He restored the jar to its upright position and the glob returned to the rest of the jam. Diego licked his palm clean as he watched the captured mess slowly disappear back into the preserve.

“You understand?” Tom asked, gently putting his hand on Diego’s back.

“Yeah,” said Diego, “I understand.”

And so did Dani.

When they arrived in Mexico, Francisco and Dani had gone one way, Hector and Sandalio another. The girl had a life with Francisco, empty as it was without her son. She had her purpose—to get back to him. But the impulses that had fired within her in all those months prior to her being expelled from the only place she knew—those compulsions for escape, and answers, and sanity, and unknown futures faded the deeper she sank into the current reality around her. By the time Dani was speaking Spanish fluently, she was crying herself to sleep at night and waking the following morning to live her life—clear of mind, but with battered soul.
Francisco did his best to give the girl the one thing she never had and share with her every family, friend, and acquaintance he could so that they could adopt her as their own. By her eighteenth birthday, Dani didn’t have names of people who loved her, she had crowds. When Francisco and Dani left the park, as it was the only place that could fit that many people—for one singular girl—they returned to his father’s house, helping the old man back inside and to bed for some much-needed rest after the long day.

“So who was the guy?” asked Francisco, a smirk on his face.

“Shut up,” said Dani, blushing.

“Okay,” said Francisco, beaming and teasing at the same time.

The two sat down on the couch in the family room, exhausted, but very much alive.

“Did you invite him?” Francisco continued. “Have you known him a long time? First time meeting? Friend of one of my cousins?”

“Oh my God, stop,” laughed Dani, but entirely smitten.

“Oh. Okay. None of my business,” said Francisco, a smirk still on his face as he reached for one of the photo albums stacked on the coffee table. He quickly began flipping through it, then another, and another.

“What are you doing?” asked Dani, her long protracted question revealing she already knew. “He’s not going to be in there.”

“Look around. In all the times we’ve been here, have you never noticed?”

Dani turned her attention from Francisco and looked around the room. No, she hadn’t. The house always just seemed to be like a poorly funded library, every room stacked with books with no shelves to put them on, and trunks of God knows what. But as she looked closer, they weren’t books. Albums after albums of photos filled the room and went down the hallway. The
old man’s bedroom now flashed in her mind. Those weren’t trunks, they were tightly stacked, leather-bound albums, sitting there like expensive furniture too heavy to move.

“When my mom died, it was a call to everyone for my dad to get him through. You take a picture, you damn well better take a second. Since the day we buried her, every picture in this house has its twin in someone else’s.”

“Wow,” whispered Dani softly, her head gently shaking off some kind of disbelief as she double-backed over what she had already seen. “What does he do with all of them?”

“This,” Francisco said matter of factly, a quick point of the chin acknowledging his father’s immense archive.

“Every picture?”

“All the way down to people he’s only met once. And others he’s never met before—but an aunt, a cousin, a house, a car, toy, landscape, picture of a picture…something, some connection…if it’s somewhere else, it’s also here.”

“God,” said Dani in amazement, “no wonder he recognizes everyone.”

“And knows their story too,” said Francisco, closing the photo album and returning it to the stack on the table.

“The guy at my party is not going to be in here though.”

“Okay,” repeated Francisco, the word now meaning something entirely new to Dani.

“How long do I have?” she asked, a little embarrassed.

“Dani, I’m not going to come here looking for someone you don’t want me to.”

She stood up and walked around the room silently. From wall to wall all she could see were stories upon stories hidden inside the covers of the albums, and then Lupita’s home came to mind, with her one of Hector and Sandalio hanging on the wall for her, alone. And she wondered
if that was true, or if somewhere else, in this house, or another, the story in that picture was
living out. She turned to Francisco, choking back tears as she did and said, “I want you to.”

“Okay.”

Self-fulfilling prophecies are one thing, sixth senses are another. Saying that something is
going to happen and then gloat when it does, is a third. All three are complete bullshit, which is
why watching Dani’s life play out, tragic as it may be at times, is refreshing. Coincidences aside,
there are simply just things that happened to her that are not fate, destiny, or even I told you sos.
They just are. The OMGs associated in this girl’s life are not from the what’s, but from the how’s.

Which is why after three years in Mexico, separated the moment they got off the bus, it is
necessary to look at Dani at present and rhetorically ask, How? How is it possible that two men,
who wanted nothing to do with her or her child, could show up in much the same way as she and
Lupita did all those years ago and have every need for her now?

It was Hector who first greeted Francisco in Spanish, then Sandalio, who apparently
forgot his part (as evidenced by the fact that it took an elbow to his ribs by Hector to get him to
talk), added to the greeting in Spanish himself. It was a ridiculous power play, but it was one
nonetheless. Actually, it was a ridiculously stupid power play, especially since Sandalio’s grasp
of the language had Francisco and Dani looking at each other wondering if Dali had the world’s
worst accent, or if this encounter was scripted, and he was just the world’s worst actor. There
wasn’t much time in the moment to figure out what Hector and Sandalio thought they were going
to accomplish in the conversation by trying to trip up Francisco with Spanish and distance Dani
entirely with it. Their scheme was going according to plan for all of about two seconds,
unfortunately for them, Dani and Francisco’s bond checked all the boxes: same page, same
wavelength, same sensibilities, the list goes on. A wink and a nod and both Dani and Francisco
returned the greetings and more, with a fluency that made it seem as if Spanish were their native and only language.

It would be funny to comment on the oops-faces, but whether anyone truly understands Hector’s motives or not—in English or Spanish—a person would have to be a fool to hear him and not recognize that he’s nothing but a blow-hard with a self-serving, not to mention aggrandizing, agenda. The analogy is chess, but whereas it should continue on with x-number of moves ahead of whomever Hector is trying to play, it instead ends with the number of moves ahead not mattering. There are only two, and they’re more outcomes than they are moves. Hector either wins, or he takes the back of his arm and knocks all the pieces off the board. Point is—when the joke’s the joke, it’s no longer funny.

Coming from nothing is a story. The bootstrap tale is another. Getting back up one more time than the number knocked down is heartening. And the list goes on for all those human condition scenarios where chins work their way back up and pride is earned.

Then there is maddening…

Hector is responsible for these—the stories others have to tell, because the makers of these stories refuse to own them. No one is suggesting that reform is not possible—Okay, reform is not possible for Hector, but it should be for others. Hector’s been given his opportunities to round the corner and make his changes, but the man either refuses or is simply incapable. Barrels have a bottom for a reason, the only unknown is who keeps scraping Hector from off the bottom of them. Yes, that’s unfair, so… for devil’s advocacies he doesn’t deserve, Hector, just like Dani, should be provided with all the rhetorical hows he’s entitled. How does this man keep falling up? How, when everyone is stripped bare, does Hector, the least deserving of restoration, return to his former state, as if the condition, status, and rank of everyone else is
dependent on their relationship to him? How, when others are buried, does Hector become resurrected? There are no *whys* for him, because *self-serving* answers them all. Some ‘how’ continually brings Hector back into existence and demands his rightful place be restored.

Hector stuck with the Spanish, as did Sandalio (if you want to call it that), and together, with Sandalio’s mouth shut, Hector gave their half-offer, half-ultimatum.

Make a list of discordant things: noble, stupid, heart-wrenching, wise, dangerous, selfish, sacrificial, loving, spite…add to that list until the only words left from the dictionary are things like colors and flavors and places other than heaven or hell, which should have made the list long before ever having to refer to Webster. With the list in hand, think of the idea of ‘doing it for the kids’, and once again you find yourself with Dani and nothing but *hows*.

So she said, yes.

Yes, to the money, from who knows where, to get them safely across the border.

Yes, to the money, from who knows where, to sort out her residency.

Yes, to the money, from who knows where, to sort out who she is.

Yes, to the marriage to Sandalio.

Yes, to the consummation.

Yes, until another son, who will never know Tom Sullivan.

Yes, to leave Francisco behind.

Yes, to the or else, and the *hows* of Hector to see them through.

Yes, to the or else and the evil that money can buy.

Yes, for Diego.

“Bueno,” said Hector, before nudging Sandalio to get up from the table. The father and son turned their backs on Dani and Francisco and saw themselves out.
It would be months before they returned, but in that time Dani would come to terms with the only thing she could. Though the ‘choice’ was hers, Francisco had sat at that table holding her hand and telling her it was okay. It made nothing better or easier, but the truth after did.

Unless for Dani, Francisco had long decided that he was done fighting battles for places and accepted home as being in the albums of his father, finding family alongside the old man until his final days. Dani was never one for promises, but she believed the one from Francisco—that she would always have family and a home here. No, he could not and would not promise her safety were Hector to act should she break her vow, but like the photos in those albums, she could trust that no matter what happened when they took her back, a better part of her would exist pure and free of them.
Session: Bastard

“Andrew, you mentioned you are a bit of a film buff, right?”

“I’m no expert.”

“Tarantino fan, if I remember, yeah?”

“Among others.”

“Yeah… It was Pulp Fiction. We were talking about Bruce Willis after the fight. When he was in the cab. What was it he said?”

“‘I’m an American, honey. Our names don’t mean shit.’”

“Haha. That one, yes.”

“We’re not having this conversation again, are we? We’ve already been down this road.”

“As you know, and I’ve said before, you’re always welcome to return to something if you want to.”

“Pass.”

“Fair enough.”

“Why?”

“I was actually thinking about you last night. My wife and I, we had a little movie night. She wanted to watch *Inglourious Basterds*. We saw it when it came out in theatres, but it’s been a while. I forgot just how brilliant Cristoph Waltz was in it.”

“And a fictionalized movie about World War II reminded you of me?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact it did.”

“A movie with Nazis?”

“As is *The Sound of Music*, Andrew, though I don’t believe our current discourse would be heading where it is had my wife chosen that movie instead. So, would it make you feel better
if I apologized for this personal affront to you, or would you like to know the actual reason why you came to mind?”

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright. You’re entitled.”

“So the truth comes out!”

“I’m sorry? Oh, clever. You’re quick, Andrew.”

“That’s what you get for associating me with Nazis.”

“May I continue, please?”

“Go on.”

“Have you watched it recently?”

“Actually, it was on last weekend.”

“Andrew—”

“Yes. Period. I watched it. God, this answering yes or no questions directly thing you want me doing…fuck.”

“No double-standards.”

“I got it.”

“Speaking of returning to things… I was wondering if you have ever come back to the photo of your grandmother that slipped out at her wake. You ever look at it? I never asked, where do you keep it?”

“Oh my fucking God! Are you implying that my keeping the photo is like the farmer hiding his Jewish neighbors under the floorboards?”

“May I finish?”

“Not if you’re going all Anne Frank with this?”
“Pick.”

“What?”

“Andrew, pick.”

“I don’t understand.”

“First you insinuated offense to a Nazi association, now you’re doing it to saving Jews. I repeat. Pick.”

“No! I’m sick and fucking tired of being handed a fucking list of options as to who I am!”

“Where is this coming from, Andrew?”

“Where is this coming from? What the fuck? This is like the hundredth time I’ve been here. And frankly you’ve known since day one.”

“Andrew, answer my question.”

“I don’t know! I don’t know! I don’t fucking know! You just keep fucking with me on this! What part of I don’t fucking know is so goddamn hard for you to understand!? They don’t make textbooks for shit like this, and you fucking know it! All they make is cults! You and your fucking self-discovery for me when you goddamn know the only answer is the one you’re trying to get me to make up!”

“__”


“__”

“Hhhh. Hhh-hhh. Hhh-hhh…”

“__”

“Hh-hh-hh…”

“There are tissues on the table if you need them.”
“Hhhhh…”
“—”
“—”
“—”
“—”

“Hhhhuuuuuhhhh. I’m toast. Dealing with this is fucking exhausting. No wonder my parents don’t say shit. It’s so much easier.”

“You’re not toast, Andrew. You’re too smart to be toast. Just remember, the unexamined life…”

“Easy for you to say, your job depends on it. And you know he killed himself, right?”

“Pick and choose, Andrew. Pick and choose. He could have tried for exile. That would have been a choice.”

“Touché.”

“Again, speaking of which…have you asked?”

“They said after I—”

“Ahem!”

“Fuck. Yes, they said after I graduate high school I can take a gap year. But they would rather I start college, and if I still haven’t decided on a major before I graduate, to at least minor in something like Spanish or art history, and see if I can earn credits while down there.”

“And dare I ask?”

“You’d be the only one.”

“And you didn’t bring it up either?”

“What’s to bring up, Dr. Rutter?”
“—”

“No, I didn’t bring it up.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I wanted to travel. They didn’t ask why. They gave me options—and then they agreed on them.”

“So you didn’t reveal a why and they never asked a why?”

“Correct.”

“I find that very hard to believe, Andrew.”

“That’s ‘cause you don’t have the history I do. Give it time.”

“Were they proud of you?”

“For what? Ugh! No? I have no idea—for what? Okay, that doesn’t even make any sense. That’s like a linguistic nightmare. I can’t do this anymore. All yes or no questions are not yes or no quest—! Oh! You’re good.”

“I told you on day one, Andrew. I’m not cheap.”

“No, but you’re smug.”

“Guilty as charged. The unexamined life, Andrew. You’re not toast. You’re not binary. And even if you were, not being the ‘yes’ doesn’t mean you’re the ‘no’, it means you’re something else entirely…even if all you know is that you don’t.”

“Socrates.”

“You going to accuse me of glory?”

“No, but that was a pretty impressive escort for my epiphany.”

“Thoughts?”

“But what does it resolve?”
“Never mind, I get it—”
“What?”
“—”
“Andrew, you have to challenge yourself to ask.”
“Two wrongs don’t make a right.”
“Idiomatically, that is the convention.”
“What about two unknowns?”
“I think you are in a unique position, Andrew. I prefer to use the word opportunity in regard to you and your parents, in that you have the opportunity to talk to them. And I’m not going to stop encouraging you to do that. Because, yes, if neither of you steps over that line to do it, then it’s just a vicious cycle of two unknowns. But that’s you and your family. This is an opportunity for something different. You will literally be taking steps here, Andrew. Metaphorical as they may be, it harkens back to our conversation a while ago about taking the roads walked by others.”
“Exile.”
“Contrary to what we’ve been trying to alleviate here, Andrew, I prefer to think of this as an opportunity for you to gain a completely different perspective on what it means to have come from somewhere.”
“—”
“Give me the ‘I’m full of shit’ look all you want now, Andrew, I will have the bowl of crow waiting for you upon your return.”
“It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s just the goddamn cliché. Yes, I know my parents are
outside of myself, but it’s still within the family. So, the idea of going outside to find the inside when it’s right fucking in front of you, is just fucking stupid.”

“And yet you refuse to ask them. You are aware this is the more expensive way to go about this?”

“But it’s an opportunity, Dr. Rutter.”

“Andrew. I’m stopping you. We’ve had this conversation before, and you need to keep it fresh in your mind every day. Two things can be true.”

“They’re toast! I’m never going to fucking believe them! You happy!? Seventeen, going on eighteen fucking years. It ain’t going to fucking happen! This shit’s engrained! Donezo!”

“__”

“I’m really beginning to hate it when you don’t say shit. And yeah, the irony, I get it. You win, happy?”

“‘That’s a bingo.’”

“__”

“And I find the silences to be excellent moments for reflection, Andrew.”

“__”

“__”

“Somehow I’ve circled myself back to Inglourious Basterds, haven’t I?”

“Again, ‘that’s a bingo.’ It is because of that very reason that I was thinking about you last night. This may come as a shock to you, Andrew, given that I am constantly encouraging you to talk to your parents, but I actually do have patients who I have recommended not communicate with certain individuals in their lives. Granted, for all sorts of reasons—caustic relationships, safety, too much pain or trauma, the reasons go on. And for some, as few as they
may be, it’s because of the constant lies.

“Now if you need me to, Andrew, I will be happy to break down every conversation we have ever had in which lying has come up and point out the difference, and more importantly the impact, of this lie or that lie, or another lie, or a lie of omission, or a form of a lie…but I think you already know, right?”

“Bingo.”

“Good, then painful as it may be for you to admit, is it safe for me to assume that you understand why I won’t stop encouraging you to talk to your parents unless something transpires that has me recommend otherwise?

“Mmm hmm.”

“Something that most likely will only happen from a conversation that someday you will absolutely have to have.”

“Sure.”

“Good. I have a question for you, Andrew. When we first met, you came in here with a pretty strong position about a lie—a lie of omission. We’ve had many conversations about lies since then, but while watching the movie yesterday, I realized I have neglected to ask you this question. To you, what is the worst kind of lie?”

“I’ve never thought about it.”

“Well then it’s a good thing I am comfortable with long periods of silence.”

“We’re going to be here a really long time.”

“My wife’s got rounds tonight at the hospital. I have all the time in the world.”

“No, I mean a really long time.”

“Why’s that?”
“When you said ‘form of a lie’—there are so many.”

“And their degrees?”

“___”

“___”

“Ha.”

“___”

“How much are my parents paying you?”

“A lot.”

“There’s the lie in whatever its form is. Then there is the lie manifested. The degree of one, is not necessarily the same degree as the other. You’re a bastard. Hahaha.”

“It’s a big question. Maybe we’ll come back to it next time. But answer this—what’s worse, the lie or how it’s manifested?”

“It’s a rabbit hole. Anything can become truth—I fuckin’ wouldn’t be here otherwise. But then it can become worse—I fuckin’ wouldn’t be here otherwise. You ever have a patient commit suicide?”

“Sadly.”

“You ever have a patient commit suicide over reasons untrue?”

“Tragically.”

“A girl at my school last year killed herself. I have no idea whether she had sex with the guy everyone was saying she did. Some said she did it because everyone was talking about it—about her—and it was too much. Others said it was because of her parents. The biggest one was because they said she was pregnant.”

“Andrew, do you hear what you’re saying?”
“Yeah, no, I get it. It’s like a Russian nesting doll, but the result is the same—a dead sophomore girl.

“Andrew, I’m not going to sully the solemnity here by crowbarring in the analogy. My concern for you and the choices you make—and equally, don’t make—has been noted at every turn. You, yourself, have already unpacked the disconnect between what you know and what is. What you’ve been told and what is. Even how ‘what is’ is fraught with its own mysteries. So maybe I need to put it to you another way. I’m not going to recommend you talk to your parents to uncover realities and beliefs you will never accept. Instead, I am going to ask you to provide your parents with as many opportunities as possible to lie to you.”

“I have no interest in catching them in a lie.”

“And I have interest in every lie they tell you.”

“Well then you talk to them.”

“Not the lies they tell me, Andrew. The lies they tell you.”

“They’re pretty good at keeping their stories straight.”

“When this becomes about them, Andrew—until then, I have no interest—zero—in anything other than ensuring that no matter how deep the revelation goes, that the one doll at the core, the only one not designed to be pulled apart, is alive and well.”

“__”

“__”

“Understood.”

“Good. I will see you next week.”

“__”

“__”
“Oh, by the way, what was it about *Inglourious Basterds* that made you think of me?”

“The farm scene at the beginning.”

“What about it?”

“Christoph Waltz at the table.”

“—”

“I’m guessing by your look you remember the quote. Loathe as you may be… let’s call your recitation a valuable exercise in keeping things fresh in your mind.”

“—”

“Andrew—”

“You’re a bastard.”

“Be that as it may—go on.”

“‘I love rumors. Facts can be so misleading, where rumors, true or false, are often revealing.’”

“‘That’s a bingo.’”

“Fuck you.”

“Have a good night, Andrew.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You suck. See you next week.”
Diego

About the only thing that didn’t go as Hector planned was that Sandalio had violent diarrhea on his wedding night. As vile as it was, it spared Dani something even more revolting—if only for one more night. Hector was a puppet master, and if nothing else, prophetic. His only problem was his big picture ideas. Hate him for them all you want, but he had them. And he either made them or he called them. Getting back to the States, Dani and Dali’s marriage…check those off from his action plan. Arriving back to a grandson who was beyond dubious of the two new men in his life…it does technically provide Hector with the opportunity to say ‘I told you so’. So, whereas Hector called it, his 30,000-foot prophecy—big picture as it was—obviously failed to get into the weeds of what had been growing. Even Dani returned to a son she did not leave behind. No, he still did not complain and could bear the brunt of anything were someone so cruel…but now the boy was a fighter, striking out with whys and greater goods. He found his voice, in spite of all of Tom’s efforts to help him do it.

It made it easier for Dani to try to bond with the boy. He was still so young, but his passive rejections of his father and grandfather were so brutal and violent. And the times when he chose to speak, either in volley or out of the blue, he shredded the men, boxing their ears so hard with his words that the two could literally be seen turning their heads to lessen the blows. It was the only defense Dani had, and it was coming from a boy, too young and too distant, to know what it meant to her.

Maybe this was what Lupita had meant—that these were the things, intangible as they were, that she could cling to. This was how they both could grow together without ever knowing each other. He was always at a distance with her, but not by choice. That distance was hers. She loved that part of herself that she could see, and she loved how something about it—about him—
seemed to understand with every punch he threw at Hector and Sandalio. There was a kind of affirmation in his eyes, a knowing that what he was doing was right by her, and to ask if she would like some more. But logic could not conquer emotion, and for every ‘her’, for every ‘him’, there was a ‘them’ and more. As distant as they were then, and as distant as they were now, they were ever present in Diego no matter how hard he tried to beat them out of himself.

It was the one thing that could make her love him. The one thing that temporarily blinded her and allowed her to hold the child, close her eyes and call him son. She would give unconditionally as long as she could, before the strain of trying to love herself was too much and she had to tell her son to ‘now be a good boy and run off’.

Bit by bit Hector poisoned the well, killing off the adopted members Diego had come to know. The aunts and uncles who started out as nothing more than Tom’s hires eventually kissed the boy on his cheek or forehead, and gave him their most selfish hug in the hope that it would last them a lifetime. One by one they were replaced in Hector’s image and joined the ranks of those who saw Diego as a problem child. They chose to distance themselves from a boy who would never learn, and watch from afar as opposed to impart their wisdom.

Tom continued his own wisdom, laughable as it was, because it worked. Try as he might to screw up the boy with all his lessons and intentions and good will, he continually managed to fall up. It was as if Diego had a filter inside of him that translated the man into something good.

Tom’s words produced a mess, but Diego listened and rendered out dignity.

It didn’t take long for Dani start to show and she allowed Diego to listen to hear belly, talk to it, and even place his hands on her—hoping that someday they would feel as innocuous as hers, but instead they burned every time. She remembered Lupita and how she talked of her grandfather while gently stroking Diego’s infant cheek. Her stories were so easy and instructive,
but try as she might, Dani could not summon the words to affirm anything for her son. By the time he called her ‘mom’, it was too late. ‘Mother’ was who she was for the child growing inside, and Diego—a child of dignity—would save her the pain of eventually having to explain to the unborn child within why the brother calls her by name.

Had Hector not gotten rid of everyone Tom had hired, one of them, if not all, would have done the math with Dani’s pregnancy and rushed her to the hospital out of fear she was about to give birth to a premature baby. Instead, they all, Tom included, assumed the wedding was a long time coming, and that the impetus for it arrived sometime back in Mexico to legitimize one of her children. Fortunately for Dani, Sandalio wasn’t doing math anytime soon and Hector was far too busy dreaming up his next scheme for opening a restaurant. As logic goes, the restaurant was the only reason Dani could give Tom when he asked her if he wanted him to say goodbye to Diego before it was too late.

“He’s had his mind on that restaurant for years,” said Dani. “Dali used to talk about it all the time. Said that Hector was afraid to open it at the time because it would draw too much attention. He was convinced his cooking was that good, and that people would come from miles and miles away just to stand in line for the smell. Maybe he’ll have some other stupid idea once I give birth, but I doubt it. You make his life easier. He’s a dog that bites, just not anything that bites back. That’s why he won’t. It will bite him in the ass. He doesn’t want this shop, he just wants the money. There’s no glory. No popularity. No one is going to come in here with fame and fortune. He’s just a stupid dreamer.”

“I’m terrible at this,” said Tom. “I’ve had no idea what the hell I have been doing since the day you left. But he means the world to me—Diego. And they all just left him like he’s nothing.”
“What did you expect?”

“More.”

“He’s not their son.”

“It shouldn’t matter.”

“And yet it does.”

“And yet sometimes it doesn’t,” said Tom coldly, challenging the girl with his eyes.

“No, it doesn’t, does it?”

Tom responded with silence and the two commiserated with their mysteries. Saying nothing about their torment. Saying nothing about their pain. Saying nothing about loss. Saying nothing about the future. Saying nothing about the past. Saying nothing about this present, as if it, with its multiple meanings, was best left unwrapped.

“I’ve stopped asking why a long time ago,” said Dani suddenly. “They don’t make answers for you and me, do they?”

“Only the ones we convince ourselves of,” said Tom. “For ourselves or for others—I’ve stopped asking too.”

Dani gave birth by herself, scared that someone who had no earthly way of knowing would somehow discover if Tom, the only one she trusted to be by her side, had been present for the birth of Carlos.

There are not many options for a newborn baby. Awake. Asleep. Eating. Being changed. Any of those conditions are generally at the mercy of the person caring for the infant. It was more by force from Hector, than genuine interest on Sandalio’s part, but Dali found himself present for all four more often than he would have chosen. Carlos took to Sandalio rather quickly because of it. It also helped that Dali was the only one among the group whose arms consistently
put the infant to sleep. Diego, ever the inquisitive one, could not keep his hands off the little one himself. And so began the balancing act between what Hector had said and what Dani believed.

She allowed the boys to be brothers and played mother to both, chastising Diego at every turn for reasons he couldn’t understand and for none of which he’d let on. Instead he watched her favorite grow in his eyes and continually accepted, without resistance, being pushed away from his brother whenever Hector was around. And at times like hawks, the grandfather and Tom would swoop down and snatch their child like prey, taking each to their respective corners to educate them about the other. In one, Tom completely lost in anathema and where and when he was in his discourse on trying to explain what deserved condemnation. In the other, Hector, with a litany of grievances so long that Carlos’ eyes would gloss over before Hector was forced to snap his fingers and bring the boy back from where he was. And as always, Diego would translate Tom into something else and return to his brother stronger than before. While Carlos, blasted with vitriol, seemed immune to it all, as if Hector’s words were meant for someone else entirely. They couldn’t pierce him, and he too, would return to his brother, looking up to him for something more than what Hector or Sandalio could ever provide.

There may be only one reason why Carlos loved Diego, but even that reason, out of the list of reasons, was not enough for Diego to return it in kind. Tom had succeeded—or Diego succeeded in spite of Tom—and as Diego aged, it was more and more evident that the only thing the boy would ever use his hands for would be to scribe the caustic words he had for the men who grew to demand he fall in line and do exactly as he was told. He hardly gave Dali the time of day, and took to calling him ‘pa’ instead of the paternal alternatives that would have actually meant something to him. There was a gap between Diego and Hector, and that space, as meaningless as it was for Diego, was Sandalio. This father of his was nothing more than the
hands of Hector, manipulated at will so that he could keep his own clean. Not that Diego needed evidence, because the lack of it would have sufficed as well and proved that both Dali and his father were too lazy to get their hands dirty, but Diego was handed the evidence anyway. Like a piece of machinery never cared for, Hector ran his son into the ground, pulling him at will for tasks he was not designed to do. The more Diego watched, the easier it became for him to call him by name, adding silent letters, and mumbled ones, to his name, whenever he needed his attention. ‘Paw’ when this father was laboring for his own. ‘Pawn’ when this father carried on for reasons unknown.

Diego would write letters at school, come home and leave them for Hector to answer to. Only once did the man respond, and in doing so would force Diego to become ambidextrous. But even in that moment, the young man looked into his grandfather’s eyes and spoke with calm through the pain of his broken hand and fingers.

“I heard pa screamed uncontrollably when you broke his leg—and then you ran away. Do us all a favor and break mine too.”

Hector had no response, he had already given it. There was nothing to say, no threat, other than to Dani, that would give him any further recourse on the matter. Diego was a known entity, and the sooner he wasn’t, the better.

The mea culpas came in a flurry out of the mouth of a man no one had ever seen, and neither Tom nor Dani liked it. Hector’s generosity now meant an implied debt later, but it freed Diego to go discover a world that was not bound to the individuals in his life he would always be numb to. He would return at the end of each semester, wiser and more mouthy and it brought a smile to Carlos’ face and a recognition to Hector’s, that his money was well spent. But eventually, even school wasn’t enough, and Diego returned—a champion for causes outside of
himself and yearning for knowledge beyond four walls.

Tom beamed, grinning from ear to ear when he saw the young man step through the door of the parts shop. Diego had grown to be stunning and suave, and save for one finger that never healed properly on his right hand, his appearance was without fault.

“You write like a poet,” said Tom, tears welling up in his eyes as the embodiment of the young man’s letters stood before him. “I know you more now, than I did when you were here,” cried Tom softly. “Come,” he said, summoning Diego to enter his embrace. “It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you too. Where is everyone?”

“It’s just me now,” said Tom, releasing Diego. “Hector got the restaurant up and running. Everyone’s there now. Once in a while he or Dali will stop by to flex, look at the books, say some shitty thing to me or someone else, make a mess to mark their territory, then leave. Couldn’t care less about this. Sits at the bar all day long waiting for Rita Moreno to show up.”

“Here? In the middle of nowhere?”

“Since when would Hector think otherwise? Why go to Hollywood when it should come to him?”

“And Carlos?”

“He could use a brother right about now. I let him read your letters like you asked, whenever he sneaks away, but he never comes asking, just comes prepared.”

“And mom?”

“Pregnant, again. She thinks a daughter.”

“Pregnant? She’s pregnant.”

“Where is she going, Diego?”
“No, I know…” he sighed, shaking his head and running his fingers through his hair.

“He’s got her in a name tag and serving tables.”

“Pa?”

“Like father, like son. Well… until you. Why don’t you go? Take my truck.”

“And say what?”

“Goodbye.”

A funny thing happened to Diego—his ears turned red. No shock to the system. No embarrassment. No lie brewing inside. Just his ears turned red. He sat down on a chair in the corner, placed his hands over his ears, and dropped his head in meditation.

“Come on, Diego. You don’t even have any bags.”

“I sold it all so I wouldn’t have to take another handout from Hector this time around.”

“This—last time?”

“Supposed to be,” said Diego, lifting his head, resignation written all over his face. “Now that she’s—”


“I’m not soulless.”

“Diego, I’m not talking negatively to you. I’m talking directly. Your changing does not change her, and it sure as hell doesn’t change a past she’s living out now. You’re not making a decision, you’re trying to correct a wrong that never happened.”

“Haha.”

“What’s so funny?”

“For years pa used to rail against you whenever he could. Said that you just talked to try
to confuse him. That by the time nothing made sense you’d clap your hands like a magician that
wow’d his audience. Tell him that he needed to think about it and then you’d walk away
pretending that what you said was profound, even though it didn’t mean shit and made no sense
 whatsoever. This is the first time I’ve ever actually heard it. And this is coming from someone
who over the years has heard you say things that were completely illogical and at times entirely
nonsensical.”

“So what changes?”

But I know what’s going to happen.”

“So do I, Diego, so do I. What makes you think you belong in it?”

“I’m her son.”

“You use that same logic with Dali?”

“I’m not going to say it’s different.”

“No. You’re not, are you? There’s only one ‘same difference’ in this family, and it’s
between your mother and Hector. They both want you gone, but for two completely different
reasons.”

“I’m just supposed to give them that?”

“What battle are you fighting, Diego? What are you looking to win here? Look at me,
Diego. There are some things that you cannot undo. Trust me, I know. Some things you cannot
redo. And then there are others and nothing to do.”

“She’s not a lost cause,” said Diego, standing up to move about the shop.

“I didn’t say that. You write like a poet, Diego, so listen. There are others—and nothing
to do.”
“I’m just supposed to live with that?”

“Do you really think an undue burden on you undoes hers? Are they teaching you anything at these schools? What the hell do you think she’s been living with? How does your suffering make it any better?”

“So that someone else knows.”

Tom let out an exhaustive sigh. “You’re the best of all of us, Diego. You’re the best of all of us.” Tom took another breath and smiled at the young man. “Go. Take my truck and say your goodbyes, but only if you’re going to say your goodbyes.”

It had been one thing to leave and come back; another to leave knowing, in heart and mind, that he could, or even would, return; but that this would be a conscious decision that he would never undo finally struck Diego in a way that no one had ever seen. Tears began to stream down his face as he crumbled into a ball on the floor, dropping into the only logical place in Hector’s shop for such a breakdown. How fitting that the boy who had to fly away would burn to ash in the only place he could not live, and rise again with the conviction that it was all a mystery and that he didn’t belong.

He stood and embraced Tom again. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“We got enough broken-down trucks out back for me to piece together three working ones, and they’d all probably run better than that smokestack I’m giving you. Watch the fluids. You name it, it burns it.”

Unsurprisingly, the restaurant was dead when Diego arrived—so much so that Hector commanded Sandalio to grab the keys to the car and go with him on a mystery errand to buy what, in order to save face.

“Is Hector around too?” asked Diego, making note of the name ‘Danielle’ written on his
mother’s name tag.

“The school bus should be coming by soon,” she said. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you,” said Diego.

This is one of those snapshots in time when everyone either roots for some kumbaya moment or some scorched earth blowout that either ends in a cathartic hug or a broken hinge slam of the door and a that’s the end of that. Had this picture of Dani and Diego had any of that, it would have been anachronistic in that the ability to Photoshop or deepfake any sense of satisfaction or closure between the two would have been decades away. Instead the moment was a potpourri of miseries and anodynes, finding one then the other in a kind of forced indifference so that neither was at fault for the other’s pain. And that the pain existed at all, solidified the difference between the maternal and the paternal and how loss hurt more than anything inflicted.

They each had to… Had to come to terms with their loss. For themselves. For the other. Had to—strangely—receive loss and to fill themselves with emptiness so that at least one could someday be full and live a life beyond the other’s. It was cold and unsatisfying, even lacking the one last look so that each would have something to remember the other by. And to make it worse, it was one of those ten-dollar word moments—a kind of snapshot prochronism that would spit in the face of Andrew without him ever being present to know.

So it should come as no surprise that time traveling spit does not exist in isolation. Diego waited for his brother to get off the bus, and the two found a place under a tree for some shade.

“How’s school going?” asked Diego.

The boy didn’t answer for a long time, choosing to pass the minutes by digging his heels into the dirt, filling the shallow wells back in, then repeating the process. Diego hadn’t expected the silent treatment, but the thought had crossed his mind. Time and again Carlos had asked him
not to leave, and time again he felt like he was being quartered by four competing forces. One that was pushing him away, another that was shoving, a third that was pulling him towards an unknown, and the weakest with no say on the matter—holding him back. The silence allowed Diego to think and run through, for the countless time, what he would say and how he would respond to the infinite *whys* he imagined Carlos would throw at him. A permanent cold shoulder would never come to pass—that, Diego knew. The unrelenting questions that would wear him down—that was what Diego had feared the most. Not that they would keep him by shedding some light he never anticipated, but that they would permanently squeeze his life with their terminal grip, and never, no matter his distance, let him breathe.

Instead Carlos spit—literally—into the face of his brother, so hard that it actually stung—though that could have also been the hard candy he’d been sucking on, the one that stimulated his glands and provided a surfeit of disgust for his brother’s face. His mouth now empty, he responded in Spanish.

> “Why don’t you write me a letter and ask?” said Carlos.

> “Come on. You know I don’t speak—Don’t do this,” said Diego, responding to his brother’s words and not his spit. He calmly wiped it from his face—the only way he knew how—and when finished, looked to his brother with hope.

> “Do what? Talk to someone other than my brother? Someone who can understand me. Someone not here. You don’t get to tell me that. You got to go learn what you wanted, and I’ve been here forced to learn what they wanted.”

Diego sighed. “You’re winning. Happy? You’re winning. What do I need to do to lose, so that you can win, and I can talk to my brother?”

> “You didn’t even try. You’re not even trying now. You go learn to write poetry so you can
send your emotions to someone else. I get mine knocked out of me until I can no longer understand yours. Your letters are like puzzles of words you hope I never get.”

“I thought you might yell at me. For a split second I thought you might not even talk to me. Those I would have understood. But this—to know you have something to say…”

“Yeah, not understanding what I say is way worse than not understanding me.”

“What are you proving, Carlos? Whatever it is, you’ve already done it. Cut me off at the legs. But I’m still going. I’m leaving and I’m not coming back.”

“Is that supposed to hurt me? Maybe I should lie and say that you are no better than any other man you fear you may become, because the truth is, you’re not like them and you never will be. But you are their opposite, and water drowns just as painfully as fire burns.”

Diego actually got a hug out of Carlos before he left, and he hated himself for it, knowing full well that he was no better than his own absent fosterers that Tom condemned. But silver linings come and they often erase pangs of guilt, even though, sometimes, no right-minded individual would choose to acknowledge and credit their arrival for alleviating such distress. Diego found his cause the moment he arrived in California. He saw how his voice could be used for good and he was immediately swallowed up by those who embraced the power and beauty of his words. This, he thought, would be for Carlos. It would someday work its way back and free him and Dani from a place controlled by those who failed to understand that they were not their guards. It was the first time that Diego felt love, not for a person, but a thing—a potential, like a pulse, and a freedom—this cause that gave more to others than it would ever give to him. He grew with it, and the more he gave, the more replete his world.

But there are the Hectors of the world—the ones that look like the wetbacks he’s called, and the ones who do the calling. There was no one who could write a letter to do Diego justice.
No one to say exactly what he meant—and how tragic his death. Instead word arrived to those who carried the Salinas name that Diego was lost trying to defend it.

No one took it worse than Tom. Hector made it a point to abandon the man of all support—upending the entire family, and both businesses, and brought the only people he had left in his life back to Mexico with him. Within a week, Tom found his familiar spot on the floor of the abandoned parts shop, but mercifully found peace with a pistol to his temple and not another piston.

Hector remained driven by his 30,000-foot view and refused to acknowledge a kind of levity that came to his spirit when they set foot back in Mexico. He wasn’t home. He had no home. But he made his silver lining in order to save face and escaped a debt from which he’d never recover. But again, with the overlooked weeds—and this time they wouldn’t stop coming, making the overdue notices for the restaurant, and the ones for the loans against the parts shop to send Diego away, seem like requests for change and nothing more than a different denomination. And he couldn’t figure out where they were coming from or how they knew about Diego’s death—these people out of the woodwork…

From Texas

New Mexico

Arizona

California

Sonora

Chihuahua

Sinaloa

Jalisco
And on down until there were no more places for them to come from; and no place for them to stay; and no room in Dani’s and Carlos’ bellies for what they made by hand; and no room in Dani’s and Carlos’ hearts—though they burst and that was okay, as they were then buried under infinite love. And by the time it was all over and life had returned to normal, Dani and Carlos had lost track of whether they had encountered more people or the places from which they came. And the only thing that Hector could think of was that Sandalio had tried to make his own silver lining and garner sympathy from someone other than his wife, who was not about to ease his mind with any part of her body. Hector tried to beat it out of his son, but even the father recognized that he was now too old, and he resigned himself to having to believe it, rather than to know. And it drove him mad, because for the life of him he could not understand why Francisco never arrived. And when another debt came due for Hector, this time from Spanish speaking men he hadn’t seen in years, another silver lining appeared—one that made him disappear forever, before anyone in the family saw the illness and hysteria take him over.
If-Then

If Diego had lived…
If Diego were an uncle…
If Diego had a story…
If a story were told…

Then…
Session: An Exercise

“No, Dr. Rutter, there is literally no part of me that feels like I have lost a significant member of my life.”

“Did you ever read your grandmother’s obituary?”

“I wouldn’t call it reading.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know when you blow past a miles-to sign on the highway going 70 miles an hour? It was kind of like that. That’s not reading. It’s just like Prescott 43, Flagstaff 87.”

“Hmm.”

“Now do you believe me?”

“There was no disbelief, Andrew. I was merely curious if it provided you with some insight that you didn’t know before.”

“Ha! Stoplights provide about as much information. It literally was who-when-where. And by who, I mean her name and that’s it.”

“Picture?”

“Let me put it this way. I’m guessing they blew the budget on the casket and funeral.”

“Or there was no need, because word travels fast in your family.”

“That’s so fucked up.”

“You’re not here because of harmony and bliss, Andrew. An overabundance of information and a free exchange of ideas with your parents isn’t bringing you to my office every week.”

“No, but hearing it is still fucked up.”

“The ball’s been in your court, Andrew—’
“No comment.”

“—”

“Yes, for like the millionth time—the irony. I get it. Blah blah blah.”

“As long as we’re on the same page. Speaking of which… I’m going to invite you to do something. It’s for you and you alone.”

“What?”

“I think it would be a good exercise for you to write a more fitting obituary for your grandmother.”

“You’re joking.”

“Not at all. It would be a valuable exercise.”

“In futility. I know less about her than what was in the paper.”

“All the more reason.”

“To what? Make shit up?”

“I’m asking for you to write an obituary, Andrew, not a eulogy. I think you can manage a paragraph.”

“Of shit.”

“Andrew, an obituary contributes to the public record of a person. Even you, should you choose to write fact or fiction, can appreciate that the obituary you write will do nothing of the sort.”
“Hey,” I said, knocking lightly on my sister’s open door.

“Hey,” said Amanda, closing the lid of her laptop and setting it beside her on the bed.

“What’s up?”

“Ceiling.”

Amanda condemned me with an eye-roll and a snore before crossing her legs and adjusting her body to sit more upright on her bed against the wall. “You better be careful, Andrew. Keep telling those dad jokes, you’re going to turn into him.”

“Pfff. Not likely,” I said, taking up my usual seat on the storage bench at the foot of her bed—the large mirror atop the dresser on the opposite wall allowing us to make eye-contact without me having to turn my neck like an owl.

“I’ll take that bet.”

“You would.”

“I’m not saying I want two shitty comedians in my life. I’m just saying—watch out, one of these days…”

“You have my permission to kill me if that happens.”

“Bang, bang,” said Amanda, her thumb and index finger firing two shots into the back of my head. My top-half fell backwards onto the foot of her bed.

“I knew I could count on you,” I said, staring up at the ceiling.

“What’s up?” she asked, moving to lie down on her stomach, our heads next to each other as she propped herself up on her forearms.

“That funeral was weird, right?”

“What funeral?”
“Grandma’s.”

“That? That was weeks ago. Let it go.”

“So, I’m right, though. It was weird, yeah?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess. Probably more for you. I can’t believe you didn’t say anything. I would have been like, oh hell, no!”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. You gotta speak up.”

“Everyone was looking at me.”

“So? If dad pulled that shit with me, I would never speak to him again,” Amanda said bluntly, before contorting her voice to take on my dad’s. “Hey, honey, I need you to carry a dead body for me. Oh, don’t worry, it’s just your grandmother.”

“The fuck!”

“What?”

“That’s like the same shit he said to me after she died. The morning he drove me to school was like gasoline…latte…Egg McMuffin…p.s. grandma’s dead.”

“Sounds about right.”

“So, it’s not just me?”

“What boat did you just fall off of? He’s been like that our whole lives, Andrew.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“Not as much as you, apparently.”

“A little?”

“I mean, I guess. It was his mother. But…he’s so set in his ways. Even if you could change him, it doesn’t change anything else. Grandma’s still dead.”
“Come on.”

“What do you want from him?”

“Is it wrong to want anything?”

“If what you wanted was for him to burst out crying, yeah. That’s not going to happen. You saw him at the wake, he cried more when the Dodgers lost to the Astros. And there was nothing at the funeral.”

“That’s fucking weird.”

“I don’t know what you want me to tell you,” said Amanda, flipping strands of hair that had fallen in front of her face. “It’s just who he is. I stopped caring a long time ago.”

“Over what?”

“What do you mean? Over him.”

“No, I mean, like…what was the last thing? What made you say, fuck it?”

Amanda chuckled to herself and turned from me, dropping her head, and in turn every hair on top of her head. She remained draped in silence while I watched her frozen there next to me. “Honestly,” she finally said, lifting her head and throwing her hair back up over her head with her hand in one fell swoop, “nothing, really. He’s just another emotionally distant father who goes to work and comes home. It’s just so cliché. Like, what’s the point? I don’t even remember what the final thing was for me. I mean it had to have been something stupid, ‘cause it was mom who told us whenever someone on her side died.”

“Well, at least she’s got some kind of excuse,” I said half-heartedly.

Amanda chuckled again. “Yeah, and she fuckin’ uses it. Let’s face it, mom and dad are perfect for each other.”

“God! That is an incredibly unsatisfying answer.”
“Hahaha! Good news is you’re funnier than dad.”

“That’s not saying much.”

“Well, we’ve got each other and that’s what’s important.”

“Fuck!” I chortled, knowing that if anyone was going to give our parents a run for their money on being distant from their relatives, it was going to be my sister and me with each other.

“You never know,” she laughed, turning perpendicularly to me and using my chest as a pillow as she joined me in looking up to the ceiling. “See, you’re good for something. If nothing else, I’ll keep you around for this.”

“What do you know about grandma?” I asked.

“She was a racist bitch.”

“No, smart ass, the other one.”

“Oh,” Amanda smirked, “she’s dead.”

“Ha!” I chuckled, bouncing my sister’s head on my chest in the process. “Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

“Anything for my little brother.”

At that exact moment, I had known my sister for over seventeen years. If she had known anything, she would have said so. Instead, we laid quietly on her bed staring up at nothing—and a ceiling fan, going around and around and around.
Obit

Dani Salinas died a while back. She was something all right. If her good for nothing son would have bothered, maybe the family who is supposed to be closest to her would have actually been. Services will be held in the middle of March, we’re sure you'll figure out when. In lieu of flowers, send every mother-fucking person known to man to completely fuck with the grandson’s psyche. Please refrain from talking to him, as that would actually be productive—or so says his therapist.
Here Lies... March 19th: 9:32 a.m.

Six pallbearers for a casket plus the person inside.

Inching up on 8 billion people in the world, but six pallbearers plus the corpse inside.

Moving towards 350 million in the USA, but six pallbearers plus the body inside.

Around 130 million in Mexico, but six pallbearers plus someone’s relative inside.

About 40 million in California, but six pallbearers plus my grandmother inside.

Over 7 million in Arizona, minus four temporarily hanging out with the 40 million next door—or at least that’s what it felt like.

Regardless of how I feel about my dad and his mother—or maybe how he feels—I get that a death and a funeral are solemn events and can make it seem like the weight of the world is on everyone’s shoulders in attendance, present company included. But it should seem and not be. It seemed like there were so many people there that the church and the earth around it were sinking into the ground. It seemed like Superbowls and World Cups and inaugurations had nothing on this thing. It seemed like one accident, diabolic attendee, or act of God, and we were all going to join grandma in her plot out back. These things seem to have a weight to them. Seem to have a heft that doesn’t really exist. And then there are things that actually do have weight and would be stupid not to take into consideration. For example, most people over fifty or sixty years of age should not be counted on to physically pick up a person, let alone deadlift a body. Doing this seems stupid. The reason why it seems stupid, is because it is stupid—that is to say that it would be stupid to count on this person to do just that.

Seems doesn’t have varying degrees, while is and the things that be have all sorts of levels. Sixty and a body is stupid. Sixty and bursitis and a body is really stupid. Sixty and bursitis and body and a solid oak casket is just fucking stupid. But it all pales in comparison to my father
who had the audacity—and I’m sorry, the ignorance and stupidity—to have asked him. He was just another guy in a sea of people to me, but whoever he was to my dad, was someone who couldn’t say no. And it pisses me off, because either my father knew he wouldn’t say no in spite of his health, or my father had his full ignorance—or maybe arrogance—on display by having asked a man he didn’t truly know—one, who again, couldn’t say no.

Grandma didn’t even make it out of the back of the hearse. If it makes me an asshole than I’m an asshole—the woman was already dead, and my father had already proven that he cared more about those in attendance than his mother inside the casket—but a part of me would have taken great pleasure in watching that thing just drop to the ground. Frankly, and I don’t know why, that same part of me that would have found joy in her falling onto the pavement also had a sneaky suspicion that nothing would have brought my grandmother more happiness and pleasure than to have broken the backs of every pallbearer who tried to bring her inside that church.

The second “Bursitis” grabbed his shoulder in pain, I should have asked my father, “Are you sure she wants to go in?”, but I highly doubt he knew her well enough to give me an honest answer.

8 billion people in the world.

40 million in California—plus 4.

It seems to me when “Bursitis” tapped out, that there were another 39,999,999 other people at that exact moment (minus the 5 other pallbearers) who could have easily dragged grandma’s soul, kicking and screaming, into that church. And yet, somehow, I ended up, quite literally, shouldering the burden.
“Andrew, you came in here today with an agenda to confirm some self-diagnosis. It doesn’t work that way. My door is always open for you to address the things you want to work on, but do not expect me to simply validate whatever you think is wrong.”

“I smashed his head in with a baseball bat.”

“In a dream you keep returning to.”

“Along with a waking affinity that at this point is only missing the bat.”

“And yet that’s not what you came in here looking to validate.”

“—”

“We are way over our time today, Andrew. So much so that I think you have forgotten your original premise.”

“—”

“You pushed this one today, Andrew. More than anything you have ever before. Why is it so important for you to try to get me to confirm that you are a quote-unquote self-hating—”

“Stop!”

“The answer you want is the easier one. The less painful one, because it’s a different kind of blame. You’re wanting this to be like an addiction. You’re wanting this to be a disease. You’ll accept your thoughts and actions, as long as the cause is outside of your control. This is unlike you, Andrew. This is one of the few times when you have waved the white flag.”

“I’ve never been able to control it. Only bury it until it somehow gets dug back up. I can’t even go a month without my psyche spilling the beans and fucking with me. He’s gone my entire life and not a drop, not a single word spilling from his head.”

“Andrew, has it ever occurred to you that if instead of hitting your father’s head in your
dream, you hit the piñata, an entire bounty will come raining down?”

“___”
Double Standard

If I were to believe Kole, I’d probably get punched in the face—not for believing him, but for acting on that belief in a way that challenges the notion of self-preservation and trying to keep oneself alive. So if I were actually Kole, I’d be dead—or at least that’s what Hollywood would have me believe. Whether it’s possible to believe Kole and believe Hollywood and live to tell the tale—that, I’m still trying to figure out.

If I were Kole, and to be clear I’m not, I would be the recipient of a kind of destiny—a fate, so to speak—that would require me to say the dumbest thing, at the dumbest time, in front of an audience whose had enough of the dumbest people. In short, once they heard, I’d be dead.

Somehow, my little outburst ignited the gas that had always come out of Kole’s ass whenever he talked. And although constantly burning off such noxious exhaust is usually a necessary evil to avoid a larger explosion, i.e. me in English class the day I heard my grandmother died, there are just some asses who need to be kept away from open flames at all costs.

Honestly, who knew? I didn’t. Gisella didn’t. Davion didn’t. I don’t think I’m going out on a limb here by saying that the whole school didn’t. But for the rest of my junior year, whatever incendiary thing Kole said ultimately made all eyes turn on me, as if I were at fault for the flatulence he released from his head.

Like any high school, mine had clicks, but by the time I got back, Kole had made it a mission to point them all out—and by all…all the ones that didn’t look like him. And to make it worse, like a child wanting attention, he waited until I was around to hear and see it.

“Andrew, look! Diversity,” he said, pointing to five black students walking to class together. “Diversity. Diversity,” he’d say on another day running up to a group of exchange
students from India. “Don’t forget the Asians, Andrew, or else you’re a racist!” yelled Kole from clear across the cafeteria during lunch one day, taking the book out of Guoxing’s hand to flag me down with it. “Asians, Andrew, Asians! They’re not Orientals anymore! Come on, man, where have you been!? Oh, that’s right, suspended!”

I could pretend to be out of my fucking mind and say that the only reason that jack shit didn’t happen to Kole was because, indeed, he looked nothing like the people whose skin he was getting under. But then neither did I. I could try again and argue that the reason was Kole Martin versus Andrew Salinas, but if I played the name game, I should probably just come to school one day with an automatic rifle and take everyone out, starting with my two best friends—it’d make just about as much sense. Fact of the matter is, I’m sticking with my original argument. Like my parents, not a single one of the teachers at my school got it—fantasy was easier—and easier still, a movie. As long as they were pretending to work towards harmony, they could pretend that harmony worked. It’s not even circular reasoning. It’s drop the magic curtain reasoning. ‘We get along, when we get along.’ Tuh-dah!

Fuck that!

For the rest of the school year all Kole got was a ‘hey!’ or a ‘knock it off!’, nothing that did anything more than to push him into the shadows and mumble it under his breath or to his own new click of little youths that somehow materialized out of nowhere. And behold, oh high school teachers, your confirmation bias awaits. Look, off yonder, Kole and a group of students with which he gets along. Your plan worked flawlessly, you blind idiots. Trust me, next time see color.

Fortunately, come senior year, Kole was someone else’s problem—moved to another school and out from underneath my skin, although in reality the damage was already done. I
spent the better part of three months having nightmares about my mother’s mother. I suppose it’s some kind of twisted silver lining that took my mind off of my father and his mother, but the common denominator between both sides made it impossible for either one to vanish entirely. As one grew stronger the other waned…up until the point it didn’t. I suppose it’s fitting that it was like an ear infection stuck inside my head. Although, other than Rutter, there was no one else in my life to keep telling me to take the damn medicine even if it stops hurting and feels completely better. No sooner did my father’s mother disappear then she came roaring back, and then Grandma Katherine…up and down, again and again, like a teeter totter. Whatever mechanism I had going on in my head was exactly like that playground rig—neither side could be down at the same time, and they sure as shit were not going to defy the laws of physics (or at the very least shoddy craftsmanship) and balance each other out perfectly for some net zero result.

I really did begin to hate my father and it took every tool in Rutter’s arsenal that summer to walk me back from off the ledge and see my senior year through, and not just bolt out of spite and hope that my life would work out for the best. Rutter seems to think that I’m passive aggressive only when it suits me. I guess that’s one way to look at it. The other is, to quote my mother, ‘you’re welcome’. You’re welcome for keeping my mouth shut and not going off 24/7 like some bitchy teenage trope. I mean, seriously, I made it this far having to figure my shit out on my own. The other argument, and no, I’m not about to give Kole credit, is the unintentional one he brought to light. When he wasn’t spouting his diversity bullshit, he spent the remainder of our junior year pointing to every student who never said a fucking word—not to their parents and not to their teachers. They weren’t mute, they dispensed empty pleasantries when respect or convention required it, but that was it. My argument is that a teenager is a teenager, so if they can zip it, so can I. Rutter seems to believe that I am neither Native American, Eastern Indian, or by
any stretch Asian, and so by keeping my mouth shut, I’m denying who I am.

Joke’s on him. I have no idea who the hell I am, so the verdict’s still out. I’m hoping for Wacandian, but Davion tells me no fucking way. Maybe I’m just desperate, but I’d like to think if the impossible were possible, it’d give the specter of Grandma Katherine another heart attack and finally drive her out of my mind forever. Instead I just looked at my father whenever he was home and thought, “God, no wonder she fuckin’ hated you.” Now if that’s not a mind fuck, I don’t know what is. And if I knew how to turn it off, I would. I mean, shit! I had been friends with Kole for years. Not the best of friends, but friends nonetheless. And what? A week? Two weeks? I come back and he’s a completely different person, we’re no longer friends, and I can’t stand the fuckin’ guy. That shit with him was more out of the blue than anything with my dad. I’ve felt separated from my father my entire life, and a growing resentment to boot. His mother’s death was just confirmation.

By July, I could not stand to even look at the man’s face anymore. All I saw was that fucking wink. And, yeah, I was looking for just about anything to get me to pack a bag and go. It’s disturbing how easy it is if you don’t stop to question yourself. I had my list and Grandma Katherine would have loved it.

And if I spoke that list, I’d be Kole.

And if I were Kole…
Session: Second Opinion

“Andrew, this self-hating nonsense you’ve been pushing me to diagnose you with for weeks… He’s your father, not a mirror.”
Here Lies... March 19th: 11:29 a.m.

I wonder if my dad had cremated my grandmother and scattered her ashes all over someplace, if he would have had a lower turnout of people for her burial, or if it would have been the same. A death is a death. A funeral is not like a destination wedding or anything. I suppose if she wanted to be dumped into Kīlauea or scattered across the Great Barrier Reef he could have absolutely forced a few hands to remain at home. But honestly, I wonder. I was looking at everyone standing around the hole in the ground, and maybe being rude and disrespectful in the process by staring, but as the final words were being said, I was convinced that not a single person there would have rather been someplace else.

That’s a lie.

I didn’t want to be there, and given what I knew about my dad’s ability to be in touch with the needs and desires of anyone related to him, I doubted his mother wanted to be there either.

I think everyone came for my grandmother. No one came to her funeral. And if the wake and lunch had any truth to them, then everyone also came for my father. They’re welcome to do whatever the hell they want, but I think coming for him was just out of obligation…or at least it was for me. Of course, as funerals go, the two were inseparable, and no one other than me could have possibly been pissed enough to say, “I’m here for your mother, not for you.” Then again, I didn’t really know her either, so I suppose my reason for attending was obligation to both. And for the record, the irony is not lost on me that I, the one who knew her least, had as much obligation to be there, as those who supposedly knew her best had the desire.

In case it’s been missed—fuck that!

I will acknowledge one thing though, if not for the wall my father spent my lifetime
building, I may have actually cried. Somehow these imaginary pieces of a puzzle to her life started to come together in my mind. Regardless of what I didn’t know, she was obviously a mother, a daughter, a friend, and who knows how many other things that never seemed to surface in my parents’ house as meaningful enough to discuss. But here, despite everyone’s reverence, it was as if it were on full display. I was too shocked at the wake and restaurant for all the people to have sunk in, but for as pissed as I still was, 24 hours was enough time for me to at least take a breath and temporarily see ‘them to her’ and not ‘him to them’.

They came for her, but as I thought about it, blinking back the tears to avoid giving anyone looking the satisfaction, I had to admit that they also came to her. I could see just how tired they were. Schedules upended to catch last minute flights criminally priced; and endless hours of travel for those who could hardly afford the gas, let alone the time away from work. And I got to thinking, because my dad’s a self-serving ass, just how many people my grandmother could have gone to.

I was welcome by Davion and his parents anytime I wanted. I could go to their house. Show up whether Davion was there or not and sit down to whatever meal they were about to have. I never thought about their house, only about the people who lived in it, all of whom I adored. And as I looked at that casket and the hole in the ground, the only thing I could think about was that my grandmother would never know another home.

The box.

The hole.

The people around that object and place.

The scale of them all…

If every one of those people meant to her what she meant to them, she would have had a
home in more places than she could have ever possibly lived.

I could not believe just how alone I felt. And trapped. No wonder my dad barely gave a shit that she died. If he had only a half—no, a quarter—fuck, an eighth of what his mother had, he’d be part of legacies and stories in people and in places that I would never know no matter how hard I tried. And all his connected pieces would be living out forever, long after my missing ones had faded and died in isolation.

Thanks for taking me to the funeral. Really appreciate it. Made things a whole lot better.

Funerals help with closure.

Fuck that!
Senior Year

Davion accepted an offer from Stanford. Gisella, Dartmouth. What should have been me sorting through the same number of offers as my two best friends had, and having the welcome problem of trying to figure out which one to say yes to, instead was me throwing together last minute applications to ASU, U of A, and NAU, and hoping for the best, but resigning myself to the fact that I had dug my community college grave, and was about to have to lie in it.

The three of us had gone into the Apple Store so Davion could pick up his phone, whose cracked screen had finally shattered. I don’t know how Gisella and I got on the topic of my fuck up. The last thing I remember talking about was wanting In-N-Out Burger, but there I was, across from her, having to answer for my sins.

“You forgot?” asked Gisella contemptuously, attempting to draw a puppy using only circles on the iPad in front of her. “You don’t just forget to apply to college. You said there were like fifteen that you were going to apply to.”

“Going, going, gone. I missed the deadlines.”

“We were dragged down to the computer labs for like a week and forced to start applications for at least three schools. What the hell did you do the entire time?”

“I must have been absent.”

“You must have been—oh, come on, Andrew,” said Gisella, dropping the Apple Pencil she had in her hand.

“I was absent.”

“Absentminded. How could you not apply to college? What’s going on with you?”

“No. What the fuck is wrong with you!” said Davion, overhearing then chiming in as he walked up, squeezing in between me and an oblivious woman, the new screen on his iPhone...
quickly losing out to the news. “Dude, you fucking said you applied to UCLA. You said it to my fucking face.”

“Hey! Language,” snapped the woman, coming back from oblivion.

“Hey! Swahili,” quipped Davion, throwing her for a loop before she walked away with a puzzled look still stuck to her face. “You’re fucking joking, right? You got into like twenty schools.”

“Nope.”

“Come on. There’s no way they all rejected you,” said Davion in disbelief.

“Nope,” I said.

“What!? That’s such bullshit, man. Don’t tell me it’s because of the suspension.”

“Nope.”

Gisella held up the iPad she was playing with. In giant letters she had written: EARTH TO DAVION. HE DIDN’T APPLY TO SHIT!

“Film school? No—you’re first-choice school—UCLA…and you didn’t even apply just to see?” asked Davion, his tone driving away everyone at the community table of iPads.

Gisella flashed the iPad: FIRST CHOICE? MORE LIKE ONLY CHOICE.

“Like I was going to get in.”

“You didn’t even try to find out,” said Davion.

HE WOULD HAVE GOTTEN IN, added Gisella with the iPad.

“They don’t accept anybody,” I said.

“Yeah, all those people at UCLA are just imaginary,” said Gisella, her fun with the iPad over.

“Nope.”

“I snarked.

“Did your therapist give you stupid pills? They’re working.”
“Yeah, he might want to dial them back a bit,” added Davion.

“I’d be inclined to OD on them at this point.”

“Maybe you already did,” said Gisella, her look of contempt seemingly going nowhere soon. “What’s the deal?”

“I fucked up. What do you want me to say?”

“Why.”

“Is that with a question mark or a period?” I asked.

“What difference does it make?” pressed Gisella.

“None. Or all the difference in the world. I’ll let you know when I figure it out myself.”

“You’re becoming deliberately inexplicable, Andrew.”

“Let me guess. I’m pushing you guys away because you’re moving on and I’m stuck here. This is my way of acting out so I don’t get hurt when you’re both off at college making lives for yourselves with all your new friends.”

“Stanford was on your list to apply to, you ass! This is your own fault,” Davion chided.

“And you already cried over me,” said Gisella, “so don’t go bullshitting us—or yourself.”

She was right. That was a blast from the past that I had completely forgotten about. I think it was her tenth birthday—might have been her ninth, I can’t remember. Her parents had once again given Grandma Katherine a run for her money by ripping into their daughter for inviting Davion and, to use their words, ‘his kind’, to her birthday party.

“That’s it,” Gisella said to me as we sat on top of a table under a ramada clear across the park away from everyone else. Tears and snot running wildly down her face, she wasted no time turning her pink dress into the world’s largest and most immaculate handkerchief. “I’m leaving,” she said. “Just as soon as I can. I am leaving and I am never coming back. I don’t care.”
“No, what about me?” I asked selfishly, failing in the moment to recognize that it was not about to happen anytime soon, and that more importantly, it had nothing to do with me. “You can’t go. I’ll never see you again.”

“I know,” she said.

It was the missing caveat that got my own tears and snot storm going. No but. No I’ll come visit or you can come with me. Nothing. Just an acknowledgment that something bigger was going to push her from this life into another. We spent the next twenty minutes ruining her dress, but when we were finished, the reality had sunk in that when the day came, we’d have two lives, but one memory.
Session: Senioritis

“And you don’t think there is something important about what your friend, Davion, said?”

“I don’t know, Dr. Rutter, I figured you could tell me.”

“You brought it up. If not the words, then at least the source.”

“Not to be overly dramatic, given my shit—or ironic—but I know Davion better than I know myself. So, of course he’s gonna know exactly where to poke me. Of course he’d say something goading about UCLA like, ‘You didn’t even try to find out’.”

“Don’t you see something wrong with the logic there, Andrew?”

“What?”

“You said you know him better than you know yourself.”

“So?”

“If he knew exactly where to poke, wouldn’t it make more sense for him to know you better than you know yourself, rather than the other way around?”

“All I’m saying is that I know him well enough to know that he would try to stab at me with some remark like that.”

“But, Andrew, that’s not what you said. You basically said that your knowledge of him, in turn, results in him attacking you. Not only is that a completely different rationale, it’s, in essence, a cause and effect.”

“Well then I misspoke. And don’t go fuckin’ throwing some Freudian slip, subconscious, bullshit at me.”

“Says the patient with the piñata nightmare.”

“Patricide nightmare. And I’ve been giving your Candy Crush idea some thought. It’d
just be a hell of a lot faster if I could hit the piñata in the dream, then I’d actually know. But this is different. Davion’s words and actions are literally his. I didn’t make them up in my subconscious.”

“No, but you’re having a field day with words today.”

“What I’d say now?”

“A hell of a lot faster if I could hit the piñata…I’d actually know. To paraphrase your friend, Andrew, you haven’t even tried to find out. You need but go home and talk to your dad.”

“Not happening.”
Here Lies... March 19th: 4:48 p.m.

I started taking Spanish in seventh grade. By the end of eighth, I could have probably been dropped someplace where it was the only language spoken and I would have survived without too much stress. By the end of freshman year, I may have actually smiled in whatever country I was trying to navigate. By the end of sophomore year, and with the help of Gisella trying out a full immersion friendship with me, there would have been a tinge of confidence. Junior year opened the door and I was well on my way to proficiency. Being picked up and dropped into another country would not have been deemed survival, but rather, opportunity. It was all hypothetical, of course, but I really did feel like something was beginning to solidify.

Funny how death changes things. There’s no logical reason for it. I’m not the one who died. My father’s mom is. It makes sense for her to never say a single word again—not in English or Spanish. I don’t know how her death somehow snipped my tongue and cut me back to a monoglot, but it did. I’ve waxed poetic about this before, and maybe there is some romantic ideal that exists for the theory, but I also don’t see how it works by skipping a generation either. It was my father’s mom who died, shouldn’t it be he who had that part die with him? Shouldn’t he be the one who was at a loss for words? How was it that he ended up talking more upon her death, and yet I was the one who lost an entire language?

With everyone talking all at once, and my dad just talking in general, it was no wonder that I couldn’t understand anyone at the restaurant with the cacophony of voices. Maybe I just used the unending commotion as an excuse to not even try—yeah, I know.

Be that as it may, I had no excuse when my dad stopped by his mother’s house to pick up some paperwork. He said it would only take a minute, so we all waited in the car. Unfortunately, there comes a point when pee waits for no one, and my eyes and ears, who had been fighting my
bladder at the restaurant to remain in the moment and not wanting to miss a thing, finally acquiesced in the driveway and gave my urethra the go-ahead. I ran inside to pee, and if not for the fact that I had to go so badly, would have been shocked at how I managed to sprint directly to the bathroom—in a house I had no recollection of ever being in before.

Pain or just relief, it was something else. I suppose my peeing has absolutely nothing to do with the bigger picture. But, as it is a fundamental human process, and one that quickly moved from voluntary to involuntary as I unzipped, it wasn’t lost on me that the split second my stream began, so too did the foreign exclamations out of my mouth.

I don’t know what to say about her house, or even if it matters. The moment of epiphany—moments, actually—had already come in a deluge in the days leading up to her funeral. Walking around my grandmother’s house felt more like picking through debris and sweeping away the silt, than anything else. Of course there are things that are out of place. Of course there are things that belong. And of course they were out of place in my parents’ house, and totally belonged here.

God, it was weird. For as long as I could remember, my parents’ house was like a vanilla shake, but once Grandma Katherine died, it was like my dad started to fuck with it simply because he could. The problem is, my dad has shit for taste, and full disclosure, tastebuds. Whereas someone might add chocolate syrup, Oreos, strawberries, peppermint, or some other logical ingredient to a vanilla shake, my father has an inexplicable disconnect between what he likes and where it belongs. He likes cumin. He likes nutmeg. Therefore, he’d add cumin and nutmeg to said vanilla shake. And that’s what made my grandmother’s house so weird—the fact that it wasn’t. Everything belonged.

The serapes, record player, stack of Latin vinyl, sugar skulls, walls and furniture in earth
tone colors, accents strewn across the house in blues and reds and yellows. Tins and pots and
glassware. Wooden boxes, and wools and cottons in functional and decorative spaces around the
home. Cacti and other succulents. And the house succeeded as a reflection of this woman, and
not some pieced together stereotype like the one my father created, by slowly sneaking these
objects into our house.

These objects…

Now that was actually weird…as I passed by everything, making note of the fluidity of
the home and how every object had its place among all the others, I realized, like the pages of a
Where’s Waldo book, all across the house there hid identical objects found in my parents’ home.
Not close to, not similar, not alike—identical.

I grabbed one, a ceramic saguaro cactus, blossoming on one arm, and a wren atop
another. It wasn’t so much a courage that took over me, as it was just an impulse to ask the man
where the hell he got these things from for our house. I didn’t even want to know how he knew
they were in her house—that required a frigid dip into his brain that I had no immediate interest
in doing.

The door to the master bedroom was ajar, and I could see him through the gap, standing
at the foot of the bed, talking to what I could only assume was his mother’s ghost laying in it. It
stopped me in my tracks, not because my father was talking to no one (he walks around our
house talking to himself all the time), but because, again, he was talking in Spanish. And I could
hear him, clear as day. And there was a word here, and a word there, that I knew as vocabulary.
But no matter how hard I tried, no matter how fluent I’d become, I could not understand him.

He walked out of the room, saw me standing right there, and was completely unfazed by
my presence, as if whatever secrets he told, were for him and her alone. He took the cactus out of
my hand without saying a word and walked past me down the hallway. With my father gone, I
stood inside the bedroom, looking for some possession. Eventually the car horn honked and I
walked towards the front door, noting that the cactus had been returned to its rightful spot. I
stepped outside, closed the door, and the electronic deadbolt locked behind me.
Senior Years

Hell froze over and ASU accepted me. I even managed to eke my way into a study abroad program in Mexico that I would begin in my second semester. That’s supposed to be a hooray, or a surprise, or some kind of two steps forward after all the ones I managed to take back, but I felt very little joy over any of it. Even my mother had to feign her excitement, so much so that it was painful to watch. It was not her fault though, and she was completely in the right to be disingenuous, because she had bigger issues to deal with regarding my dad.

Getting old sucks. People just go through life and they, too, are right to do it. Everyone has fifty billion stories to tell about the time they did this, or the time that that happened—but critical to life, and actually living it, is the fact that no one is getting in line to buy tickets to hear about the time someone else got constipated. No one would be going anywhere if we all had to hear about it—or frankly cared any more than just a friendly reminder. Drive safe, have a good day. Dinner’s ready, did you take your insulin shot? Those are the brownies with the nuts, those are the ones without. I’m opening the cabinet, watch your head. Careful, the floor is still wet. It’s so fucking common that it no longer even registers, and none of it’s a story worth telling…until it is.

My dad’s been eating like shit since before I could remember. Had to have been pre-diabetic before I even knew what diabetes was, and was testing his blood and giving himself shots for years. So as stories go…get in line.

But apparently my high school years had been a turning point for his health, and unbeknownst to me or my sister—shocking, I know—his health moved from a ‘who gives a shit story’ to a cautionary tale. Don’t worry, the man’s not dying anytime soon—one death’s enough to fuck up this family—but what did come sooner, rather than later, was the slow burn. He went
from having a 7-day pill organizer, no bigger than the Snickers bar he should not have eaten with lunch every day, to one that was damn near the size of an advent calendar. And with all the pills, and the shots, and the fact that this is my inherently insufferable father that I am talking about, his mind was going—and not in the right direction.

Good days, bad days, right? That’s what happens with all those stories about minds and memories. Only problem with this one…What the fuck am I supposed to compare it to? The times where his mind to mouth resulted in silence? Or the ones where the only verifiable realities were the figments he spouted into existence? I don’t know where my mother landed. At times I felt she was beginning to see my side, albeit the one I never explicitly told her. Something about it felt good, cathartic really—knowing that a realization was coming from her, without any evidence from me. There were days when I came back from class and she’d vent to me, because she couldn’t get ahold of my sister, and talk about how infuriating my father had been before he left for work that morning. She’d go on about how he’d say things that never happened, or never happened in the way that they did, and for the briefest of moments, I felt like she was understanding what it meant to be bombarded by mysteries and untrue realities. She’d sigh, and then blame his medications, and in doing so I could see the moment leave her—and my hope that she would ever understand how I felt growing up without the truth from either of them.
Session: Take Care

“Let’s keep our schedule as best as we can, Andrew.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s Zoom if we can, otherwise a phone call.”

“Okay.”

“Email me if you need to reschedule, but don’t miss a week.”

“Okay.”

“Take care, Andrew.”

“Bye, Dr. Rutter.”
Señor

My mother texted me right before I got on the plane.

Call me when you get this. It’s urgent. Love, mom.

That’s one of those texts that when you read it, the only thought going through your mind is, “Great, who died?” I’ve never gotten the insert person here is dead text. I’ve heard about it. I’ve heard it’s completely informal. I’ve heard it’s the wrong way to do it. And I know for a fact that there is another way to break the news and it is infinitely worse.

I don’t know what I’d want my mom to do. The sick and twisted part of me that’s helped me make it this far in life without throwing myself off a cliff kind of wants her to say to me, “Honey, do you have to go anywhere?” To which I’d reply, “No.” And then she’d say, “Well, let me know when you do, so I can drive you.”

What I do know, is that I don’t want the same conversation to occur, but to instead have her final words be, “Well, let me know when you do, so I can have your father drive you.”

It was bad enough he drove me to the airport on his way to work. Even though my mother gave me a giant bear hug goodbye, and smiled and waved at me as we backed out of the driveway, I still couldn’t help but feel like I was going to step out of the car, grab my bags, and my father was going to summon some ‘one more thing’ Steve Jobs moment.

“Hey, Andrew, your mother’s dead.”

Although, come to think of it, if he did it the way he did it before, it’d sound more like, “Oh, Andrew, I almost forgot. My wife died as we were driving away.”

There’s a lot to be unpacked there, and maybe I should blame Dr. Rutter for giving me the tools to do it. For better or worse, I certainly placed some blame on him, because I couldn’t stop thinking about it the entire flight down. Of course the majority of the blame rests with me not having charged my laptop, having packed my books in my checked bags, but mostly from
what happened with my phone and all my music on it. Right after I got the text from my mom, the phone slipped from my hand as I was trying to put it into my pants pocket. It survived the first bounce. It even survived the second. What it didn’t survive was the third, and the small gap in the corner of the floor between the airplane and the jetway.

Down it went onto the tarmac and shattered into pieces. And down I went to Mexico with my father on my mind and nothing to distract me but some safety pamphlets and an elderly man five rows in front of me who wouldn’t stop turning around to look at me.

I swear I don’t have ‘one of those faces’ as they say, where everyone comes up to you and asks, “Where do I know you from?” The elderly man didn’t have one of those faces either, but I had the same question for him, and was hoping that his neck would get stuck shortly after takeoff, so that I could just sit there and stare at him until I figured it out. Had masks been mandatory, I don’t think either of us would have had enough visual evidence to begin scratching our heads over who the other was, but it gave me something to do, and for that I was thankful.

I suppose what I should have been doing was freaking out over the mystery text and wondering if my sister’s luck ran out and she finally got in another accident. Or if my dad decided not to go to work and instead went straight back home to work on some dumb woodworking project and lost a thumb. Honestly, ‘it’s urgent’ is not all that urgent with my mom. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, ‘it’s urgent’ can be replaced with ‘please’, so I went with ‘Call me when you get this. Please. Love, mom’, and went back to trying to figure out who the guy up in front was.

“Hello? Who is this?” my mom answered forcefully when I called her after getting off the plane in Mexico.

“It’s me, mom.”
“I don’t know this number.”

“No, shit, mom. I’m at the airport. I’m calling from a payphone.”

“Well, how was I to know? What’s wrong? Does your phone not work down there?”

“My service plan works in Mexico. Too bad my phone’s in a million pieces back in Phoenix.”

“What? What happened?”

“What difference does it make? It’s broken.”

“Well, just as well.”

“Why, what’s wrong? Did something happen to dad? Is he sick?”

“No, your father’s fine. I guess this is just not a good day for phones. I was waiting for you to call, because your dad and I need to change our numbers. I think we need to change yours and Amanda’s too. I got a call from our cell phone company this morning and they said someone has been spoofing our numbers, and they may have even gotten into our account.”

“That sucks.”

“Tell me about it. We have our credit card information on there.”

“If they did get your username and password, make sure you change it if your other accounts are the same.”

“I’ve been doing that this morning. Anyway, I guess this makes it a little more difficult since you don’t have your phone. I don’t know if you can buy a phone down there and have us activate it here. Or if we can even send you one. I’m going to have to call you back when I find out. How long before you’ll get to where you’re staying?”

“I don’t know mom, I literally just landed. Plus, I got bigger fish to fry,” I said, as I watched the elderly man from the airplane slowly approach me.”
“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing yet.”

“What do you mean, nothing yet?” said my mom, her natural motherly instinct to freak out, kicking in. “Andrew, don’t go telling your mother these things when you’re hundreds of miles away in another country and I can’t come rescue you.”

“Nothing. It’s just some guy from the plane looking at me. He probably just wants to use the phone,” I said, looking at the other phones also in use.

“Andrew. No, you need to wave down security or the police. You don’t know what kind of criminal he could be. He sees someone alone. You’re an easy target.”

“Oh my god, mom.”

“Yes, Andrew. Trust me. My mother didn’t raise no dummy.”

It was a poor choice of words on her part. Maybe if I had my iPhone and was FaceTiming her, I would have caught an expression on her face that recognized her error. But as it was, it didn’t sit well with me.

I know that she didn’t mean it—the way that I took it. Nothing between my mother and me, or my father and me, ever was. They built in disconnects between the people and the places in their lives in order to keep everything out. They just never imagined their son would keep everything in.

“Excuse me, sir?” said the elderly man in Spanish.

“You still there, Andrew?” asked my mother.

“Sir, do I know you?” the Spanish speaking man inquired before burying his head back into his phone to tap and scroll furiously with his finger.

“Andrew.”
“Yes, aren’t you—? This is you—” said the man in Spanish, holding up his phone to my face, a picture he must have taken of me carrying my grandmother’s casket into the church displayed on the screen.

“Andrew!”

“You’re Dani Salinas’ grandson, right?”

“Sí,” I said, and hung up the phone.
Vita

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