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## Angelo, Angelo, Angelo

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ANGELO, ANGELO, ANGELO

DIEGO ADRIAN RICO

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2021

**Dedication**

Antonio

&

Aaron with an E.

ANGELO, ANGELO, ANGELO

by

DIEGO ADRIAN RICO

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

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The faculty and staff at UTEP's Creative Writing Program.

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## Critical Preface

"You cannot explain your way out of telling a story." Those were the words told to me by Benjamin Alire Saenz after he read my first draft of what I now consider to be a tedious explanation of human emotion. It took me approximately nine months to understand that. I came to my own understanding of this principle. The explanation of how a roller coaster works is not as thrilling as riding a roller coaster.

Entertainment pushes the mind into arousing the senses in various mediums. Every form of entertainment, regardless of genre, provides thrills to the human mind. Although static on the page, a novel aims to uplift the senses to feel, emote, and imagine- it should be a kind of roller coaster, except safer. An activity to be reflected on the couch, waiting room, or library. Being knocked around a speeding roller coaster or diving from an airplane may be a necessary part of life, a heart-pounding five minutes or seconds of adrenaline, if not that, at least a slow-burning duration of a novel.

I wrote an initial preface for my thesis project nearly ten months ago. After working on my project, it is evident that my original ambition was to explain the experience of the American political, social, and economic turmoil in 2020. The current events of that year have not been forgotten: the pandemic, the promise of life returning to usual, social demands for justice, and in the background, a looming paranoia of the Earth's environment that began with the wildfires of 2019. These events occurred alongside a Presidential campaign that ignited political passions among the American public. In addition, part of the original scope for my novel included an explanation of how technology, specifically the Internet, played a part in the American social fabric. I demanded from my project, and of myself, overwhelmingly, to find a narrative to piece these disparate events together. The first attempt at such an idea explained it through caricatures,

not characters. The caricatures were ideas coming out of talking heads. Heads that were still not alive. Instead of using characters to create the thrills themselves, they were talking heads trying to explain how a roller coaster worked. Worse off, I was trying to explain the state of an entire country through the lens of my ambition.

My protagonist was me. The point of view was mine. And all the country was strictly affecting me.

I had to put away my thinking mind and pull myself back into the world of entertainment and in the realm of fiction-writing, more specifically, the world of human emotion. It was my dad who nudged me in the right direction by recommending a book by Steven Pressfield, aptly titled, *Nobody Wants to Read Your S\*\*\*!*.

Pressfield writes, "A real writer (or artist or entrepreneur) has something to give. She has lived enough and suffered enough and thought deeply enough about her experience to be able to process it into something that is of value to others, even if only as entertainment."

With the help of my director, Jose de Pierola, I had to ask myself a series of questions regarding my project. Simple questions like, what was my novel's story about?

I would begin with *who* my story was about.

Me, of course.

Throughout all the story iterations up to that point, the protagonist had not changed. I knew this much. He was somewhere between 25 and 30, and his job was somewhere in New York. And suppose I was honest about who the character was. I could exclude the idealized version of myself. He could be more honest. And I could assess him as a young adult who walked and talked with the confidence of a cocky, fake, self-assured yuppie.

Regarding this description, Pressfield writes, "The word 'fake' may be too unkind. Let's say 'young' or 'evolving.'" That life would be the basis for that character's inner life. Anything I could provide as valuable or entertaining had to be from what I have learned from life so far.

Consulting with my director, I discovered that my project was a coming-of-age novel or *Bildungsroman*- a story dealing with one person's formative years or spiritual education. But, there was a discrepancy between this genre and my story's that stood out to me. It was the character's age.

New Adult was recently coined in 2009 by St. Martin's Press. It includes a protagonist between the ages of 18 and 30 years old. The themes explored are the protagonist's journey transitioning from their teenage years into adulthood. They can include themes such as: leaving home, developing sexuality, and facing education/career choices. My protagonist, Angelo, faced those growing pains. He was ignoring calls from home, navigating a budding professional life in a metropolis, and dealing with his feelings over a woman 16 years older than him. That was progress. I finally arrived at a more specific genre centered around an emotional, possibly entertaining, story concerning a young man growing up.

That was the story's genre. Still, the story was missing.

The next step was to define my character's story. Joseph Campbell's non-fiction book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* pushed me to imagine my hero moving through their journey. There had to be a beginning, middle, and end. But, earlier on, every version of a three-act structure changed nearly every week. Going through my notes, I realized I had to anchor the story somehow. I needed something to ground it, a pike that would bring the story's flying tent back to Earth. But, at least, I knew I had a character.

In reviewing my drafts, I discovered two recurring elements. 1) My protagonist was in New York dealing with his professional and romantic life, and 2) my protagonist's brother called from home asking him to visit.

Pressfield writes, "The writer must know what genre he is working in and the conventions of that genre, just as the bridge builder must understand the science of foundational integrity and the means of mitigating stress on strung steel." This genre creates expectations for the reader, forcing the writer to meet those expectations. I had defined my story as a New Adult novel. That action forced me to think in terms of a character growing into adulthood. The defining of my genre furthered my story by identifying what narrative questions I was going to raise to the readers. There were at least three. They were: 1) Would Angelo's romantic relationship be a success or failure? And, 2) Would Angelo return home as his brother, Marlow, had asked, or would he continue living his dream life in New York?

The question repeated itself, what was my story about?

Again, the problem from months before kept recurring. Every version of the story had a different plot. The story I wanted to tell was somehow always different. But at least now I was equipped with a series of birds-eye-view maps to get me where I wanted to be. I knew who my protagonist was, but what did he want? And why?

I could have come up with any desire. But all the story's iterations were still bouncing around in my head. I could not infer one desire from the elements I had just finished grounding.

As part of my thesis proposal from ten months before, I had to list a series of books that I would use as literary references. As a symptom of my initial overwhelming ambition, the references I listed came from a variety of genres, including *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* by Mark Haddon (mystery novel), *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon

(postmodern novel/paranoid fiction), *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert A. Heinlein (science fiction), *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz (young adult, *Bildungsroman*), and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (literary fiction/tragedy.)

If I had any chance at defining my protagonist's desire, it would have to come from studying the books I referenced ten months before. I scrutinized their core conflicts and worked out the relationship between the story's genre, protagonist, and hero's journey—each book distilled into a one-line story synopsis. At this point, the hero's journey became a suitcase-like catchword. Inside that suitcase, I put several things inside. They were the protagonist's desire, conflict, and the plot they followed to reach their desire. For the one-line story synopsis, I could have avoided reading all the books and just read the back cover of each title. But, the answer was not going to be given to me after spending three years of my life learning to write. Oh, no. I was going to find out my way.

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* follows Christopher John Francis Boone. A fifteen-year-old boy implied to be autistic decides to investigate the neighborhood crime after discovering the murder of his neighbor's dog. It explores the protagonist's inner life. Christopher faces a series of dilemmas that challenge his mental and emotional stamina. In short, it is a book about a boy who decides to solve a mystery and ends up maturing his way through to the conclusion of the neighborhood crime.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, Oedipa Maas, entrusted with the estate of her ex-lover, Pierce Inverarity, after his death, embarks on a journey into a conspiracy theory where she follows the clues in her attempt to find out the true nature of her ex-lover. A recurring symbol, a muted horn, shows up along the way that both confuses her and woes her deeper into a strange, surreal world.

*Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert A. Heinlein follows Valentine Michael Smith, a human rescued from Mars and brought back to Earth. The arrival of a martian with extraordinary powers on Earth sets off a series of political events. The characters around Valentine Smith attempt to rescue him.

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz follows two Mexican-American teenagers. Between each other, throughout the novel, Aristotle Mendoza and Dante Quintana establish their family relationships, racial and ethnic identity, and human sexuality.

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald centers the heart of its story in an unfulfilled romance, specifically, Jay Gatsby's obsession to win Daisy.

Each one-line synopsis contained the protagonist's fatal flaw, which created the story's central conflict. The conflict between the protagonist's desire and their fatal flaw demanded a series of events. I took three or four steps back and paced around my apartment. After returning to square one, I saw that the genre of the book further determined how the narrative questions were going to be answered by the end of the novel. I noticed that the protagonist's fatal flaw must work against the protagonist's primary desire in a closer inspection.

Chris in *The Curious Incident* is autistic. His deficiency in understanding human interaction creates narrative momentum for the story to be resolved. His desire to discover the dog's murderer pits him directly against his fatal flaw.

Oedipa Maas' "fatal" flaw is the lingering curiosity over her ex-lover Pierce Inverarity. That curiosity pulls her into the conspiracy theory. It clouds her judgment regarding her feelings and decisions about the estate she has inherited from him.

In *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Valentine Michael Smith's fatal flaw is his foreign, martian, extraterrestrial nature. His obliviousness over human nature on Earth leads to his demise.

In *Aristotle & Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Aristotle lives with a clear, pure, and genuine commitment to the nature of his desires. That sincerity pulls him closer to Dante, a high school teenager of the same age in a world that is unaccustomed to the idea that two boys can fall in love with each other.

I asked a series of questions that should never be asked. How did they do it? Did each author know the genre of their story before they had written it? Had they decided on their protagonist first and then discovered their fatal flaw? Or had they chosen a fatal flaw and packed it into a character's life story? Alternatively, maybe, in all likelihood, they experienced an epiphany and wrote their entire book in one sitting.

I could not wait for the answers to come and decided to make one up.

Although many institutions of writing, both academic and commercial, try to categorize each work of art into specific genres, all of them borrow elements from outside their designated labels. I began to see the gray areas of writing. Building a novel required me to build and meet reader expectations with a subtle blend of genre-bending. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* blended elements of mystery and *Bildungsroman*. *The Crying of Lot 49* involved love, romance, and unfulfilled desire with paranoid fiction. *Stranger in a Strange Land* also included elements of romance between the martian and a human. I began to see writing as a blend of expectations. That made sense to me. After all, nothing, especially human emotion, is as simple as black and white.

In my last Hail Mary of figuring out the end of possibilities for my novel, I contrasted my protagonist's desire with that of Jay Gatsby's. His desire was for the lost affection of a woman,

Daisy. Could that be Angelo's? But there was a differentiator between my story and *The Great Gatsby*. It was the age of each protagonist. Gatsby is around 30 years old and has served in the war. He has entered adulthood. The story's context is Gatsby dealing with not having been able to get over a lost love, Daisy. In my story, Angelo is in the middle of the breakup. Gatsby's "obsession" with Daisy is his fatal flaw. In contrast, Angelo's fatal flaw cannot be his obsession with Sophia if his obsession is in the making. Therefore, another fatal flaw must exist within Angelo that creates tension against his desire to provide an entertaining novel to the reader.

From Mario Vargas Llosa's non-fiction book, *Letters to a Young Novelist*, I remember conceptualizing an element of fiction writing. That concept was the following. Each decided element of a story transforms the story. Choosing a particular protagonist over another changes the story. The narrative device, deciding it, and changing it, changes the story. And with my research, deciding the genre of a story defines the reader's expectations and, therefore, must change the story. I concluded that once I assigned a fatal flaw to my protagonist, my story would not only change, but it could and finally find its ground.

William Faulkner said, "the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat." If I were explaining my story, there would be little room to explore the novel's, human heart. In short, I had to stop running away from what I was trying to avoid. And what I was trying to avoid was nothing short of Angelo's heart in conflict with itself.

With that in mind, I decided I needed to change the direction of my novel inward and into the characters' lives.

Unbeknown to him, Angelo desires to find and express love. What could be the fatal flaw in Angelo's character that works against his desire? Based on my decision to pursue a New Adult novel, Angelo's fatal flaw had to be his incomplete understanding of what love means. Angelo's age is the main culprit in obstructing him from getting what he wants. His work as a political consultant requires him to understand the emotional thinking of the masses. But for all his cerebral knowledge, he lacks the subtle understanding of personal relationships.

I had finally arrived at a singular story. At the end of the country's pandemic, Angelo, a twenty-five-year-old political consultant, falls in love with his boss, a woman 16 years older than him, and decides he will ask her to marry him.

There was progress for my novel, after all. I had a protagonist, knew his desire and fatal flaw, and knew the narrative questions I would raise. Those three elements were essential, but my story lacked something else.

I asked another series of questions that should never be asked. Does every author know their story's theme before writing the story?

I can never be sure. I know that from my process, scenes and images begin a story. From there, as I have detailed in this critical preface so far, the work of wrestling out something valuable begins.

Grant it, my character, a younger man, was in love with an older woman, but would the story be about that?

No, it could not be about just that. There had to be something more valuable than that.

Returning to Pressfield, each story needs to have a theme or a concept. The theme or concept is the invisible answer, never explicitly stated, which answers the narrative questions with something greater than plot points. Sometimes the theme can be identified by the reader.

Sometimes it lacks definition, stays elusive, and cannot be detailed as quickly as the plot. When someone asks, what is it about? The person who reads the story will answer with the story's plot or hero's journey most of the time. But sometimes, the reader will answer the question, without knowing it, with the plot and the theme.

For example, what is *The Matrix* about? Let's assume you have watched it as many times as I have.

A viewer might answer with the following. The movie is about a guy who discovers that all of life is a computer program. With the help of some rogue humans, he is unplugged from the virtual reality machine called the Matrix and becomes a total badass. He gets so good at fighting in the Matrix that he learns to dodge bullets and eventually defeats the machines that had him plugged into the Matrix in the first place.

That is the answer to the story's "about" question, but it does not discuss the theme.

A fuller answer could include the theme and explain the movie's magic touch.

*The Matrix* is about a young man named Neo who is allowed the opportunity to change his life when he is unplugged from the Matrix. Neo conquers his fears and insecurities. With the courage he builds up with the help of his friends, he rises to defeat the preconceptions of what his life means to him.

The theme is what gives each story its magic. The invisible attribute pushes someone to tell the story to their friends and family. The theme or concept stays with the reader after the story is told, even if they cannot put the theme into exact words. But the paragraph above, I believe, is what makes *The Matrix* feel true to the human experience.

I reviewed the story's iterations with the writing I had accomplished in the previous nine months.

In my novel, each character navigates the gap between their youthful world fantasies and what the world is. Thematically, my new adult novel concerns a protagonist who understands that what he wanted as a young adult may or may not translate into becoming an adult. The character has to negotiate between the fictional world he believes in and the external reality the world presents to him. In the case of Angelo, he is learning to barter in life with time. From youth to manhood, an exchange occurs in Angelo's mind, one that remains unaware to him, between an idolized version of love and the reality of love. The story centralizes around this conflict. How will Angelo navigate the discrepancy between what he feels inside and what he experiences outside?

According to Faulkner, good writing must always be the human heart in conflict with itself. I would extend that further and say that every good theme reflects a human heart in conflict with itself. The theme in *Angelo, Angelo, Angelo* fits those parameters. A human heart conflicts when deciding between pursuing selfish pleasures or social responsibilities.

"What is youth? A dream. What is love? The dream's content." (Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*)

I began to understand that my writing process must always return to two things: the reader's expectations and the theme.

The genre, and more specifically, the narrative questions raised, must be presented and met by the beginning and end of the novel. In *Angelo, Angelo, Angelo*, the genre is new adult. A reader expects the protagonist to navigate into adulthood from youth. Specifically, the narrative questions raised are: Will Angelo's marriage proposal to Sophia be accepted? Will Angelo heed the advice and warnings of his best friend, Terra, regarding the proposal? Will Angelo's career in New York go as planned? Will Angelo return home to visit his brother, Marlow?

The theme must also be addressed constantly, but not directly. A theme cannot be expressly stated because that would explain the story and would disallow the reader to enjoy the thrill of reading the story. But the theme will manifest itself by following the protagonist through his hero's journey to attain what he desires. The character's flaw directly conflicts with what he desires through that journey. What follows is an iteration of the theme. The sacrifice of entering adulthood requires the abandonment of youth's fantasies. The death of idolized dreams pays the fruits of adulthood. Without sacrificing one's selfish desires, a person may never enter adulthood. The gap between personal fiction and external reality must be dealt with in entering adulthood. And last, the death of idolized dreams requires personal growth by the individual.

Angelo is trying to discover how he will live. His first concern is regarding love. That should be the focus of the work. My original thesis proposal shows that my work as a writer does not force me to explain why the country is in its state. That question is overly ambitious and cannot be answered by one story. But I can place a character within a tumultuous country and have that character figure things out for himself. Creating a difficult situation for a character allows the reader to connect with the story. And in that way, I am closer to attaining the goal I set out to achieve- writing an entertaining novel. I no longer have to worry about explaining why life happens. Life happens. What is interesting is how we deal with life. And this falls in line with Karl Jung's treatise on the collective consciousness. That principle tenant dictates that humanity shares similar experiences that bind us together in mutual understanding. A writer does not have to prove why life happens. They must only illustrate it- or worse yet, write it.

I have marked an X on a map by knowing my story's theme, genre, and character. With that stake in the ground, becoming lost in writing the novel becomes much less likely to happen.

The decisions have been made. No matter how far away I steer through the hero's journey, I know where my story returns home.

What follows is a brief narrative summary of my novel. My committee members may have read various versions. But the following describes the general story in its new structure.

The beginning of the first book in the novel is Angelo exploring his relationship with Sophia. Sophia is a separated, single mother raising her son, Beau, who works as a political consultant alongside Angelo. Angelo has been assigned to a team, with Sophia leading it, focused on winning the next Presidential election using social media and mass data gathering. Angelo is particularly well-suited for this task for his natural consulting talent and begins working on the project. But the pandemic that allowed for his relationship to occur with Sophia is now ending. Angelo and Sophia must re-enter the reality of their lives. Sophia breaks up with Angelo. Terra, Angelo's childhood friend, visits Angelo and tries to convince him to return home to see his brother, Marlow, back home. Angelo refuses and is unwilling to let go of Sophia. But Marlow is not letting go of Angelo either. Angelo receives a phone call from Marlow to reconnect with Angelo, but Angelo is hesitant about his younger brother's proposition. Sophia discovers that Angelo's third brother, Wilfredo, and Josefina's mother are dead. Angelo carries with him a guilty conscience about both deaths and refuses to acknowledge the deaths in his family. By the end of the book, all of Angelo's attempts to ignore his brother's phone calls result in him endangering his and Sophia's life. Marlow has warned Angelo about an impending car bomb threat in New York. When the bomb goes off, Angelo is injured gravely into a coma. Without anyone related to him in New York, Angelo is forced to recover back in El Paso. The book ends with Angelo's New York dreams.

Altogether, a different problem, technique faced me in my manuscript. Several instances of jarring changes in point of view, transitions, settings, locations, and inner lives, occurred in my drafts.

I returned to my class notes to deal with the loss of narrative momentum I was experiencing. In reviewing my notes, I came to a clearer understanding of Professor Sasha Pimentel's principle. Each sentence must reveal an image, scene, or character desire.

Theme, genre, character, and plot have illustrated my novel's roadmap. But the technique is what I need to effectively get to my final destination. The writing must reveal the primary storytelling elements by writing an image, scene, or character desire, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, chapter to chapter.

Image, scene, character desire.

Image can be defined in a physical realm, an objective reality. A pear. An empty theater. A blanket in a field. An office cubicle. A spaceship. Those are images.

Scene. A scene is an incident that implies people, and if not people, at least emotions that people can understand, especially if the work is fiction. Because as mentioned before, a reader, regardless of genre, is investigating a narrative question that the author raises at the beginning of the work. The only thing that keeps a reader engaged in fiction is the emotional journey that the protagonist will work through that implicates the reader within it.

Part of my initial research, including detours into science and non-fiction books, was due to the possibility of writing a science fiction novel that included an artificially intelligent character. This aim proved to be overwhelming, but the research I did still proved helpful.

*The Emotion Machine* by Marvin Minsky is a non-fiction book regarding how the human brain works and what possibilities exist in mapping out the processes of the human brain in hopes

of one day replicating it in the form of artificial intelligence. *Intelligence* is defined as "the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills." In the book, intelligence is defined in parallel with this definition but by using the metaphor of maps. Intelligence is the ability of the human brain to map out the external world through the five senses, receive information from the external world, and use emotions, the brain's internal processes, to apply prior knowledge and skills to the external world. Every emotion is a mental process. And because of the brain's nature, the processes that have been learned from the past implicate how a human may react to a situation in a given future. Therefore, the actions occurring around the character via the setting or another character must catalyze an emotion. And it is the job of the writer to present that emotional state. It is the emotional state that is creating the thrills for the reader. The experience of emotion is the cornerstone for the entertainment of reading a novel.

Everything outside the character, the setting, can become a catalyst for an emotional change. This creates many opportunities and gifts for the writer. Since I had chosen the setting of a country during a pandemic and election year, this created opportunities for me to explore how those events could shift the story's characters.

In setting scenes, I typically rely on objective information to describe the characters' location. There were two particular scenes in which this happened, one on a beach and the other in a desert. My encyclopedic tendency pushed me towards web searches that add color, specificity, and details about both settings. At the end of writing both scenes, my writing felt like a completed homework assignment for school rather than a story being told about human beings. The lesson I gained was that even in describing the world around characters, i.e. setting, the inner life of characters could be extended, consulted, contrasted, or compared. It was a hard lesson to learn that every word and sentence does matter and either add to the story's momentum or takes away from

it. My first drafts relied heavily on long paragraphs, detailed explanations, and conceptual abstractions. In contrast, better writing involves the senses, but only as a texture to human emotion and desire.

Using imagery, scenes, and character desires will create tension. The story's central conflict is Angelo's love for his boss- a secret. There are other secrets on Angelo's mind, such as his family's history, the reasons he refuses to go home, and his relationship with Marlow, his last surviving sibling.

Narrative momentum can also be accomplished with dramatic irony, image repetition, and sonic repetition. Part of Angelo's intentions are ironic and can provide dramatic irony. After all, he is a political consultant. He is paid to understand the feelings and emotions of the masses. However, he has little tact when it comes to personal relationships. In addition, he is attempting to woo a woman with a lot more experience in personal relationships.

In *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes, a photographer, studies the effectiveness of portrait photography. His criteria can be defined by two parts 1) studium and 2) punctum. Studium, as broken down by Prof. Pimentel, involves four parts: imagery, language, form, and tension. Tension can be created by the events facing the character. A recurring problem with my writing throughout my coursework and working on this manuscript has been to avoid coyness.

In his feedback, Jonathan Nehls pointed it out to me when he wrote, "Why are you being coy about this? It seems important that the reader knows what the characters seem to know." This problem comes from a misunderstood concept of where tension originates.

Initially, and mistakenly, I believed tension was created by the reader putting the puzzle pieces together. The pieces were chapters, scenes, characters, and their intentions. But this is only partially true. The true nature of tension comes from intimacy, as taught to me. The nearing

proximity of the two elements creates tension. In the case of fiction, it is most likely that those two elements are characters. And those characters' motivations, intentions, secrets, and goals are posited against each other. Think of a secret being held between two people. Talking about something related to the secret creates tension regarding the revelation of the secret. But in order for this tension to successfully translate onto the page, the reader must know the secret in the first place.

Returning to my feedback from Jonathan Nehls, I was mistakenly withholding information from the reader. Without the reader knowing the "secret" of each character, there is little to no chance of creating tension effectively on the page. To answer Prof. Nehls' question, I was coy because of my initial trepidation regarding exposition. But exposition is necessary for the reader to understand the context in which the characters are interacting. The reader must become close to the character. And the reader must witness the character becoming closer to the subject of their character. That proximity is what builds to the story's punctum- the story's risk.

For the punctum of the story, the urgency of it, that thing at risk or stake, is Angelo's vulnerability in asking Sophia to marry him. Their age discrepancy adds to the urgency of his situation. His fidelity to what he feels is that things that prick the reader's ear. Something about it rings risky, but also true. What will happen if Sophia rejects him? After she does, how will he respond? How accurate is his love for her? Is what is at stake Angelo's entire identity? Is his identity tied to the love he has for Sophia?

What is at stake?

Angelo's dream self.

I mentioned the narrative summary that I wrote for a "first" book in the preceding sections. In a conversation with my director, I discovered that the original draft of my manuscript had

several stories within it. My first attempt was to work each story into the novel. But that problem created the list of solutions mentioned above. However, the untouched storylines that have yet to be written will come about in the two following books, which may or may not be part of one novel.

The first book ends with the death of Angelo's New York dreams. He survives a car bomb but is in a coma.

In the second book, Angelo wakes up, but his memory is impaired. It is his brother, Marlow, who takes care of Angelo. While taking care of his older brother, Marlow investigates the conspiracy theory he was involved in. Marlow believes the conspiracy theory was behind the car bombing. The second book ends with Marlow facing a fictional world he believed in against the real world of his brother's injury. When Angelo wakes up, Marlow begins to wake up, as well.

In the third book, Terra, a character that plays a role in both the first and second book, becomes the protagonist. Her struggle is in navigating how to help Angelo remember during the same time of the second book. Because Angelo cannot remember everything, she can help him recall his memories. But what memories will she choose for him?

Angelo remains an integral part of each book. Angelo has a dream about who he is and what he is. His ambitions, goals, desires, secrets engulf him. Angelo lives for his dream life, not his current life. He believes his life's purpose is to achieve his life's purpose. Angelo, whom things happened to before the accident, would know that answer. That particular Angelo, the person he created to live and work in the world, would know who Angelo was without a doubt. The Angelo of the public, the one who had a reputation and who was preceded by his reputation, would know the purpose of Angelo's life. But what if Angelo had in some way forgotten his life's purpose? What if the car bomb obstructs him from achieving his perfect life. What was his life supposed to be? Angelo's impaired memories cannot allow him to remember. He cannot remember what

Angelo wanted. That could serve to raise the stakes of the story for Angelo. Because if Angelo cannot know what he wants, then any road would take him there. So maybe the central conflict of the three combining stories is Angelo's heart searching for his heart's desire. But is he remembering everything correctly? Did Sophia say she was in love with him or not? Did he believe her? Did she believe him?

The three stories follow Angelo and his friends, trying to piece back together Angelo's person. But each character has an unspoken power over Angelo. If Angelo cannot remember everything he was, then his people can steer him towards their desires. Or will they steer him toward becoming the Angelo he once was?

## Prologue

From: Rios, Angelo <angelo\_r@electricave.com>

Sent: Thursday, August 24, 2021, 4:13 AM

To: Rincon, Terra <rincon\_t@memesystem.com>

Subject: Re: XYZ Gen

I need to keep a paper trail. I don't know if this is important, but I think it might be.

The first time God saved me was at Imperial Beach. I decided to swim, but I changed my mind, so I floated out to sea. Clusters of people passed by me like ships and islands. Who were they? I didn't know and didn't care. I was floating.

My eyes gazed at God's gray heaven, a cloud full of rain. The light shined in aluminum. It floated, and the sky breathed life into it. I saw a man. A machine man- a sort of automaton. One of its arms was bionic, shiny, and chromed. The machine man stretched its metallic arm to me, and its fingers rolled from its hand like God to Adam. There was one eye missing, like it had been torn away, a stratus cloud whiffed out. The other eye, made from another cloud, looked like it was made from metal scraps that glowed red. The cluster of cumulus clouds multiplied colors, the sunlight cracked an infinite palette. My eyes locked on the man in the shadows. I noticed there was only one ear. The machine man's helmet covered the other. I wondered if he could hear me.

*How far was heaven?*

Then a wall slammed my body, and I was buried in water. Was it Marlow waving at me? It might have been him. I'm not sure if I remember things the way they happened or if I'm placing a piece of a dream inside of it.

There was nothing but white.

Then there was darkness.

*I promise to be a good boy. I promise I'll take care.*

*I'll take care.*

*My brothers and sisters, I'll take care, my fathers and mothers, I'll take care.*

*Please, God, calm this storm. Calm the storm. Save me.*

I felt sand. I was safe now.

The shadow of a body reached me. It was Marlow.

"You know, for the smartest guy in the class, you're kind of a dumb ass." As strong as the riptide, he picked me up. We walked to the umbrella.

"Don't tell mom or dad. It'll ruin everything."

"When they see you, I won't have to say anything."

"What happened?" dad asked.

"Your son fought the ocean, the dumb ass."

"Don't cuss."

She closed her cookbook. She peeked under the towel that covered my face. Her look traced my face with affectionate disapproval- or disappointment, "We would have missed you if you drowned."

I should have drowned that day. Later I was to think it was a person who pulled me down. I may be paranoid, but I'm not dismissing the idea entirely.

Marlow was hungry, "Wilfredo, do you want to get some ice cream?"

"I can't eat ice cream, too much sugar," and kept listening to his mp3 player.

Mom encouraged him, "Wilfredo, go with Marlow."

I remember you left with them. I heard my dad get up from his folding chair. "I'm getting in for a bit."

"Careful, Jacinto," she said. I was sure he was gone when I started crying. Mom didn't tell anyone. "You have to be careful." I heard the cookbook open, and she turned another page.

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After reading the email, Terra was at his disposal. She would have skipped to the following email if anyone else asked to help them keep a paper trail.

Angelo's message made her look over her shoulder if anyone could see her tears walking past her workstation. Angelo became a friend again with a single note, someone closer to the person she recognized as Angelo. This was part of his therapy. It was what she promised Marlow she would do, help Angelo rescue bits and pieces of who he was before February 2021.

Before starting the day in the office, from the 14th floor of the company skyscraper, she relived the feeling of being the unofficial fourth sibling of the Rios family.

In the prism of her own memory, she was the fourth sibling and considered herself the balance. 22 years ago, she knew enough about each Rios to come in and out of their household

without tipping fate in either direction. That was her job. There was something special about the three brothers, dad, and mother that she wanted to protect. She didn't want to ruin it. Careful in not being noticed, hiding in plain sight, careful in not making things change around her, careful in not affecting the Rios. She tried to stay in their house, watching them be. She wouldn't mind being unnoticed because the experiment of who the Rios were would never stop. She could just see them forever. Terra could observe them from outside their window, from the living room peeking into the kitchen, at their family reunions, in their backyard, waiting for them to come back from the movies. She wasn't sure what it was. Their X factor was what kept her close. After all those years, she wasn't any closer to finding out what they had that her family didn't. The question of who the Rios became a series of different questions that led to her job now.

But right now, the morning tasks were pushed aside.

She wrote a note back.

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From: Rincon, Terra <rincon\_t@memesystem.com>

Sent: Thursday, August 24, 2021, 9:27 AM

To: Rincon, Angelo <angelo\_r@electricave.com>

Subject: Re: Re: XYZ Gen

Angelo,

I haven't forgotten about your request. You haven't sent much, but I'm keeping records for you.

I remember Marlow telling me about how you went into the soup after it happened. So many years have passed since grade school, but you're right- it was him who waved at you before the surf took you under. He saw you looking at him just before you disappeared. You might not know this, but that day was terrifying for Marlow. The big blue was enough to keep him out of the water, but watching you locked in made it worse. He froze when he saw you. It still haunts him. All he could do was pray that you would come out of the water. Like Josefina said, you would have been missed.

I've missed you.

Sincerely,

Terra

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Maybe Angelo would reply soon. She refreshed her email and sat at her cubicle desk, waiting. Angelo, the stoic and shrewd businessman, without a hair out of place, never referenced God, never forgot anything, either. That was what was so strange about helping Angelo recover. It wasn't the Angelo she knew.

There was no reply. Breaking for her one-hour lunch, she left her desk. On the 10th floor of the company skyscraper at the cafeteria, she remembered school and her classmates waiting in line with their lunch money as kids. Now, Marlow had been gone for a month, Angelo had woken up from his coma two months ago, and Wilfredo was gone. He had been gone for a long time.

Waiting in line, a headache came over her. She left her tray. On the ninth floor, at the company's small clinic, she reported feeling a migraine and chills. The nurse emailed her a note copying her boss. She went home.

She visited Angelo at the Rios' old house. He was awake and in El Paso, the place where she never imagined he would return.

As the doctors had said, Angelo's memory was severely impaired, at least his semantic memory. It would take time for it to recover while his usual functioning self was absent.

"I bought the ring for Sophia," he said.

Angelo didn't remember that Sophia had said no.

The experiment was over. There was a new one beginning.

"That's not Sophia's ring, Angelo."

Angelo edged his finger along the ring without an idea of what it meant to him. It was a silver circle. Terra caught Angelo's reflection. The circle reflected light, and their heads bent upside down. He was a vision. A man carrying a silver circle. And the ring had no weight to it, physically or metaphysically. Anything was possible. Angelo didn't know that, but Terra did.

"How did you feel when you bought the ring?" She asked. And underneath her breath answered her own wandering question, "Sometimes clarity comes in hindsight."

But Angelo chimed in, "What if clarity never comes at all?"

She felt alone even with Angelo by her side. With a clean slate, with his brain washed away from memory, who was the man sitting beside her anyway? Angelo's moments of clarity came in every day and disappeared by the next.

Still, his dialog surprised her. "Where did that come from?"

Angelo looked at Terra. "I know your face."

"I know yours too." She flicked his hair behind his ear. It was the way it should have always been, neatly in place, always according to his plan. That plan was now absent. And she felt that she was taking care of a ghost. A beautiful, handsome, still tan spirit who looked at her the way she always wanted to be seen by him. Without a memory. In the moment.

Angelo asked who Sophia was. And why her name was inscribed in the ring.

The day before, he had talked vividly about how he would propose. He spoke about it like he was reciting a memorized set of lines that confused him, as much as it surprised her. Terra listened. A trusted adviser like Eleanor Roosevelt, Henry Kissinger, and Judas Iscariot.

The doctor had said that this would happen, Terra remembered. That his recovery would take time, there would be peaks and valleys. It wouldn't be a linear path.

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Just last week, Angelo had plans to start a family.

"We are going to have the biggest family," he said. "It feels like its time, you know, growing up and raising a family."

"Everyone is getting married and having kids, with intent, too," Terra said and laughed by herself.

"It's time to settle down. We've had fun. Now we need to sow for the future- with God and for God. I want to teach little Beau as much as I know about what's coming, friends, family, life, love, enemies, everything, to be ready for the world. I want you by my side."

Angelo was confusing her with Sophia.

Terra tried on the words. They felt fake, and she imagined what Sophia would have said if she were there. She imagined what it would be like if she had a kid named Beau. What would she teach him?

Values, of course. That's what everyone wanted to teach their kids. Children should grow up and be the better version of their parents with the correct values and discipline.

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Although Angelo had beaten Terra in their last semester for the highest honors, Terra had done her work alone and without help. In public, after high school, Angelo held himself as an honest person. Terra knew that it was a lie, and both ideas were lies. Angelo was not an honest person, and Angelo did not consider himself to be an honest person.

It was Marlow who had shared Angelo's secret.

Angelo had convinced his brothers to work together. He cited utilitarianism as his principal argument: the greatest good for the greatest amount of people. All three brothers would benefit from the plan- and they did. They broke out and would share their schoolwork. Angelo focused on history and social studies, and Wilfredo summarized math and science chapters. At the same time, Marlow gained the most out of the deal. He received his brothers' notes, learned mnemonic strategies, and contributed by not telling anyone why they worked so closely. It was an added benefit for him to find a place to practice reading. Taking his time, he could read the captions underneath the black and white photographs- Nazi Germany, the Antebellum South, the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl.

"Is this for real?" Marlow would say, "can you imagine living back then?"

They considered the atrocities of history a myth, perhaps even a fiction. In El Paso, in America, they believed those things were dead. Black and white photographs served as evidence.

There was no evidence proving that Angelo had gotten help from his brothers. The only proof would be their word. And the brothers were loyal. Even if that loyalty had a time stamp. It was only after a year that Marlow told Terra about Angelo's secret strategy.

Angelo never knew that Terra had learned his secret strategy of winning the highest honors. She kept it to herself. After that, everything Angelo said was bent through the prism of Angelo not knowing. Angelo never knew she knew him that well.

That was her game, her purpose. At a very early age, she had dedicated herself to that purpose. It was her purpose without her even knowing it.

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The Rios were all dreamy people.

Beginning with Josefina, their mother, who Terra dreamed was her own mother. She listened to her advice more than she did her own while eating her food at their dinner table. Their father. The man was sought out by the boys in high school for his advice and free internet connection. And three boys with seemingly invented names like her own were names that didn't fit anywhere, except maybe in history books. But they needed to do something meaningful to get into a history book. What that was, she had no idea, but she knew that with their names and with their family, they had a chance. Even when she looked, she would change the entire structure of their lives.

She became different things to the three brothers.

To Angelo, she became an invisible consciousness. Terra believed it came from his cheating. Although he never knew, she knew. Terra's eyes would make him remember, she thought. And her eyes did that, among many other things, like secreting testosterone around her that made his groin itch. She knew she had that effect on him before he did. That became even more fun. When her breasts came in before anyone else's, she took advantage by hiding them from him.

To Marlow, she became a sister. She listened to him complain about the brother's differences. In hindsight, with the clarity of the science, she knew now, the majority of Marlow's complaints were impossible to bridge. Even between brothers, the gene pool proved to be an ocean. It still surprised her how different two brothers nurtured under the same house could be so different. In other cases, the two siblings were nearly the same. What was life like there? Was it more dreamlike?

To Wilfredo? Although she wanted to believe she was his best friend. She knew that wasn't the truth. In fact, she didn't know if Wilfredo died knowing she was his enemy.

Terra kept her attention on the living brothers and did what nobody considered necessary- that's what she did. Terra would never be able to put it into words, not even on her death bed. But she believed it to be true. Even when she didn't want to do anything but just watch, she actively changed something around them, around Angelo, Marlow, and Wilfredo- maybe the air they breathed.

It was a mystery of her life, like black holes and dark matter.

Where did their differences come from? Where would they go? And would she be there with them? Or would she die away before they all reached where they needed to be? Was there such a place called destiny?

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That was almost ten years ago. How many versions of themselves had they cycled through, Terra thought? Their bodies re-animated themselves entirely in seven years, but their minds kept the same stories. The stories hadn't changed while their bodies had grown. But they hadn't outgrown the stories that never seemed to change. They were in the middle of a second cycle since she estimated.

Now, on the next day, Angelo had forgotten about the ring, and Terra had taken it with her home to not distract him on this particular new day.

Terra concluded that Angelo loved Sophia, but he also loved Sophia because he wanted to father little Beau.

"I miss how I used to be."

"How's that?"

"More confident, more sure about things, decisive. I was a decisive person."

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Terra was helping Angelo retrace a picture of a memory he had. Angelo thought about it over some more and resigned the idea of being a north star for little Beau.

"Do you think you always loved Sophia? Or do you think it was temporary?"

"How's that?"

"One day, you might have wanted to have your own kid. Did Sophia want more kids? Could she have had more kids?"

Compared to what he could say, Sophia said more about Angelo than Angelo could say for himself. A woman older than Angelo by 16 years. Terra didn't judge. She had given up on judging people. It was another cloud that could fog her mind from seeing through people. That was her job. To see what motivated people and reconstruct how motivation was built inside people's minds- a sort of psychologist, but with other applications outside of therapy like building artificial intelligence. That goal was far away, but at least, she was studying how the mind worked.

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From: Rincon, Terra <rincon\_t@memesystem.com>

Sent: Thursday, April 29, 2021, 9:27 AM

To: Olivers, Sophia <sofi\_olivia@genetika.net>

Subject: Thank you note

Hi Sophia,

Thank you for meeting with me. Everything you shared has been invaluable.

I'll keep you updated on Angelo's recovery. The first days can be confusing. Patients like him can lose pieces of their short or long-term memory. They can regain and lose consciousness. His head is healing. It can last for a day or two, but everyone expects him to make a full recovery in about five or seven days. The doctors have said they are thinking about the possibility of an

artificial prosthesis leg and possibly an eye, too. There are many options, but none of them can be explored until he's fully recovered.

The doctors expect he'll wake up soon.

Sincerely,

Terra

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"Do you remember what Marlow said yesterday?"

"Who's Marlow?"

"Your brother."

"Oh, yeah."

She could tell he was lying. But he wasn't lying like Angelo would lie. Angelo lied with intent. This person, the one in front of her, encased the genes and brain that made up the Angelo she knew. That particular person was lying, not with intent, but because of a slight blush. The blush came from a rapid change in body temperature. Visibly it would have been lost to most people. It was so subtle nobody would see it. But she saw it and noticed it. It was a sign of little embarrassment of not knowing. That same embarrassment would cause the Angelo she knew to bolt out the door at the very thought he was caught without knowing something he should have.

Although it was useless for Angelo, she recalled to Angelo what Marlow had said. She liked hearing it. Maybe that's why girls wanted to talk after all. She was always the quiet one until now. Now she was the one who needed to speak. She had just noticed it now. She hadn't seen it because nobody was there. But something in her mind ticked. What would Marlow say again if he

were there? That was enough for her to become self-conscious. She was talking a lot. A lot more than Angelo. She had never talked so much. She wasn't girly that way, according to her mother, the school's mother gossip queen.

Terra remembered for Angelo, "Marlow won't start his family until you get better."

Was she losing him?

Angelo didn't like to talk about Marlow. There was an ocean between them, a distance long enough to cut any ties, more than conscious memory.

"He might come back to see you before Christmas."

She wanted to be a Rios sister again and dreamed of being a part of the Rios family constellation- wanting to be the forever young aunt in the family, always staying relevant. Their sons or daughters would have her as a point on a map named aunt.

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Terra arrived home after taking care of Angelo for most of the day. Before nightfall, before being too tired to do anything, she put on her running shoes. She ran through a desert trail behind her house.

At the end of the trail, she stood on top of a stone at the top of a cliff. She looked out, catching her breath. Then she grabbed a fistful of rocks. Limestone, dolomite, siltstone, the ones they studied as Boy Scouts. She was the only girl. There wasn't a Girl Scout troop in their side of town. Picking at each rock in the palm of her hand, she counted each kind. The desert wind pushed them out from her cupped hand. The Earth rumbled and gave way. Falling, stopping, slipping, the hard sand broke underneath her weight and shoes. With the edge of the cliff, things, alive and dead,

came running down. Limestone, dolomite, siltstone, ocotillo, sagebrush, barrel cactus, Mexican elder branches. Once at the bottom of the embankment, she pulled her body out of the thicket without time to think. Needles were sticking out from her knees and along her torso. She pinched out as many she could see.

Limping back home, she figured it was the same mistake Angelo had made at Imperial Beach. On that family vacation, 22 years ago, on the way to the hotel from their day under the sun, after everyone, except Marlow, tested the water, Josefina warned them about the ocean's beguiling nature. To be in the heart of nature required one to constantly look over their shoulder. "The world does not love you. Make sure you remember that. A bolt of lightning will kill you before you hear a thunderstorm whisper." Josefina's voice replayed inside her head. She had never left El Paso before going to San Diego with them. Josefina had given her the ocean and advice on how to avoid the wrath of nature.

Hobbling, she arrived at her apartment hoping there would be a missed call from Angelo. There wasn't. Her legs and hands burned. Sweating and bleeding, how could she have been so stupid? It hurt so much she wiped tears from her face. She remembered Josefina and Wilfredo; neither Angelo nor Marlow ever talked about them. She wished they would. But not all Mexicans are in love with death. Remembering the dead is not an easy mountain to climb.

### **The Color of Things in Manhattan**

It was 2020. Angelo said he was in love with Sophia. Maybe. Maybe not. No. Yes. He was. He was definitely in love with her.

After that, Angelo took another month to call again and called more frequently. There was so much on his mind. Love was on his mind- past and present.

Before Ava, there was Sophia. In early December, Sophia planned on getting to Angelo's apartment a little after 2:00 pm. She arrived fifteen minutes earlier than usual and walked into the snow covered apartment courtyard. Angelo had given her a key since the last summer. She opened the door and walked into Apartment E.

Inside the studio apartment, passing the bedroom in five steps, she opened the window to the garden. She took the potted plants from outside the window and rested them on the window sill.

Angelo edged inside the apartment, "Don't worry."

Sophia screamed and slapped him, "Cabron."

"They're fake plants."

Sophia regained her breath, "I've seen you water them."

"I spray them with alcohol to clean them."

"Well now they're inside, even if they're fake, they won't get dirty."

"Do you want a drink?"

Angelo remembered how it had started. It was after day drinks in summer 2019. She lifted herself into the driver's seat of her new Tesla, her summer blue jean dress skirted up her legs. They were tanned and glowing and there were new freckles. He pointed them out with the tip of his finger. She finally looked at him looking at her.

Seven months later, the tryst was ending. Angelo was leaving the company and Sophia was returning to her ex-husband.

She toasted, "Congratulations, competitor. Good-bye, ex-colleague."

"That's the first time you consider me your colleague."

"Ex-colleague."

“Soon to be dearly missed ex-colleague.”

Sitting on the Murphy bed, Sophia leaned her head over her shoulder, coquettishly. Angelo fell in love with her again, for the same reason- a romantic idea.

“Are you doing better?” He asked.

“I say I’m over it, but I’m not. When you grow up, don’t be like Sloan. And don’t have any kids, Angelo, or at least wait. Sloan and I should have waited.”

“If you two had waited, do you think things would have been different?”

“No, probably not. But I should have waited.”

“You should have waited to have married Sloan or have kids?”

“Which one do you think?”

“You two have been together since you were 11 years-old, which means you’re the same age. You both could have waited to have kids.”

“Maybe I should have waited to meet another Sloan.”

“And then you wouldn’t be with him. I would have been your other Sloan.”

“You’re my first other man, Angelo.” She reached her hand and touched his face.

“How’s Sloan?” Angelo asked, hoping he wasn’t doing too well, renewing his vows, or coming back from the dead in Sophia’s mind.

“I met her,” and leaned her head on her shoulder caressing her bare arms hugging the sheets. “She’s 23 and absolutely beautiful. She’s perfect.”

“How did you meet her?”

“I asked Sloan to introduce me. The three of us met. She said she didn’t know about me or the kids. She apologized for that, too. She said she hopes Sloan and I can work it out, that our story

makes her jealous, how Sloan and I found each other so early in life. She said she always wanted to know her true place- not having to think about it.”

“Takes the mystery out of being alone,” Angelo didn’t know he, like the perfect 23 year-old mistress, was jealous of Sophia and Sloan.

“I asked Sloan to have her meet with him and me so I could see them together. I needed to see them as a couple. They were beautiful together. You can tell the age difference, he’s sixteen years older, but he was older in a complimentary way.”

“Doesn’t sound very complimentary. Or do you mean complimentary in a Continental breakfast sort of way? You have breakfast and don’t feel very complimented at all.”

“It’s not funny, Angelo,” Sophia laughed, swiping tears from beneath her eyes, drying the water before dampening her mascara. “That was part of the deal.”

“What deal?”

“The deal I gave Sloan to come back home.”

Without feeling it, Angelo’s heart sank. This was temporary, too. “Damn it, I’m going to miss you.”

Sophia cradled his cheek, “Be honest.”

“I’m going to miss you like hell.”

“Look at me, be honest.”

“Did you love me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Nobody knows why they love someone, they just do.”

“That’s not true. I do. So why did you love me?”

“I needed to know how big my heart was.”

“Is it a lie you can’t only love one person?”

It should have hurt, “You have to choose who you love,” and it stung.

“I told you.”

“What did you tell me?”

“That Sloan and you would get back together. It couldn’t end any other way. Him leaving after being your boyfriend for almost 30 years, it wouldn’t make sense. I told you since the summer.”

“It hurt so much, but I want my family back.”

“If it did hurt, you kept it out of sight from everyone. At Genetika nobody knew anything about you and Sloan separating. I didn’t know until you told me.”

“I said I was over it. I’m still not over it.”

“I’m going to miss the swank hotels, too. Can we share travel points? Or can I have some compensation for my broken heart? You’re leaving me high and dry.”

“I’ll dispense you advice as compensation. Stay single, Angelo, as long as you can. You’re better off that way. Or at least stay single until you know you’re not going to cheat, because I can see it in your eyes- you’re a cheater,” she kissed him on the cheek and wiped lipstick off his face.

“I want to get married, I do.” He was staring blankly at the air between them. Who was he? A single, solitary man in a navy blue suit without a worry in the world- that’s who he wanted to be. Why did he say it? To be alone, that’s what scared him, to be alone and be okay with it. To be alone and lose touch with all his married friends. To be alone and do something dishonorable, like sleeping with someone who was almost divorced, practically divorced, soon-to-be divorced. It was okay to think that until Sophia stopped being any one of those things.

Sophia rolled over on her back, “I was joking about not having kids, Angelo.”

“Did you know that behind every joke is a half-truth?”

“I’m being serious. You’re ready for a family of your own. Are you seeing anyone?”

“Uh, you?”

“You’re not seeing anyone else, why not?”

“Because you said not to.”

Sophia laughed, “Oh, that’s right. I did. Good. As a complimentary gift, in compensation for your loss, I’ll help you find someone,” Sophia opened Angelo’s leather wallet phone case and social media. “You haven’t posted anything in a year, how come?”

“Playing it low key, remember?”

“Let me take a picture, you look good there.” Sophia snapped the picture and posted it on his profile.

“You haven’t posted anything, either. Maybe you should post something for a change,” Angelo teased Sophia.

Sophia rolled her eyes and said, “No, I like my perfect life. My perfect social life. Why does anyone need to know the sad parts?”

“Is that what you think your profile says about you? That you’re perfect?” He realized, of course, she knew. “What does my profile say about me?”

“Nothing that nobody already knows.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re perfect.”

“Did you know that behind every joke is a half-truth?”

“Who told you that?”

“An ex-girlfriend.” Sophia laughed and kissed him on the cheek.

The Annex Bar had reopened. Sophia’s advice was more pragmatic.

“Don’t buy a house, you don’t need a house. And if you do, don’t buy so much furniture.”

The bartender chimed in, “If I had ever lived with my husband before marrying him, I would have never married him.” The bartender topped Angelo’s tequila, “It’s funny that we’re talking about this, but I dreamed my husband wrapped himself onto me like a snake. I can’t remember if my husband was a snake or if he wrapped his hands around me like a snake.” An older couple sat down at the bar and whisked the bartender away. Sophia walked to the restroom.

In the stall, Sophia wondered what it meant for her to go back to Sloan. There wasn’t a clear answer or feeling. Would it mean anything if her kids ever found out? So far, it was a secret kept by three people, and one of them, the beautiful mistress that reminded Sophia of herself with perfect skin and body was gone. Sophia was sure of that. She was gone. Sophia wondered about going back to Sloan, it didn’t have to mean anything. It could be a bad dream you laugh at or a good dream you forget.

Sophia and Angelo joined at the stairwell, they kissed under a red light, and passed through the velvet curtains. They left the subterranean pint-sized annex by the stairwell. Angelo held his liquor well but it was his mind that did the tripping. Could it work between Sophia and him? If he loved her, maybe. He did love her. Yes, he did. Maybe he needed her.

They moved to a table. The opened windows and doors let cross winds sweep away any possible virus lingering in the air. Angelo sat down. Her brown eyes looked at him. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. They relaxed in the cold.

Sophia dropped her napkin beside her. He bent over to grab the white folded napkin, the rolled elephant disappeared. His fingers found the linen cloth, he lifted it from the carpet, grazing the back of his palm along her tanned knee. Her eyes never looked away.

“We’ve never been so public.”

“No one’s watching. No one cares.”

“Still, it’s exciting.”

Back in Apartment E, they shared their last Xanax. Angelo served a nightcap.

“Do you have any Adderall?”

“I can get some.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you remember the day before we released the home-DNA testing kit, how nervous you were?”

“I was not nervous,” Sophia shot him a look that made her look more annoyed than she actually was.

“You came in late. You were hungover or something wasn’t right. I saw you pull your purse from underneath the table. You took your bag and held it upside down, everything came clattering out. Your pill bottle rolled off. All you said was, ‘Thank, God.’”

“Oh, right. I remember. That was a stressful month. It was Adderall.”

From the corner of the studio, the room began a sunset simulation, the oval smart bulb was plastic but its finish made it look like porcelain. The digital lamp glowed. It transitioned from bright white to burnt orange- a proxy for a sunset. Digital sounds of nature came through the back

of the light: the wind whispered, artificial birds chirped, branches swayed, all of it emulating nature, easing them to fall asleep.

Sophia and Angelo settled into bed. Behind their shut eyes, Sophia imagined the summer months before the pandemic in a garden on vacation with Sloan and the kids. Angelo imagined marrying Sophia. They embraced. In thirty minutes they would fall asleep and dream. Maybe they would dream the same dream.

The next morning, to refill his prescription, Angelo kept his appointment with his therapist. He took his laptop into the miniature kitchenette and swiped the lens cap covering the camera. Sylvio was online.

Sylvio emphasized Angelo's improvements and said, "I see the possibility of reducing the quantity. On our first appointment you sat down across from me with a series of problems. 'Doctor, I can't sleep, I can't relax, I can't focus.' Your brain's chemistry was as choppy as the sea in a storm. All we've done since then is calm it and your mind is seeing reality under a different light."

"Thanks, doc. I feel good about how things are going so far. The city is locking down. Risking it would be risky."

Sylvio laughed, "Did you mean to be funny?"

He wanted to say yes, but knew it was a lie.

"Have you called home? Have you thought about working from home?"

"I have, thank you." Where was Marlow? Where was dad? He hadn't called. He would call as soon as the session ended.

"There might be some peace in visiting home."

"Peace. That's hard to come by. It's rare."

Sylvio agreed. Finding peace was rare, it was a strange phenomenon, as strange as finding a patient who left therapy knowing what they wanted.

“Does everyone have a problem with reality? I don’t know what to call it.” Did other people exaggerate things to get their prescriptions, too?

“There are people in your situation. Yes, you are not alone in that.”

“But even people without the same problems, how many come to you convincing themselves about something you know isn’t true?”

“Everyone, I guess,” Sylvio said and Angelo laughed. “Most of my other patients are true believers in their own reality. Their biggest problems come from not being able to reconcile their reality with the rest of the worlds’ realities. You should appreciate your improvement. Angelo, are you familiar with phantom limb syndrome? We talked about it some years ago when you lost your brother.”

“Step-brother.”

“A piece of you was lost when Wilfredo passed away. You still grieve for that loss. When a person loses a limb, let’s say an arm, despite it not being there, the person may feel an itch, ache, or pain. There is no way of telling the mind that the pain is manufactured by the brain’s customary functions. The wired pathways that were forged never faded as quickly or swiftly as the arm that was lost. A simple remedy is putting the limb that is still there into a mirrored box. The box gives the illusion to the brain that the missing limb is still present. That particular therapy allows the patient to see and touch what isn’t there anymore. Wilfredo isn’t with you or your family anymore, but there are ways you can assuage that emptiness. You said he was a musician?”

“Yes. He loved listening to music.”

“Maybe you can listen to some music when you think about Wilfredo. Maybe you can share a song with Marlow and talk to your brother who is still alive about Wilfredo, that could help. How does that sound?”

It sounded like \$170 a session well spent. Angelo said goodbye and scheduled an appointment in two months and closed his laptop.

At the pharmacy, Angelo and Sophia waited. “Maybe after talking about it all, we won’t need any of this,” Angelo shook the pill bottle. “Maybe we’ll get sober and get back to reality.”

“You keep hoping I stay, but it’s over.”

It didn’t keep Angelo from hoping.

Sophia hoped, too, but she didn’t believe everything she thought.

Back at his apartment, after Sophia left, he sat in the roller caster chair. He looked at the garden. He smelled the jasmine perfume she used to scent his fake garden plants. Sunlight diffused into the garden, changing its colors.

It was getting late. He pulled the Murphy bed down to the wood floor. He set the oval smart bulb to sunrise, and watched the garden turn gray. He imagined the cumulus clouds hovering outside.

The temperature dropped.

Snow fell on Manhattan.

The gentle ice floated into the studio and landed on his lips.

It tasted like seawater.

In the garden, there was a stone that caught his eye. It always did. It glowed red in the afternoon when the sun was out. But the same stone turned purple, almost blue, when it was cloudy. Closing his eyes, if the stone was red he imagined it blue, and if it was blue he imagined it red. He fell asleep.

A phone call woke him up. It was a lawyer calling from El Paso on behalf of Marlow. Marlow had just been assigned executor of his grandmother's estate, but was unavailable.

"Where is he right now? Have you contacted him?"

"No, sir. He's detained under grand theft auto and corpse theft charges."

"Marlow stole a corpse? Was it alive or dead?"

"What?"

"Some people are corpses before they ever die."

"No, this is a dead one."

His half-brother's surprises were surprising. Unimaginable. "Whose?"

"I don't know sir, I don't have any more details regarding the charges. Mrs. Rios provided legal funds. I assumed you would like for me to post bail on behalf of your brother so I have."

"Yes, that's fine. I'll make my way down there."

### **Micro. Wave.**

In the kitchen at the Rincons, the digital clock on the microwave glowed green, blinking 00:00. There was a pencil on the kitchen table. Marlow got a sick feeling to his stomach.

"Do we have homework?"

He dragged his feet to his old room. Stepping onto the bottom bunk-bed, he peeked over the blue aluminum railing. His bare feet landed back on the carpet. The peeling wardrobe, the crooked La-Z-Boy, the Dallas Cowboys lockers were tinted blue with the light coming from the three windows facing the street. A blanket of gray clouds floated above the purple, desert mountains.

*Is it morning, or evening? Were you dreaming?*

He couldn't remember his name. His head was groggy, hazy, aching. Looking up, he stretched, his neck was sore. It felt like he had woken up under the wrong ceiling. What was his name?

Peeking room to room, he came up to a closed door, creaked it open, and slipped in. A photograph on the dresser was encased in a broken, aluminum frame. The picture slipped out. Angelo, Wilfredo, Josefina, Jacinto. Angelo, Wilfredo, Josefina, Jacinto. Angelo, Wilfredo, Josefina, Jacinto. And Marlow. His blood pulsated along his neck, twitching his skin.

*Flex. Shake it off.*

On the dresser was a weathered, navy blue suede luchador mask. A tongue of fabric at the back of the laces was torn at the edges. He pulled it over his face, adjusted his sweatpants, and posed. Looking into the mirror in the restroom, noticing his arms were half the size they used to be, he stopped. Shirtless, his arms, abdomen, and shoulders were broad but sinewy.

*Forget your name again.*

He strolled through the house finding things to do to kill some time. There were height markings, Dallas Cowboys stickers, a wobbly butler cart, broken furniture all around the house. He opened the windows and walked barefoot to the front yard. The concrete was cool on his feet.

He walked towards Wilfredo's tree, a Mexican elder, a tree alive in the spring but didn't seem to like any other season. The desert thunderstorm was in the air. The rains would be there soon.

His phone rang.

It was his abuela's voice, Abuela Estelle.

Was there anything new? There was.

"I'm sure it'll be in the newspaper tomorrow."

"What happened, Abue?"

"Well Susie moved in two weeks ago, she's sweet, she has a granddaughter your age. You might like her, when are you coming?"

"Abue."

"Well, anyway, she barely settled in and they robbed her apartment last night. Guess what they took, mi'jo?"

"What, Abue?"

"They took two things, her television and the urn with her late husband inside. Can you believe that? I want a traditional burial with a casket. It's not supposed to be funny, mi'jo, so don't laugh. Isn't that terrifying?"

*Who the fuck steals an urn?*

"A casket is a good idea. You would be harder to steal that way. Anyone looking for you would have to dig you up and make a bunch of noise, by the time they would be done, I'd be there kicking their ass."

Listening to his grandmother's next story, he walked to the backyard, sat on an eroded wooden bench near the basketball court, and spotted a cigarette butt. Between his fingers, the ember was ashed and black but still smoking. Jacinto had come through the back. Marlow had

missed him. He looked over the backyard's rock wall into the arroyo, the edges brimmed with sage brush, tarragon, prickly pears, and were decorated with punctured footballs, soccer balls, and basketballs. In the desert's distance, gray storm clouds floated above the mesa, "Dad?"

"What did that man say? Are you all coming for me? Don't let me die here."

"Abue, you chose to go there."

"I spared you the choice, it's called love. But don't let me die here. If I do die, promise me you'll get in touch with Angelo."

Angelo, Angelo, Angelo. His grandmother on his mother's side was asking about Angelo. What was it about Angelo? What did Angelo know that he didn't? What could Angelo do that he couldn't? Be less selfish, more considerate, that he could do. "Si, abuela. I promise."

She kissed her phone.

Marlow did too, "Adios, abuela."

He sat on the bench. The thunderstorm's rain arrived and cooled Marlow's back. It would all be over soon like his grandmother had said. But inside of him, a wave of panic sneaked up. He tried shrugging it off. It crawled from inside his skin to the top of his head. He chewed his nails, noticed, and went for a run instead.

Seven blocks down, he stopped. From the fence near the sidewalk, he saw a small group of people, five or six, huddled together underneath black umbrellas outside the Greek Orthodox Church. Pallbearers lifted a casket from the hearse. A man in a black suit came out from the driver's seat of the black Lincoln Navigator.

Marlow passed the fence, crossed the deserted parking lot, and walked to the church entrance. Peeking inside, a priest turned around and knocked on the glass door, startling him.

Making his way back to the street, he wondered, “What am I doing?” He had just avoided a panic attack, but now he was wet and miserable. He day dreamed for a lover to show up in the rain. He would kiss her and take her home. But she wasn’t there. Nobody was.

Standing in the middle of the parking lot, a shiny thing caught his eye- the hearse’s back door handle. It was slightly open. Checking over his shoulder, there were four empty cars and nobody in sight. He unlatched the door and it swung open. A varnished, wooden coffin was inside. Stepping in, he reached the driver’s seat and squeezed into the front. The keys were in the cup holder. He turned the engine on. The windshield wipers swiped the rain away. He pulled out of the parking lot and into the street back home.

At the house, he stationed the Navigator in the driveway, hurried into the house, and opened the garage door.

*Nobody. Nobody saw anything.*

Still drenched, he crouched into the back of the Navigator and creaked open the casket. He peeked inside, it was a small body, about the size of his grandmother, old, elderly, shrunk. He could tell it was a man, but couldn’t see the dead man’s face, all he saw was a chin and a nose.

A light broke through the clouds behind him. The rainstorm was coming to an end.

The garage door was open. He rushed out of the Navigator. The rainwater had pooled at the border of the lip between the driveway and the garage. Rushing, his feet on the pavement slipped. His head landed on the Navigator’s door. His weight jerked him back and his head plopped. Everything went blurry.

He got up, walked to the door, and pushed the button.

Still woozy, he made his way inside the house and landed on the living room couch.

His eyes squeezed closed.

*What the fuck were you thinking?*

*What the fuck did you do?*

*Who the fuck steals a...*

*Sell it on eBay.*

*What about the body?*

They were right, they were always right. Why did he have to do this? Why couldn't he keep his emotions under control? Why was every decision he made drastic and dramatic?

That's why Angelo stopped calling, that's why Angelo didn't visit.

"Angelo would never steal a corpse."

### **A Luchador**

In the patrol car, one cop asked the other, "Who steals a hearse, Jimmy?"

"I don't know, Tony. Some low life with no job."

"I used to be a luchador."

"Which one?"

"La Flama Roja?"

"Mil Mascaras?"

"No. Che Malo Malinche."

Tony turned away, "Oh, yeah, the lowest low life."

"Did you all hear about the incident at Nazareth Hall?"

"What are you talking about?"

"There was a robbery there a day ago. An older lady's apartment was robbed. They took her TV and the urn with her dead husband inside. Do you guys know anything about it?"

"Looks like we have the first serial corpse burglar, Jimmy."

“I didn’t know there was a body inside the coffin.”

“Tell that to you’re lawyer,” said Tony.

“Would you believe me if I told you I thought it was empty- because that’s what I thought. I think it was a case of- what do they call it? Selective hearing but for seeing. When you only see what you want to see. I thought it was an empty coffin. My grandmother needs one, maybe not now. But I can’t afford one.”

“Stop talking,” There was something in his voice Jimmy didn’t want to hear anymore, maybe he was telling the truth. It sounded honest.

“I could have afforded one before, you know. I had a job. Before all of this, I was a luchador, Che Malo Malinche.” That’s who he was. “I was a luchador.”

### **Chiliogon**

There was a guitar player behind the folkloric dancer and Mariachi. They performed a Mexican hat dance behind a transparent plexi-glass- a Mexican Barbie and Ken.

Terra pressed her fingers at the bottom of Angelo’s rib cage, just above his stomach, making him burp. “Is it still there, that hole under your ribs?” She asked.

The waitress took the table’s empty plate.

“It’s more like a curve inward, under my ribs. It’s a small indent.”

She grabbed his hand and put it on her chest just below her neck and above her breasts, saying, “Feel the bone sticking out.”

Above Terra’s left breast, below her collar bone, Angelo felt a bone, “Barely noticeable.” His finger tips pressed it.

“It used to be up to here,” her finger was an inch away from her chest, “My anxiety.”

“You never showed it.”

“My body, chest, every part of me, was constantly tense. My jaw clenched at night. My neck was tight. All of my muscles were contracted. This bone finally gave way.”

“Your anxiety made that bone stick out?”

“The human body is a closed system. What goes inside the mind reflects in the body. I couldn’t feel the anxiety because it was everywhere, my body compensated for it.”

“The hole won’t go away, then?” Angelo clarified.

“You can lessen it with breathing exercises.”

“You mean that bone was sticking out more before?”

“It hasn’t gone away since the sixth grade, but yes, it was more pronounced. It’s a mark I have.”

“What’s the hole about?” Angelo asked, touching the bottom of his chest.

“It’s an imprint of masochism.”

“You’re saying I’m a sucker for punishment?”

“In a way, yes. Your body and mind lived a trauma at one point. But instead of feeling it you sort of crouched away. It wasn’t always there. Maybe when Wilfredo died.”

Angelo sipped on his drink. He didn’t like talking about Wilfredo. He didn’t want to hear the Juan Gabriel’s *Amor Eterno*- Wilfredo’s favorite. Those memories, his family out on the patio drinking, laughing, and singing hadn’t died yet. It was the last song before the music disappeared from their house- before Wilfredo disappeared, before he was found months later.

“It’s better not to poke, Terra.”

“It’s possible you dissociated from your body and stayed up here,” she said, touching his temple. “You didn’t let your body feel the emotion deeply, you cut it out, and put it away, far from your body, inside your mind, but it left a mark, where you wouldn’t notice it, on your body. You

hunch inward, trying to keep you safe.” Terra pushed his hand away from his chest, “It’s just a scar.”

“What else is on your mind? Be honest this time.”

“Are you seeing anyone?”

Angelo regretted having told her about Sophia.

“She’s emotionally unavailable, Angelo. I’m not your therapist. I could be. But if I was I would tell you to look into that. That’s part of the masochism. You’ve made yourself comfortable with painful situations. You’re going to try solving this one, too, until it hurts too much.”

“Fine, I’ll change the topic. How’s Marius?”

She paced herself before answering, “I can’t explain it. I’m sure I won’t have to when you meet someone special. It’s like someone deletes the smallest little worries from your mind. Of course, you start worrying about bigger things. But when someone like Marius comes into your life, you find out how many small little things were on your mind to begin with. Millions, Angelo, millions of small little worries.”

A world without worrying- it sounded like heaven. What place was that?

“That might be why your back aches, you worry so much even, when you say you don’t. Carrying that load finds its way to the bottom of your back. That’s why I’m excited for you to meet someone. Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

“You said before meeting Marius you had millions of small little worries and after you met Marius all those worries disappeared. What do you worry about now?”

She giggled and searched for the answer in the air, “What do I worry about now? Mmm... kids.”

“Already?”

“That’s not all I think about. I have my career. Other things that Marius and I want to do together, but we have to start planning for kids if we want them. I’m thirty-one, so time is kind of important. Technically, you don’t have to worry about it as much. But if you meet someone your age and she wants kids, you’re going to have to think about it.”

“Visiting with you is like visiting my therapist and best friend, an all inclusive experience.”

“Sophia is emotionally unavailable, Angelo. You need to move on and find someone special.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Liar.”

Sophia and Sloan came into his mind. He wished he had met someone when he was 11 years-old like they had. Yes, there had been infidelity between them, but also an undying loyalty. How lucky for two people to be earmarked for each other. Another heaven. A pre-arranged love life, he wouldn’t be required to do anything except be present. Perfect attendance in school-without any effort, Terra had earned perfect attendance.

She snapped her fingers in front of his face, “Where did you go?”

“Nothing, just day dreaming.”

“About what?”

“About what song they’re going to play next,” Mexican Ken was behind the plexiglass, he adjusted his mariachi outfit and bid a goodnight.

Terra and Angelo walked through San Jacinto Plaza. The white Christmas lights hung on the pine cone and sycamore trees as snowflakes and icicles.

“Is Marlow getting out tomorrow?”

“It looks like it. He’s lucky enough to get out of trouble as easy as he gets into it. I wish I was that lucky.”

“I think you are. He needs his big brother right now.”

“He needs to take care of himself.”

“You should come more often- and stay longer. We miss you.”

“I missed you, too,” his speech slurred a little, “I miss you, too.”

“When you see him tell him I love him.”

“He loves you, too.”

He stayed and wandered the plaza. Moving from bench to bench, he became dizzy and sat. The clouds shined silver gray in the purple night. They peeked between the short El Paso skyscrapers. A miniature skyline compared to the one in New York, but the sky was bigger. In front of him was a mountain range of clouds highlighting the rocky mountain range. He traced the clouds with his finger.

It was one thing he did miss from home- the big sky and the day dreaming.

Was he always like this? Was he always the boy looking at the sky, out the window on a long drive, figuring shapes out of nebula? Was he ever anyone else?

How many cloud shapes could he make?

The night’s drinks mixed in his stomach and he threw up over the rail of the park bench.

What was he thinking about just now?

What was he thinking?

A storm of memories flooded his mind.

Wilfredo. Why was he in the arroyo? Josefina. Why couldn’t she stay still?

The Rincon family constellation was down to three. Marlow, Jacinto, and his own grandmother. Three sides of a triangle. He made the shape of a triangle in the sky. With three points on a map, a person could find themselves.

He could imagine a triangle, three sides, easily enough. Another triangle was in the sky and he traced it with his finger. What about four, five, six? Wilfredo, Josefina, Sophia, Terra, Jacinto, Marlow. A rectangle, a pentagon, a hexagon, a heptagon, an octagon, and stopped after getting dizzy again.

How many families would be effected by the end of the pandemic? The news predicted 100,000 deaths. The numbers were getting closer. He couldn't imagine 20 friends on his favorites call list. He couldn't imagine 200, 300, or 400.

There could be more shapes, but he couldn't keep them all in sight. Some were too big.

A one-thousand-sided polygon multiplied by a hundred, a chiliagon, only a machine could see that. If he was a machine he could see a lot more shapes a lot quicker. But there was a limit. He could only care about Marlow for now.

Marlow who had watery eyes the day he carried him to his family's umbrella on that beach day in San Diego.

Jacinto.

Where was Jacinto?

The smallest rainstorm fell underneath his hanging face. His chest ached. His heart burned.

“Fucking heart burn.”

He missed them. He missed his family.

## Wilfredo's Tree

During the hour before the storm of 2009, the house that never felt like home to Wilfredo was empty. Angelo and Marlow were visiting their mothers. He was supposed to be alone.

He glared into the television. Maybe he should have acted drunk. Drunk to cover up his embarrassment. He was holding a beer in his hand when Jacinto walked in. He could have made Jacinto notice the beer and not his feet. Josefina's heels were on him, he wanted to know how they felt. It was nothing. It didn't mean anything.

Why did it have to mean anything?

The shoes were probably just a phase.

It could be a phase.

Who the fuck was he kidding, it wasn't a phase, he knew since the fourth grade.

Why didn't Jacinto say something? A small quip, a joke, anything aloud would have been enough instead of that interminable silence inside the closet. Betting on it, Jacinto, Angelo, and Marlow would laugh about it later that night. They laughed about everything. They would find a way to make this into something it wasn't.

If Jacinto would bring it up, he anticipated it would be later that evening. Almost every evening, they would listen to music, drink, and smoke. They would blast the oldies station and move onto the Mexican station, listening to a variety of music, from ACDC, to Queen, to Black Sabbath, and finish with Juan Gabriel, Jose Alfredo Jimenez, Los Angeles Azules, and Vicente Fernandez.

Sitting in front of the television, imagining the million things that could be said, his toes twisted and turned inside his red Converse shoes.

It was the jokes made at his expense that made him want to punch them. But he admitted, nobody knew their jokes were being made at his expense.

Angelo knew.

Marlow definitely didn't.

Churning his neck, wringing it, sitting on the couch, it boiled his blood to hear Jacinto and Marlow say things like maricon, puto, and faggot after listening to Queen and Juan Gabriel. How could they make fun of someone after singing their songs? Laughing behind someone's back was the most intolerable thing that Wilfredo could imagine.

And Jacinto didn't say a damn thing when he found in him the closet. Not a single sentence was said by him. Jacinto just walked out, pretending that he didn't see anything.

The questions rushed through his mind over and over again. He stared at the television in the living room and decided there wasn't going to be any singing that night. There wasn't going to be more jokes made on his expense. He turned off the television, got up from the couch, and went through the house collecting Jacinto's music, speakers, a stereo, a radio, an mp3, and, most recently, an orange speaker, in the shape of a pill. Outside, in the backyard, he threw them over the rock wall. At the bottom of a steep cliff, the arroyo's dead brush swallowed everything thrown into it.

Finished, he stretched on the couch and felt the glee victory over ignorance. Finally, he would be able to do his homework in peace and quiet.

How would they find out? He laughed and imagined the sequence of events leading up the discovery.

Most likely, nobody would notice. Until evening. Jacinto would go to the kitchen, open a beer, and look for his speaker.

Nobody would laugh.

Nobody would laugh.

The joy faded and blood blushed into his cheeks. A wave of panic swelled over him.

What had he done?

What had he just thrown away?

Jacinto liked to dance, laugh, drink, and be happy, it meant hangovers and some loud fights, but it meant something else, too. There was life inside Jacinto that could wash any sadness clouding over Josefina in an instant.

“Juan Gabriel isn’t dead, he’s like Elvis, they just went home.” Every night, in his drunken stupor, all of Jacinto’s idols were reborn.

Their home, no matter how crowded it felt, was a home for music. Home was a place full of dancing.

What had he done? Why had he thrown it all away? It was the best thing to happen for Josefina and himself.

The phone rang. It was Josefina, “I’m not going to be there tonight. I have a double shift today. Have you eaten?”

“It’s fine, mom. I’m not hungry. Someone’s calling.” He hung up.

It was Jacinto, “Hey buddy, sorry about earlier. I forgot my keys to the restaurant. You know how I’m always forgetting. Have you eaten? Do you want pizza?”

Belittled. The man who owned a whole Mexican restaurant was offering him pizza. There wasn’t any need for patronizing. “No, thank you, Jacinto. I’m fine,” and hung up.

What was wrong with him? Why didn’t his house ever feel like home? Why didn’t any house feel like home? Why couldn’t he be happy like Angelo, Marlow, and sometimes Josefina.

What was inside him that couldn't make him like them? Was it the constant melancholy him and Josefina shared? Was it the nature of his secrets and desires? What secrets did the Rincons keep?

There had to be something behind their happiness. To be so happy must have meant they were hiding something. Covering it up with joy. Belly laughs for the dumbest jokes. But not him or Josefina. They were cut from another cloth, fallen from another tree, Cain to their Abel.

He rushed outside, the trees rustled in the air, countless branches stretched from the Mexican Elder, its leaves floated as if underwater, submerged in air. He climbed onto a limb and stretched his arm. His cell phone moved side-to-side hope it would catch the signal from one of the speakers in the arroyo.

He tapped on the name of the orange pill-shaped speaker, it was labeled Storm Chaser, the one Marlow had given to Jacinto for his birthday, and connected it. He hit play. From the top of the hill, above the arroyo, he heard music.

A faint hsssss began and stopped. It started again. He hopped onto the top of the hill from his step-dad's backyard rock wall. He made his way down the steep embankment. He slipped. Caliche soil avalanched into his jeans, shoes, and socks. A cloud of sand trailed his descent into the arroyo.

Without time to notice the pain, he dusted himself off and followed a small trail carved out by him and his brother's footsteps. A punctured basketball and football hung on prickly pear and a Mexican elder. He found CDs and took them up. It was going to take a few turns to get everything back up.

The storm, a collection of clouds like wild mushrooms floated less than two miles away, and moved as fast as a giant turtle.

Stepping deeper into the dried desert shrubbery, pricking and pinching, the music from the orange pill-shaped speaker sounded clearer. Juan Gabriel's voice echoed, "Mira mi soledad, Mira mi soledad, Que no me sienta nada bien." The plants of the desert made the music echo. The chorus, Wilfredo's face flushed red.

*This isn't happening.*

What happened earlier that afternoon, it couldn't have happened.

*This is not happening.*

Dancing in his mother's heels, discovered by Jacinto.

*No. It couldn't be.*

In her dress.

Vinyl records, cassette tapes, more CDs, one of the stereo speakers, he grabbed them, dusted off the dirt, and took them up. The sight of the trail was blurry with his tears. That night, if he saved all the music, he would do his best to get drunk! Be happy and get drunk!

The music kept playing.

Juan Gabriel was singing the misery for everyone, he didn't have to be miserable. There were songs for that.

He hurried into the arroyo's thicket.

The thunderstorm released its rain. The music was muffled.

Where was it coming from?

Why did he do this?

Why couldn't he just be happy?

God damn it.

Kicking up a mud storm beneath his boots, he rushed into the bracken. Rain pooled in the arroyo. He arrived at a small opening underneath the ocotillo and cactus. Underneath a dried sage brush, he got on his knees and stomach and stretched his hand into the yellow tumbler. His fingers tips touched the orange speaker. Stretching further, he grabbed it and yanked it out.

A lightning rod broke from the clouds above and struck the Earth.

Wilfredo shuddered from his jaw to the heart of his chest, his hands covered his ears. A telephone pole fell down, the wires and electric box sparked flames. The rest of the desert, still green, didn't catch fire.

*Home.*

He slugged to where the arroyo rose to meet the family backyard. The arroyo was streaming downhill. He tried digging his steel-toes into the wall of the caliche soil, but the rain drops made the clay admixture soft and the wall crumble with every kick. He kicked harder. The soil fell and dissolved into a puddle of mud.

The only other way out of the arroyo was the hiking trail that opened into Colony Cove's parking lot a mile away. It was a strip mall and Wilfredo saw it in the rain.

Walking the trail, the deluge made the heels of Wilfredo's boots slip. Sliding, a cactus needle caught his falling hand and punctured through his palm like an ice pick. Wilfredo bent over, stepped his boot on the green, cactus palm, and pulled his hand. The needles came out and his blood mixed with the ravining mud and water.

His lungs were heaving. His body was exhausting quickly. All he wanted was to get home and eat pizza.

The water rose.

Dead brush floated.

Looking towards Colony Cove, there wasn't anyone to yell to.

The backyards of the houses along the arroyo were empty. Living rooms glowed and flashed digital blues and pinks from their television sets.

His fist clenched onto the limb of a Mexican elder. He could wait there as long as he needed to. His grip wouldn't break.

The branch snapped.

His hand grasped for another limb, but there wasn't any. He swam in the chocolate water. His clothes caught on the sharp elongated arms of an ocotillo. Kicking underneath the water, his boot stamped on a barrel cactus, a tuna flower rose to the surface along with the rest of the dead thorn brush. Finally, the ocotillo released him.

The backyard of the house that was never his, the one that would always be his step-father's, grew smaller and smaller until it was gone.

### **Marlow's Menudo**

The house needed renovations. Marlow went inside.

Angelo studied their old house. A ranch style home, elongated, one-story, was as dusty as he remembered leaving it. Shingles were hanging off on one end. The deck's paint flaked onto the hard caliche soil.

Marlow slurped a spoonful of menudo at the dinner table, drops of sweat collected on his brow, "Spicy." He took the one piece of toasted buttered white bread, broke it, and gave a piece to Angelo. He dipped his share into the red stew and ate it.

"We don't talk about money at the dinner table, but we have to," Angelo said.

"Did you finally win the lottery?" He rose from the table and took his plate to the sink.

“Your grandmother’s lawyer called me. He’s the one who arranged everything to get you out.”

Marlow took his tablecloths to the faucet and shook it. The crumbs fell away, and he began cleaning the dishes- Josefina’s pueblo-style bowl.

Angelo hesitated on what to say next, on how to break the news to him. He should have asked Father Santiago to be there, “Estelle passed away last night. In her sleep.”

Marlow was tired of getting angry with himself. It figured. When he fucked up, he fucked up at the worst time.

“The nurse at the hospital said she passed away peacefully. I’m sorry.”

“What’s going to happen to her?”

“The lawyer has her arrangements in order. She left you her estate- everything she had, it’s yours.” He reached for the oregano, sprinkled it into his bowl and stopped. He could have waited until after they finished, after the table was swiped clean.

“What’s going to happen to her body, did they tell you?”

“They’re going to cremate her- part of the pandemic stuff.”

Marlow’s hands snapped Josefina’s bowl in two.

“Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah, there’s nothing I can do about it, even if I wanted to, right?”

“I guess so.” Angelo took his unfinished bowl to the kitchen sink, returned to the dinner table clean, and swiped it clean. “It’s going to be a month before they get her ashes to you.”

Marlow got back to the table with two cold beers.

“Are you okay?”

“Am I okay? Okay is better than most, right?”

“Your lawyer says he’s confident he’ll manage your case without any jail time. The courts are overworked. And about your grandmother’s estate, he’s preparing everything for you to sign. You’re going to be taken care of as far as money can take care of someone. You won’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“How long are you staying?”

“Unless you need something from me, I’ll leave tomorrow.” Did he miss anything? No. That was it. Marlow was out of jail. Home. Safe and sound. He needed to get back to his work in New York and see Sophia.

“I don’t need the money. I don’t want it. I don’t want any of it,” reached for a napkin and blew his nose.

“A housekeeper wouldn’t hurt, a few renovations, a new gym in the garage, new HVAC, you can train seriously for a fight, I don’t know, whatever you want,” and looked around the house.

“The house is fine.”

Outside the window near the rock wall, planted in desert soil, was a palo verde. Its yellow blossoms, even in winter, tricked by the mood swings of the desert weather, marked its undecided nature, it could be a tree, maybe a shrub. “You can use the money to fix the garden. The money doesn’t have to mean anything. You can take it, put it in the bank, forget about it, and save it for a rainy day.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It’s not that hard, either.”

Marlow could forget anything, why not this? It was what he envied most about his little brother. His own mind couldn’t forget a single thing. Birthdays, deadlines, due dates, court dates, the law, promises, everything was forgettable, but not this, why?

“Even if I took it, you wouldn’t take a dime. You wouldn’t let me share it, would you? Because in this country, like dad says, we each get the share we earn.”

“I can’t trick you into taking the money.”

“It’s not a switch in my head. I won’t take the money and pocket it, and forget about it. I can’t. I wish I could, but I can’t. That’s all.”

“You can go back to school.”

“Fuck school, I don’t need any more school.”

“There are other kinds of schools. You can go to a technical school. Learn a trade, what’s wrong with that?”

“And be a plumber?”

“Plumbers make good money. You can earn your money and not have to touch your grandmother’s estate.”

“And what would the family think?”

Angelo slammed the beer on the table, “What fucking family, Marlow?” He adjusted the table. “You can’t keep pretending that everyone stepped out of the house for a gallon of milk. You can’t wait for everyone to come back.” The bottle left a crack on the withered wooden table.

“Can you stay longer?”

Accepting the invitation would tie him back into household matters. No. He had left for a reason.

“Have you seen him?”

“You mean dad? You think his mind constantly wanders, but when he’s here, his feet touch the ground and he comes back to reality.”

“You’ve seen him.”

“He was here before the accident.”

Nobody accidentally stole a hearse with a corpse. Angelo pinched his brow. “What was he here for?”

“He wanted to see my new outfit. Can I show you something?”

Marlow left the kitchen and came back from the living room. His luchador mask covered his face. “Do you like it?” It was glossed over, navy blue, shining with white trimmings. The eyes and veins were a tapestry of colored linings, lime green, baby sky blue, bright red, tasseled at the back in a ponytail.

“What do you think?”

He couldn’t deny it. It was his best mask. He forgot about what he was doing there. Maybe, he could forget things.

“It’s great! Seriously, it’s fantastic. When did you get it?”

“Get it? I made it. I’ve had a lot of down time. I started stitching.”

Maybe not taking the money was what he needed. All the money in the world wouldn’t steal the hunger away from a starving soul.

“How long are you staying?”

“Tonight. I’m staying at an Airbnb near the university.”

“Stay. I’ll take the couch. You can take our room. Are you hungry?”

“We just ate.”

“I’m always hungry.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Marlow opened the fridge and took out his favorite vegetables. Angelo went to the fridge and opened another cold beer.

“Do you have any tequila?”

### **A Trail of Posts**

Terra was about to go inside. She made out Angelo and Marlow’s silhouettes. But near the window, she noticed the front porch bench was broken. It was swaying in the wind. Paint chipped away and fell off.

She grabbed the chain that was hanging from the porch’s ceiling and hooked it onto the arm rest’s metal hook. The seat’s wooden runs were snapped, but it was level. She balanced herself on it well enough to sit. It was dusty unlike the varnished bench she sat on as a kid listening to Angelo, Marlow, and Jacinto sing.

Where was Jacinto?

She needed fatherly advice. She wanted to hear honest advice from honest eyes. She hoped he still had them. Terra swiped her phone and waited on the bench. She could play house a while longer, secretly, she was their foster sister.

Angelo stepped out.

“Are you staying longer? Are you working from home?”

“It’s home over there now.”

“You won’t take two homes over one?”

“No. I need to focus. Do you want to go inside? It’s cold.”

“My allergies are bad,” she swiped her nose. She laid two sturdy wooden palettes on the seat.

“It rained yesterday.” The air and sky were clear, cloudy and cold but clear. He patted the seat, “It’s broken.” From the corner of his eye, not wanting to look, he sensed something had happened.

“I can’t believe it. I feel like an idiot visiting you and Marlow.”

It was better not to ask, but he sat.

“I found Marius’ phone yesterday, laying out on the couch.”

He didn’t have to.

She scrolled through pictures. One by one, she pinched the screen with her fingers, zooming-in to each one.

“I asked him what had changed. He said nothing, but that he had found someone on the internet and it was a one time fling. But he was lying, because there were more messages.”

“When did this happen?”

“Last night and this morning.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I thought I knew him. I thought I knew who he was. I should have seen it coming,” a laugh escaped from between her teeth, “My God, a Mormon runaway! How could I not have seen it coming! The writing was on the wall staring at my dumb fucking face.”

“They still do that?”

“No, but maybe that’s why he ran away. Just yesterday everything was okay. It was the way it was supposed to be. It was…”

“Perfect.”

“Yes! And now it’s ship wrecked. Completely fucked. I don’t know what to do with myself Angelo. I don’t know what I’m going to do. It feels like the world shrunk.”

“The world is small.”

“A tiny piece of the world was cut out for me. It was beautiful and small and big enough. It was everything I wanted. But the world’s not small, Angelo, we are. I’m scrolling through each

picture. Each one feels so fake. I feel like I'm looking at somebody else. But it's me. And it's him. And that girl, that stupid girl, inside the picture, she's dead."

"Well if she was stupid, good thing she's dead, too." Angelo recalculated. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

"Then I look at him. His dimples, his curly hair, his teeth, what was going through his mind? What was going through mine? Was he always thinking about this, why didn't he bring it up before? Was he always doing it? Angelo, I'm going back to each picture I ever took to see where it began. I can't see it. There's nothing that screams, right there! It was all fake. A trail of pictures and posts that didn't go anywhere. A dead end. It's dead. We're dead."

She took the handkerchief he offered, "Before coming here, at my parent's, I found a box full of pictures and little things. It's where I would put all my things from him. That's where it all belongs, in my secret box inside my parent's house behind the walls, underneath the plaster. It smells old. Aged paper. Old pictures. Stale greeting cards. It smells like home. I want to burn it. I want to burn him out of my mind. He's all over my body. I feel so weak. Angry, at the same time, does it make sense? He lied to me. He bewitched me. He put down a trail of crumbs that led nowhere. I was picking each one. Damn him, Angelo, damn him to hell. Eight years of my life."

"You can try and make a story out of all those pictures. But you said it yourself- they're dead. That's not you. She's gone. Marius in the pictures is gone, too. You can make sense out of it in that way. And that would be the half-truth. Don't try and see further than that right now. Let the storm pass and see what's left in the wreckage. Don't give up on the idea, I did, but you don't have to."

"What's the idea?"

"That a dream can be honest, I guess."

“I’m exhausted, Angelo. Stay longer. Marlow needs you. I need you. Come back home.”

“I’ll try, I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“I’m not asking you to know, I’m asking you to stay.”

“I’ll try.”

“You can’t fool me, Angelo. I know who you are. You always look so busy, but you’re not that busy. I know you’re afraid of coming back home. But it doesn’t have to be the way you think it is. You can stay and live your own life. You can stay and have your own family. But you can stay, that’s for sure. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing. If you decide to leave, that’ll be a shame, but that’ll be your decision.”

“Do you miss Boston?”

She paced her breath, “Sometimes in the winter. I loved the campus out there. Visiting Martha’s Vineyard, I’ll miss October and the oak trees.”

“Why did you come back?”

“I haven’t come back, yet. But I can come back if you do.”

He could come back. Or he could visit more often. There was a time in El Paso that emulated the fall in New England- it lasted three weeks. The desert was decisive. It was cold or it was hot. And it could change its mind in the middle of a week or a season.

“What would I do here?”

“Won’t they let you work from home for a while? You’ve been up there since the beginning of the pandemic. You could tell them you need to spend some time with your family. That’s all. Give it a month, maybe two, if you don’t like it, you can always go back. What do you think?”

“I’ll ask them.”

“The worst that could happen is that you spend Christmas and New Year’s with us lowly people.”

“You’re lowly now?”

“Come South.”

That didn’t sound so bad. Maybe Terra was to him what Marius was to Sophia- someone from childhood who got old with you until you promised you’d be there when you died.

“What about Sloan? I mean, have you talked to Marius?”

“I can’t stand his voice. I want him to die.”

“He might fix his head over this. Or maybe he gets run over by a bus.”

“I hope he does.”

“Me, too.”

“Something is going to happen. Maybe not like that, but something will happen and you’ll be able to make up your mind about it all. It’s inevitable, destined, pre-ordained, fixed.”

“What is?”

“Not knowing, I guess, until you do.”

Terra’s heart lifted when she adjusted her seat on the bench. And it came down slightly again when she laid her head on Angelo’s shoulder.

“I feel like I did when Wilfredo died. I feel like I lost someone.”

“Marius.”

“Not just Marius, I lost my future family. The family of my dreams. The one I was building inside my head. It was my secret family. Marius and me would talk about it. Every time I saw him, it was like a breath of life to each and every kid I wanted. I think about them like real people. It’s my memory of imagining them. I feel so stupid.”

“A memory of the future. That’s a neat idea.”

“Yeah, that does sound stupid. Living something that hasn’t happened yet. Loving people that don’t exist. Hoping to see someone invisible.” The pictures she scrolled through were the most visible evidence of it existing. The pictures on her phone, stored somewhere in the cloud of data above them, was proof that her dream had died. She believed in rescuing her old life. “I can’t stop thinking where it went wrong. I can’t stop my head from rewinding, again, and again. It’s stuck on a loop. Angelo, I feel like I’m going crazy.” She burst into tears. It was over. It was all over. Bad luck won over all her plans. Out of all the people she could have loved, why had she fallen in love with Marius?

“If you’re going crazy, and if you’re saying you’re going crazy, you’re still here, Terr Bear.” He pressed his fingers on the bone that protruded from the higher part of her chest.

“Ouch.”

“You see, you’re still here.”

She hugged him, rested her head on his chest, and closed her eyes. For a windless moment, lighter than the dust resting on the bench, there was no Marius. There was no memory of Marius. There was only the heart beat of her other chance.

He kissed her.

She kissed him back.

Her lips took him embraced by his chest and arms. She stopped. Angelo could be Marius.

Not again.

“No.”

“I can...”

“Stop.”

She lifted herself from his chest, with her thumping heart signaling an array of indecipherable emotions. Angelo was everything she needed. But it couldn't be him.

"I love you, Angelo."

"I love you, too."

"I know, but I can't. There's too many things."

"Like what?"

She wanted someone like him. The dream of having his children flashed in her mind for a split second before she silenced it to go away. The feeling, the urge, she pressed her hand on the bone protruding from her chest. They were her dreams. She wanted to make it stop. The dream machine inside her mind came to a halt. Then Angelo disappeared. Her dreams carried her on the bench, swaying gently until a breeze lifted the dust and she felt her feet touch the wood on the deck.

"There's three reasons."

Oh, God. A list.

"First, I had the same feeling with you as I had with Marius. And I don't want to think that what happened with him could happen with you. I don't want to risk it."

"I won't hurt you like he did."

"That's what he said, too."

"What else?"

"I'm worried about your political inclinations. I respect your opinions, but I think there's a gap that's too much."

"Are you serious?"

"Third, my brother's name is Angelo and that makes it kind of weird for me."

“But...”

“I really like you Angelo. I always will. I’m sorry.”

“I have three reasons why we should try,” and he went on to explain in vague terms his need for her body.

She listened to him as a friend would.

Inside the house, in the kitchen, Marlow was cooking his evening vegetables.

Outside, in the basketball court, the netting on the rim was being undone by the wind, the tatters and soft pieces of net were falling, carried into the arroyo, on the other side of the backyard wall, Jacinto came out of the thicket.

He climbed to the top of the hill, jumped over the rock wall, walked across the cement court, slid the screen door, and walked into his house.

Marlow, stirred the beans with Josefina’s old wooden spoon, he heard the sliding door open and looked up, “Hey, dad.”

### **A Prodigal Father**

Jacinto’s face was hidden behind a red bandanna.

“You look like you’re about to rob a bank, dad.”

Jacinto sat down and shook off the dirt from his cowboy boots. The ones that Josefina had bought him on their last Christmas. In two weeks it would be Christmas, again. There wouldn’t be new ones under their tree. There wouldn’t be a tree. He slipped his boots off. “Who’s that outside?”

Marlow peaked out the window, “It looks like Terra.”

“Tell her she needs to go home.”

Marlow walked to the front door, opened it, and peaked his head, “Terra, my dad’s here. You’ve got to go.”

“Mr. Rincon?” Terra sprang from the bench and made her way inside. One step in, she saw Jacinto.

“Damn it Terra, I said get out!”

The bark pushed Terra on her heels. Confused, she ran out the door with her face hidden in her hands.

Angelo walked in, “What’s the matter with you?”

“It’s not safe,” Jacinto coughed, wheezed, and leaned his body on the corridor’s wall.

“Your brother can help me, don’t worry Angelo, you can go.”

Marlow and Angelo fastened a blue hospital mask around their face.

“What are you putting that on for?”

“You might have the virus, dad.”

“No,” and pulled the mask off of Marlow’s face, “I won’t have it.”

“You’re sick dad,” Angelo interrupted.

“You’re afraid of a bug, Angelo?” He coughed, “What are you doing here anyway?” His sons laid him on the couch.

“You’re a doctor now, too?”

Marlow turned to Angelo, “What’s your problem?”

“It’s fine, Marlow. Your brother’s leaving.”

Jacinto pulled the red bandanna to his chin, “I’m starving. Is there any food?”

Marlow went to the kitchen and returned to the living room with a bowl of menudo. Jacinto took a sip of the broth and coughed it out. “It’s spicy as hell,” and tried lifting himself off the couch, “I need to be somewhere?”

“Where are you going, dad?”

“What’s the Yankee doing back in my house?” He cleaned his mouth with his bare hand and wiped it on his jeans. His beard was nearly all gray.

“He’s here to help me with some legal stuff, dad. My grandma died.”

“That woman hated me. You boys got a light?” Marlow fetched a lighter from the kitchen and came back.

“What are you doing smoking in the kitchen? Josefina doesn’t like that,” Marlow interrupted.

“Josefina has been gone a long time, son. And she’s forgiven me. Ain’t that right, Josefina?” The three of them stood in the quiet kitchen. “I’m late. I have to go.”

“Where are you going, dad?”

“Nowhere you would like to see, so don’t bother. Marlow, we need to go.” Marlow took the dishes to the sink, swiped the surface clean, and pushed the chairs under the table.

“Where are you guys going?”

Jacinto stood from the couch and dragged his feet into the hallway.

Angelo waited at the kitchen table like the times when everyone would walk away.

In the hallway, Jacinto took his rifle from the gun cabinet. Marlow prepped his own. The eldest saw the similarity in their movements and gestures. Josefina would point it out. Now he saw it. They cleaned their guns in the same rhythm, they tightened and loosened their belts, and both wiped the sweat off their brows. The same moreno complexion.

“Where are you going, dad?”

Jacinto’s breath convulsed. He coughed, leaned on the wall, and slid down to the floor. He uncrossed his legs and stretched them further. Marlow came up to him. Angelo tapped Marlow on the shoulder, signaling him to make room. Marlow moved away and Angelo crouched.

From the back of his pocket he pulled out a hospital mask and pulled it over his dad's ears, covering his mouth. His finger lifted in the air, signaling his dad. "Keep it on, viejo. We don't know how sick you are."

"We're running out of time, mijo."

"I know." There was a time he wasn't so strange. That was a long time ago. Before Wilfredo and Josefina left his home and soul. Since then, he was always running and out of time. He looked at him coughing, the weakness, exhaustion, the lids of his eyes closing. He might as well be drunk.

The two brothers took Jacinto into the master bedroom. They laid him down and Marlow covered him under Jacinto's grandmother's blanket, still in one piece, still warm, still green, brown, and turquoise, still smelling like coffee.

"Get some sleep, dad. You need to get better before we go anywhere," Marlow said.

"Have you guys been to the restaurant? Has anyone checked up on it?"

Marlow answered, "Things are fine. Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying, I'm asking."

"We'll be here, dad."

Angelo closed the door behind him.

Trapped- he needed to disappear.

### **Yes No**

Angelo returned to the apartment Airbnb. It was 10:00 pm. Late but he needed to speak with Marlow's lawyer.

"Mr. Contreras?"

"Yes."

“It’s Angelo Rincon, Marlow’s half-brother.”

“Yes?”

“I had a question regarding Marlow and Jacinto.”

“Who is Jacinto?”

“My father.”

“Ah, yes.”

“I had a question concerning my brother’s inheritance.”

“Yes?”

“My half-brother lives with my father, and I’m currently concerned about Marlow coming into possession of that inheritance while living with my father. I was wondering if in Estelle’s testament she stated anything concerning him. If she had, I was hoping there could be a way of safeguarding Marlow from inheriting the assets while living under my father’s house.”

“Has something happened?”

“No, not yet.”

“Is there something that can happen?”

“I’m not sure...”

“Do you have a lawyer, Mr. Rincon?”

“I don’t.”

“Do you have a dollar?”

“Do you take card or can I send it to you?”

“Yes, please, do.”

Angelo reached into his pocket and took out his phone. With a tap, “I’ve sent it to your email.”

On the other end of the line, Mr. Contreras checked his phone, “Excellent. Now, as your lawyer. What is the problem?”

“The problem is that my father, Jacinto, seems to be involved in some kind of activity that I’m not entirely sure is legal or not.”

“What kind of activity?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Is there something you are sure about?”

“It’s something of a mental health condition. My father’s mental state is deteriorating. But I only know so much. He’s rather private.”

“Is it suspicious?”

“Paranoiac.”

“Was there any activity that you saw that might have been construed as illegal?”

“No, nothing of that sort. My father retrieved his rifle and was asking Marlow to take him somewhere.”

“Is Marlow able bodied?”

“Yes.”

“Is Marlow’s mental state in good and stable condition.”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

“What do you see?”

“I think you may be conspiring.”

“How so?”

“There’s nothing that I can do from what you’ve stated.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ve hired me as a your lawyer concerning your half-brother’s inheritance. And you’re asking to know if there is a way to keep the inheritance away from him until his living situation changes, until maybe, he moves out of your father’s house?”

“Is that something you would advise?”

“Yes no,” Mr. Contreras cleared his throat, “Meanwhile, you’ve also acknowledged there not being any illegal activity, only the presumption that something illegal may or may not be happening. And Marlow seems to be in good standing as an independent adult without any threats to his physical or emotional state by an external party, such as your father, Jacinto.”

“Yes.”

“Good, we agree. All I can see is that your call can be considered more conspiratorial in nature than what you’ve told me so far concerning you father and Marlow.”

“I see.”

“But I understand your concern. Estelle Rios did mention Jacinto.”

“In what way?”

“That in the event of her funeral, which may not be the case given the current events, Jacinto must not attend her funeral.”

“Did she mention why?”

“Only that she didn’t trust him. Would you know why?”

“Yes... no,” Angelo stayed on the line and waited, Mr. Contreras stayed silent. “Another thing, I’m leaving back to New York early tomorrow morning. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Could you inform your brother I have been trying to contact him. He hasn’t answered my calls, unfortunately.”

“I’ll speak with him. Is there anything you need from me regarding the estate?”

“I’m afraid not. You’ve done everything she asked of you.”

“Did she leave anything regarding me?”

“Only that I reach out to you before reaching out to your brother, and I’ve done that.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes.”

The next morning Angelo was leaving to the airport. His bags were in his car when he received a phone call from Mr. Contreras. He parked his rental car. Annoyed. Inconvenienced. This whole trip was unnecessary. Everything was fine. Still, he picked up.

“Angelo?”

“Yes.”

“It’s your lawyer.”

“Aha.”

“I looked over things and there’s something you should know about.”

“What is that?”

“I forgot to mention that Estelle Rios has your name as second beneficiary. In the case, God forbid, something happens to your brother, you would be in charge of her estate.”

“Did anything happen?”

“No, just that.”

“Had a change in heart?”

“I tend not to disclose the second beneficiary name unless it becomes absolutely necessary. In your case, I figured it would be in my interest to let you know.”

“Why is that?”

“To avoid a guilty conscience if anything were to happen.”

“Do all lawyers prepare for that?”

“I’m afraid not, it comes with experience.”

“How many years have you been in legal work?”

“Enough to know when something is afoot.”

“Something is afoot in my family’s situation then.”

“No and yes. One never knows these things, really.”

### **Houses on the Wall**

After the call with Mr. Contreras. From the red rental compact car he hated smelling, Angelo postponed his flight to New York and extended his stay at an Airbnb he had rented.

He crossed into Juarez and drove to his grandmother’s house. A ten minute drive down Avenida 16 de Septiembre, a right on Gomez Morin, the restaurants were closed and the streets muted.

Her house had just been painted, all white, surrounded by graffiti-tagged crumbling concrete walls. The baker’s shop was open but closed due to the pandemic, and the corner store was closed.

His aunt opened the door, they wanted to hug and kiss, but waved six feet apart. At the small hallway entrance, a series of ceramic clay houses hung on the wall in the entrance. One of them was made by him as a child. His grandmother and mother bought the ceramic houses white. It was his job to paint and decorate the one they gave him, gluing miniature tables, chairs, pots,

flowers, anything he wanted the house to be. There were 15 other houses, all of them different to the one house in which his grandmother lived in for 89 years.

Inside his grandmother's room, he laid beside her on the queen-size bed, "Como estas, abuela?"

Tears began to swell up in her eyes, she pouted and whimpered. "I want to die already. How much longer?"

He interrupted the thought, "Almost, grandma. It's almost here. And when it gets here, you'll dust your hands off without any pain and say, 'done.'" He dusted his hands with his arms stretched to the ceiling so she could see what he meant. She placated her whimper to an exhalation and moved her crooked right hand to wipe the tears from her face. She reached further, her bony arm touched up her hair as best she could. A breath of tranquility passed through her teeth. She opened her mouth and took a piece of honey-baked ham he slipped under her teeth. Her head nudged to see his hands, and she nudged back. His aunt was there, in that moment, they could hear the birds in the backyard chirp. His grandmother had been asking about her death for many years. It was a combination of arthritis and chronic pain that left her bedridden for the last eight years- she was tired, exhausted.

Angelo's grandmother fell asleep. He looked around her room. Every wall was filled with paintings and photographs. On her dresser were the jewelry, brooches and pins that hadn't been worn in eight years. Clinging to a frame was a newspaper article with Angelo and his friends graduating from college. It was fading. There was a marking behind it, illegible but his grandmother's handwriting. Every picture had her writing, marked by date, location, and age. The opposite wall was different only that it was filled with hand-drawn pictures from all her grandchildren.

“My children,” Angelo’s grandmother said before falling asleep again. She was looking at the same wall he was.

Each grandchild was “her” child, but how could she mean that? How could she remember everyone’s birthday? Was there a room in her heart for each one of them?

On the headboard, a small trinket he had sent to her from Mexico City was hanging- a pink, pillow cactus key chain. He had forgotten about it. Would he feel anything when he got it back? He left the bedroom and walked into the living room.

Looking into her room from the hallway, Angelo wondered what other markings might be on her body. Maybe her chest had a bone sticking out like Terra, or maybe her back was hunched with a hole in her chest- but probably not. Angelo’s grandmother had a heart filled with “her” children, all of her grandchildren, there wasn’t emptiness, no inward dent underneath her ribcage.

Leaving his grandmother’s house, he hugged his aunt to say goodbye. On her right side, Angelo felt her shoulder blade- it was tight and twisted.

He remembered her aunt’s story. She almost married at eighteen. But her fiancée was forced by his family to marry the woman he impregnated. Was the twisted shoulder blade a marking of being stabbed in the back?

His aunt blessed him and they prayed. He estimated for about ten minutes. He wondered if he would ever get rid of the rush to be somewhere else. The factor of being inconvenienced- would he ever get rid of that? He stopped himself. Where else did he have to go?

On the bridge back to El Paso, there were twenty bodies walking in between cars. A man with a giant pot belly, it stuck out by at least two feet in front of him. It held still, motionless, like

a rock, even as the man walked. There was a girl with a limp. She ran after a hand that was holding a few dollars from a window two cars in front of him.

Was it okay not feeling anything?

Was he numb?

He should have felt something.

### **State of the Family**

“Take him his plate, will you?” Marlow asked.

“Don’t you have anything lighter like chicken soup?”

“I didn’t put any chili in this one.”

“Looks like a hangover cure,” and took the menudo plate.

Angelo opened the door to the master bedroom. Jacinto’s head peaked above his shoulder.

“Wilfredo, is that you?”

Angelo stopped at the doorway. There was something innocent in his voice, the same voice he used when asking Josefina for coffee in the mornings. “It’s me.”

“Let me see you.” The room was dark, a slither of afternoon sunlight crept through the curtains.

“It’s muggy in here,” he placed the tray on the ottoman near his dad’s bedside, opened the curtains, then the windows, and sprayed the room with a disinfectant mist bottle. Saturday morning chores for Josefina.

The curtains that used to be green were now faded to gray. The broken sofa recliner in the corner was covered by Josefina’s dresses. Jacinto’s clothes covered the dresser. On the floor were his work boots that needed new soles, Josefina would have taken care of that.

“I need you to take this test,” Angelo pulled out a nasal swab from his pocket, it was enclosed inside a plastic case.

“You win, buddy,” and lifted his head.

Angelo swabbed the back of Jacinto’s throat.

“I don’t have it.”

He put it back into the plastic vial.

“You don’t believe me.”

“Cover your face.”

Jacinto did as he was told and grabbed the tray to his bed.

Angelo pulled the ottoman with his feet and sat.

“Angelo, I know what happened to Wilfredo.” He signaled Angelo with his index finger to the dresser. On it was an orange pill-shaped speaker. “Do you remember the night Wilfredo disappeared? Do you remember my music stuff was outside in the rain, my guitar, my stereo? You boys gave it to me for my birthday. It disappeared that night, too, until I found it. It showed up in the backyard.”

The muscles in his jaw clenched. Not again.

Jacinto paced his breath, “A couple of weeks ago I received a signal from Wilfredo or maybe from God. There was a song playing in the supermarket. I was walking out the door when I saw it. It was a missing children report. The picture was faded but it was your brother. I asked the store manager about it. They couldn’t give me any useful information. How could my boy still be up there after so many years? I wasn’t sure if the picture was Wilfredo or not, but it had to be! Why else would I find my speaker? I stopped at every supermarket in town. Some of them had the same poster. Can you believe that? I started going by every day to check on who had been putting

them up. I asked the managers who was in charge and they said nobody. That it was a community board, nobody was in charge of cleaning it up or monitoring it. I started thinking that maybe Wilfredo is the one who's still putting his own bulletin up on the community board. They never found his body. Which means nobody can be sure if he's alive or dead."

"But they did find the body."

"Josefina told me she thought Wilfredo was going to be a girl before he was born. Yvette was going to be his name. I started thinking, if Wilfredo is putting them up on the board, who's been keeping him away all these years. And it hit me like a bucket of cold water."

His head hurt. The pressure on his eyes signaled another migraine. He held his head and pinched between his eyes. All the information, all the "research."

"They used the food to get to him, to take over his mind and body. That's how they got in. You might be eating an apple but you don't know anything about the chemicals. What they might have put to slow your brain so you won't think about it."

"That's not true."

"Josefina was right. That's the way it works. Don't be buying and eating junk. Garbage in, garbage out. I've always told you boys not to eat that garbage that you buy. Josefina told you the same thing. It's in the food. It's all the food. It's in the cereal. In the milk, too. When they make the milk they put chemicals in it. The preservative kind of junk to make it taste better and last longer, but it's in there, too. But that's exactly what's wrong with it. It's not natural. And those plastic tacos that you put in the microwave. When you heat them up, what do you think all that radiation does?"

"It makes them hot, dad."

“No, sir. Not just that, it makes all the plastic come off of it, too. So when you’re eating tacos, you’re eating plastic, too. It dulls your mind, makes you slow and groggy. I’m sorry I never could buy you guys better food. I’m sorry about those headaches you had growing up. I remember you sleep walked every night for an entire month. You would wake up with a headache. You said it was like you hadn’t slept at all. That you were tired after sleeping nine hours. There was no reason for that. I wasn’t paying attention. But it’s in the food we eat. It’s what you put inside your body that messes up our heads. But it’s so cheap. That’s how they win.”

“Who’s winning dad?”

“The same people who made this virus. It’s not people, Angelo. It’s the companies. The companies are so big they make everything that’s bad cheaper to buy. They’re crop dusting an ocean of chemicals on farms. It’s in the air. It’s everywhere. Chemicals rain down on all the farms. It’s in the fruits and vegetables. They do the same with the ocean and fish. We swim in it.”

Angelo looked over him, not at him. “Do you have the bulletin with Wilfredo?”

“I burned them all, but before I did, I scanned it and saved it on my computer.”

“I’ll get it.” Angelo left the room and went to the living room next to the kitchen. The laptop’s battery was missing.

“Marlow, where’s the battery to the laptop?”

“It’s in the kitchen cabinet, above the fridge. I take it away so he can get some sleep.”

Angelo picked the battery from the cabinet. A dusting artificial garden was beside it, blooming with colorful plastic flowers, he thought about Sophia and the last time he had seen her. Where was she? It didn’t matter, he was home now- Jacinto’s home.

Angelo logged into his dad’s laptop. The desktop was plastered with files and folders.

“It’s in a Word document.”

“I found it,” Angelo said after he browsed the most recent open files.

It wasn't Wilfredo in the picture. The name of the girl was Yvette. She was pale, white, blond thirteen years-old. The light skin was probably the only thing that resembled Wilfredo.

“I still can't find it. Give me a sec.”

He opened up the computer's web browser. From there he typed open the browser's saved social sites. The news feed was red. Red. Bright red. Red he couldn't take his eyes off. There were crosses and prayers, flags and rifles, emblems and posters. It was better to play along. To fight him would be like waking up a sleepwalker.

“A penny for your thoughts. How was the road coming from Juarez? Marlow said you went to visit your grandmother.”

“Fine, the roads cleared up after yesterday's rain.”

To talk about anything else would be better. A distraction for Jacinto's constantly thinking mind.

“They made big changes to Paisano Highway.”

“It's a beautiful highway, isn't it? It loops all around the city. Do you know what Paisano means, chavo?”

“It means countryman,” he scrolled through his dad's computer.

“You haven't forgotten all your Spanish.”

“I might drive around the city again before I go. It helps me think.” It helped him get out of the house, too. He was an independent adult, but couldn't handle sitting still in his Jacinto's house.

“What's on your mind these days?”

“Work.”

“Don’t worry, put the computer away. I’ve missed talking to you. What’s on your mind that’s eating you up?”

“Work.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a consultant. I’m working on a political campaign. I was until about a month ago. Our client lost the elections, I’ve been reassigned to figure out what their voters want- the state of the party.”

“I could tell you that. Do you remember, Mr. Agawa-san?”

“I remember him.”

“We traveled across the country when I worked in franchising before I started the restaurant.”

“I said I remembered, dad.”

“I know, but I like remembering out loud. It helps me think. Agawa-san and me started in Florida and drove all the way to California- quality control. We took a detour in Utah. Agawa-san wanted to see the Valley of the Gods near Mexican Hat on the San Juan River. It was beautiful. We made a pit stop. I found him smoking a cigarette after my restroom break. I asked him, ‘Agawa-san, what are you thinking?’ He turned around and said, ‘What in the hell was my country thinking when they attacked this country. This is an impossible land to conquer. It is enormous. It is magnificent.’ He was always thinking those big things.”

There was something always interesting in Jacinto’s stories. He hated to admit it. He pulled out a notebook from his back pocket and scribbled an idea.

“What did you write?”

Angelo put his notebook away. Jacinto didn't need to know everything. If anything, he thought he knew too much.

"I just want to know what you wrote."

An angst of frustration twisted his neck. He took out his notebook and read, "How many countries are in a country? How many countries can fit inside the USA? How many dreams, countrymen, patriots, rebels, how many countries can you fit inside a country before it breaks?"

"You bobble head, you're thinking too much."

An unsolicited opinion, he had stopped asking for his advice a long time ago.

"Just one, son. All the answers is one, like God. Remember what Josefina would teach you. There is only one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church, there is only one holy God. There is only one country. Just one. Nothing more. I can't imagine what your job is if you need to think about things like that."

"But you said it yourself, this country is enormous. What makes you think it's only one in ideas?"

"I can tell you what's wrong with the country if you're asking."

"I'm not."

He smiled, ready to reveal his secret, "Too many choices. I went to get a coffee, I just wanted to coffee. Then they drowned me with all these choices. I told them, a fucking, coffee, por favor, I didn't want anything else. It used to be that simple. That was the dream in this country. To keep things simple without so many options. There was a time when everyone could fit into being a countryman because there weren't so many ideas about what it ought to look like. There was an idea about the country that overruled. Countryman, or patriot, was easier to see in pictures and believe it. It was easier to see on television and buy it. It was easier to vote and buy into it. That

was the country that you fell in love with at school. It's the one that took you away to the Big Apple. You still believe in it. You have to. It looks like it's your job thinking all those big things."

It couldn't be avoided, it was impossible to speak with a mad man, at least he could try to have him acknowledge his own craziness.

"You don't think Wilfredo is alive, do you?"

"I tried raising that boy right, that's what Josefina wanted. I don't believe he was. There's never been a gay man in the Rincon family"

"Wilfredo wasn't a Rincon, he was Rios, he wasn't your son."

"All those ideas got into his head about being something he wasn't. It's all the television you boys watched growing up. I tried raising that boy right, the way Josefina wanted. But I couldn't. There was too much. I was overwhelmed. Wilfredo couldn't hear me. The TV, the music, the computer, they drowned me out. It's all a big nightmare what happened to him. I was trying to help. I loved that boy. He was a good kid. I was going to save himself the trouble he was putting himself in."

"You were trying to help him?"

"I was saving him the trouble of meeting the world."

"He wasn't asking to be saved, dad!"

"I was doing my best! And I won't have you question my judgment. Enough! Why can't you see what's happening. You're afraid of seeing the world around you. You're afraid of seeing the reality. It's what keeps you ignorant. It's what keeps you away from the truth. It's what keeps you away from home, from Marlow, from me. The world is broken, Angelo. The country is broken! And I'm doing my best to save what I can. They say we're all in this together. When was the last time you felt like one of them? When was the last time you ate like one of them?"

The day before yesterday he was eating and living like the rest of them. Some of them were his neighbors, his friends, his co-workers. Jacinto didn't know he was working for the biggest consulting company in the world.

"Never mind, I'm asking the wrong person. You eat like them, don't you? One of the Rincons up there with the big shots. That's us, ball busters, here or there, wherever we go. How much money are you making now?"

Angelo hesitated. All his dreams were waiting for him in New York. They were his dreams, and he wasn't interested in Jacinto knowing. That was all that mattered, to get back to *his* reality, where the world made sense.

"Never mind, don't answer. That's your money. You've earned it. Don't let anyone tell you different, especially the government. Don't let anyone take it away from you." He coughed and coughed again. His lungs constricted his throat. "I've told the Conspiracy about you. Will you meet with them?"

"Is that where you were going yesterday?"

"That's where I was going yesterday, but you stopped me. It's a good thing you did, I wouldn't have made it. When I get better you need to help me."

"What were you all planning to do?"

"These big companies, the ones you work for, they want your money, they want your time, they want your body, they want everything. It's never enough. They'll take everything. I lost everything paying taxes. It's this tax or that tax, always. And then they give it all away to a bunch of unemployment programs and illegal aliens. They own all the money in the world, all the money in the television, and the news on the television, they turn around and give it all away. All the

while they're pumping junk into our food. Nobody can stop them. You need to stand up to them. If you don't, they'll get to you like they got to Wilfredo."

"You're looking out for us."

"Always."

The man who swore he wasn't sick believed what he was saying. It was in his voice. The words, the idea, and his mind were one. There was a part of Angelo that was jealous. The man across from him believed in something. Ludicrous. Irresponsible. Mentally unstable. But he believed in it to the core of his bones. There was one thing he had learned from leaving. Everything changed. But not Jacinto.

"I need air."

Angelo got up and walked out the room.

In the kitchen, Marlow was cleaning the dishes. "How does he look?"

"Pale," Angelo took a seat at the kitchen table. "Since when do you drink coffee?"

"It burns calories." Marlow served a second cup of coffee and gave it to him.

It happened to Wilfredo, and it could happen to Marlow. But Angelo would do something to stop it this time. He wanted to keep the family he still had, the one from grade school, he would even take the one from high school.

"Should we take him to the hospital?" Marlow asked.

Angelo stood from the kitchen table and smacked his lips, "He wouldn't go to a hospital for a cold, flu, or a broken arm. Do you want a beer? Do you have any tequila?" He put Jacinto's nasal swab test kit into the delivery box. In a day or two, they would get the results.

Marlow went for the bottle. He sliced some oranges and put some worm salt on a plate. They sat together.

“Dad is crazy.”

“Yeah, he’s a riot, huh?”

“Are you hungry?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks,” he was starving actually.

From the kitchen table, he looked at Marlow. Marlow, his half-brother, the little one who had tears in his eyes on the beach in San Diego, the one who had never left the house, would never leave Jacinto’s side, he would never leave the family, him or Jacinto. He wondered how life would be like if Josefina hadn’t gone to the supermarket that day.

### **Missing Children**

By 2010 Wilfredo’s body hadn’t turned up yet. The house after the thunderstorm stayed in an unquiet silence. Josefina took it onto herself to find him. She was convinced he had disappeared. Maybe he had gone back with his dad. She visited all the grocery stores she could. She left bulletin pinups on every single board she could find- coffee shops, grocery stores, gas stations, gymnasiums, schools. Wilfredo couldn’t be found.

A year later, the remains of a body were found. It was nearly impossible to identify, but it was.

Then, on a normal day in 2019, with an eternal emptiness inside of her, on her weekend routine, Josefina finished paying for her groceries and walked to the supermarket exit. A strip of blue paint caught her eye on the corner of white paper on a bulletin. Pacing herself, it looked like the same blue paint that had stained her first batch of bulletin printouts she made when Wilfredo

first disappeared. A wind from the AC vent blew the stack of newer bulletins like leaves and revealed her old bulletin post.

Wilfredo's face had nearly faded, but his eyes were still visible. For 11 years, Wilfredo's face was still peaking from the wall of missing children. Without a shadow of a doubt, she believed it was that bulletin that made her daydream of him everyday. He was still alive on leaves of paper. That infinitesimally small, undying light of fire and hope living inside her bones. How many more posters had she left behind? She had no idea, but a feeling he could be rescued rose inside her chest again.

Her hands shuffled through the photographs, maybe there was one more of Wilfredo, and maybe she could see him again. Every bulletin had two pictures of the same child- before and after. A face before their disappearance coupled with a face after being lost. The latter were faces made by computers. Digital manifestations of how their faces might look like years later. But it was the first picture that mattered. The first picture of the child was the child before the meeting with the world. Children before their family and friends were forced to move on. Children before their faces were blurred behind parents' tears of sorrow. Children before they had become victims.

She plucked her son's photo off the wall. Tears swelled from the empty hole inside of her, below her rib cage, near her heart, just beneath it, and they flowed onto the paper. She held him in the palm of her hand. Her eyes had never stopped looking and could never stop. She folded the paper into her purse and walked to the grocery aisle, praying with the rosary in her hand, having forgotten her cart was full.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for our sinners.*

Her prayer was interrupted by screams and gunfire that echoed from the far side of the supermarket. A series of hollow banging shook the store warehouse. The noise clattered and

reverberated. She flew into the aisles for cover before running to the exit. She froze when a young man raised his gun to her.

“Fucking Mexicans.”

She ran and escaped into the supermarket’s restaurant and crouched underneath a table. A woman of her age by the look of her face joined her underneath the table with whom she assumed was the woman’s elderly mother. Their hands wrapped onto each other. They prayed.

Their prayer was answered.

The gunfire rang further and further away.

Huddling out from underneath, she saw children running. She found a pair of children. Their damp hair and eyes looked like they could be Wilfredo’s. She swept them under her arms and pulled them into the restaurant and under the table.

Movement began outside. Men and women ran in and out.

Out of thin air, a black soldier dressed in army camouflage appeared. He opened his arms and swept the children away.

She stayed inside running through the aisles looking for every child who looked like Wilfredo- every child. She swept them as many as she could and pushed them towards the exit.

The exit filled with light.

The man with the gun found her, again.

She looked at him, into his eyes, and saw everything a mother could see.

The man was pale, his eyes sunken, his hair frizzy, not fair, with glasses.

She saw his age.

She saw his heart.

Wilfredo would have been his age. But...

Was there a child before the man standing in front of her became man?

There was a child!

A child was still inside him longing for someone.

A child still inside him searching for an impossible rescue.

A child before his eyes had sunk, a child before he raised his arms in firefights, a child before the sadness of his eyes became a sickness in his soul.

There was a child still inside him.

The child inside him could be Wilfredo.

It could be Wilfredo.

It could be Wilfredo.

### **The Apples of a Tree**

Jacinto left his room to quench his thirst. With a glass of water in his hand, he left the kitchen and walked back towards his room.

He heard something coming from Marlow's door, his mangled right ear leaned in. Was that a cough? Maybe he was clearing his throat. Marlow wasn't a cryer, but he also never asked for help. Was he sneezing? He gently tapped the door with his calloused knuckles, "What's going on in there, chavo?" Creaking the door open, he walked into the room, and whispered, "Chavo?" .

Marlow was curled up in bed, facing the wall. "Hey, Dad. What's up?"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Dad. Why?"

Jacinto almost believed him, "You have got to get up, mi'jo. Today isn't a day to be in bed." He walked into the bedroom towards Marlow, "I've been staying away from the house 'cause I didn't want to pass the virus if I did have it. Not that it's real, just want to keep my distance, but

I've been passing down the block the last few days and I've seen you here every day. All you do is stay home. I'm sure you haven't eaten, have you? Have you eaten? You're staying up late. I noticed that, too. You need to go to bed earlier and make yourself a routine. You've been acting strange, you've been like this too long. I've noticed. Are you tired?"

"In a little bit, Dad. I'll get up in a little bit. Thanks."

Jacinto sat on the edge of the bed. He tried turning him over but he didn't move. He stayed still, facing the wall.

"I can't Dad."

"Yes, you can. Come on." He reached for his son's arm, his skin was cold. Then he pulled his shoulder, tugging on his shirt. He rubbed his hands on his arms, trying to loosen him up, trying to wake him up. The little one was never without energy. What was the matter? He was so tense. Tense. "Have you been working out too much? Your muscles are knotted and tight." He reached again with both arms to pat his back, to get him to turn. "Come on. Come on." Marlow turned his head over his shoulder and Jacinto saw his face. His eyes were swollen, red and wet.

"I can't, Dad."

"Yes, you can. Come on." What else was he supposed to say? "Get up, like your old man." He had to get up. Things were getting better, things were looking up. But they weren't, they were getting worse. "Things are getting better. It'll be over soon. Do you want to watch some TV?" He turned on the television.

Every day the world was different. That's how the news machine worked. Every day the world was coming to an end. Somebody's end. But not his. He wouldn't mind seeing the end come to some of them. Maybe then it would be more quiet. You could hear yourself think. That's how the liberals would invade homes. That's how they would get to people like his sons or like Terra.

Family was the most important thing. That's how they would survive- by staying together. The news could make you doubt everything. When they did they would slip into your head, like a virus, like the one crawling in his lungs making him cough and wheeze, like the one in in his mind making his head ache, damn migraine was killing him, the worst he ever had, the news was the virus, all their ideas about what this country was and what it wasn't, why couldn't Angelo see it, they made him question everything he knew.

“The news was saying the virus is an attack from China, Dad. They didn't say anything about it being from home- from here. You think it's from here- from the companies?”

“There's a lot of news out there, son. Don't pay any attention to it. You just look at me and follow my lead. I won't let them get to you like they did Wilfredo.”

“How did they get Wilfredo, Dad?”

“Wilfredo was confused, Mar. He was confused. And he didn't know any better.” Never mind, it was a bad idea to watch the news. He turned off the television.

“Do you ever feel like the world is changing, Dad?”

“The world might be different. But we're not, Mar. We're going to be different just staying the same, you hear?” Different inside, different outside, there were too many ways of looking at things. Millions. The television, the computer, the phone, everything was different on each one. What else could he say? “You're okay. We're okay. Things aren't that bad. We're good. We're really good.” After minutes, he got his son to turn facing the ceiling. “You're so thin, mi'jo.” Marlow sat up. It was the ribs that were showing. “You're dehydrated. I'll get you some water. Come up.”

First, his spine rolled up and his torso bent forward and up. Up. Up. Okay, it was something. He was strong. He could move. The neck needed to straighten up. “Pull your shoulders back. Move

towards me. Scoot to the edge.” Jacinto checked his back. The air was going through okay, not even a whistle. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“No, Dad. I just need to rest.”

Jacinto put his arm underneath Marlow’s and lifted him. “No, chavo, mira, come on. Easy. Like that funny commercial with the staples and the red button on TV.”

Rising up from bed, leaning his whole weight, Marlow was heavier. Much heavier. So big. So grown. There wasn’t a lot of weight on his legs. Looking down, his legs were loose under him. Marlow was the shortest one of the three. He knew the feeling. Exhausted like the nights after working in the fields, picking. “Why are you so tired, chavo?”

On his feet, they walked together. Marlow’s hand grazing the wall out of his room, into the corridor, and into the living room.

“I think I’ll just stay in today.” They passed the living room.

“Okay. That’s fine.” No excuses today or any day. They needed to be strong, especially now. He pulled him towards the front door.

Finally, Marlow gave in, “Okay, Dad.”

And that was good. Okay.

Outside, in the front yard underneath the shade, Angelo and Terra were swinging on the bench in the cold December air that made Christmas feel like yesterday. A blanket rested on their laps and swung over their shoulders.

Angelo and Terra were coming to the front porch with their masks. The evening’s cold was settling, the grass would frost at night and thaw by morning.

Jacinto came out, “Angelo, Terra can you go get Marlow’s bike?”

“God damn it! He’s sick. He needs to rest. We don’t know if you have it. Let him go.”

“Your brother is fine. I don’t want him to sit again because he’ll stay sitting. Go get the bicycle, Terra, please.”

She walked off the porch and came back a minute later. Whatever Jacinto needed, she would do. She didn’t want him to be mad, no matter what he was doing, no matter what he believed, it was better that he was back. Old men had crazy ideas, maybe not as crazy as his, but just as crazy, just as widespread, just as common. If she wasn’t going to be with Marius and his crazy ideas at least she would be with the Rincon’s in their house that didn’t feel as abandoned as it did three days ago. After all, who knew anything for certain about the virus. What did anyone know about the virus. So much news every day, everyone saying something different. You couldn’t trust anyone or anything. Would she want to anyway? Would they want to? No. The Rincon’s didn’t trust anyone. If Marlow could walk and talk, maybe he could use the exercise. She needed to see some life, Marlow was strong enough for that, he was strong enough for anything.

The bicycle pump was in the corner of the porch. Angelo got it and gave it to Jacinto.

Jacinto leaned Marlow on Angelo and pumped air into the tires. Stepping down the feet from the porch, Jacinto put the bicycle on the gravel walkway, released the kickstand, and let it rest. It was red, dusty, and old. Turning around, his eldest was still standing, maybe leaning too much on Angelo- the liberal one. The one who knew everything. The one who was too smart for his own good. It was a good sign Marlow was standing. Still standing, always standing, his luchador son.

“Ese mi Malo Malinche. There you go. As easy as riding a bike. We’ll be here when you get back. You need to go out, you need to feel the wind on your face a little bit, you need to see the sun, you need to be out. I’ll have dinner ready when you get back. Make sure you’re out there long enough so that I can fix it up. What are you looking at me for? Go.”

Marlow looked down. He looked up. Rain was drizzling. The smell of wet pavement caught his nose. Maybe he wasn't that sick. Maybe he wasn't sick at all. Maybe he was just sad. What was that glazing over his eyes? It wasn't raining that much, was it? And why was his heart beating so fast like he had just sprinted? The street was blurry, the bike was blurry, his hand on the handrail was blurry. His eyes were open but he wasn't looking at anything. Why was everything so blurry? He stopped looking and stared. Stared at something, or nothing. One leg lifted over the bike. Resting, he sat on it, resting, he breathed, catching his breath. The day's sad clouds were moving away, the ones that reminded him of the last day Wilfredo was with them. The grayness lingered. It lingered since the day the music died. But in the distance, not too far away, the street was bright and shining. Further away, just two or three blocks, he could see not every street was clouded. There were the waves of heat rising up. The weather was changing just a few blocks down. How did that work? If you didn't like the weather, you could wait five minutes. But he needed to ride his bike like his dad told him. Angelo and Terra were waiting for him to be the big-little brother he knew he was. He lifted both his feet, pushed, and floated from the grass to the walkway to the sidewalk to the street.

*Okay. I'll ride over there where it's sunny and bright. Maybe I just need to breathe.*

The mountain range farther out was brown.

*Look at that.*

Brown with patches of green. Marlow pushed off from the gravel. The bike gained speed rolling down the walkway. The lukewarm pavement turned wet. After riding in the wet concrete, a few hundred feet away, the street was hot.

On the porch, Jacinto waved to Marlow's back. He put his hand down and walked back to the house. "I'll start making dinner for the two of us. You both ought to order something."

"Your son is sick, Dad. He's sick and he's out there riding when he should be resting."

"My son isn't here right now. That sad man isn't my son, he's okay, that's what he told me. My son's coming back."

### **Out of Office**

From: Rincon, Angelo <angelo@electricavenue.com>

Sent: Thursday, March 12, 2020 4:13 PM

To: Mace, Adam "Atom" <adam@electricavenue.com>

Subject: Out of Office

El Paso, Texas, March 12, 2020

Good afternoon Adam,

As you know I'm in El Paso visiting family. I thought my family emergency was going to be less time consuming than it turned out to be. Given the current restrictions on travel, would it be okay to work from home for a few weeks?

Let me know what action items you need from me. I'll make sure to get them done and over to the team. I was looking forward meeting everyone. Can we maybe schedule a Zoom call, instead?

Best regards,

Angelo

### **Out of Office, Reply**

From: Mace, Adam "Atom" <adam@electricavenue.com>

Sent: Thursday, March 12, 2020 4:13 PM

To: Rincon, Angelo <angelo@electricavenue.com>

Subject: Out of Office

Thank you for your message. I am currently offline with limited access to my inbox, and will return on Monday.

Electric Avenue offices are closed.

All the best,

Atom

### **Freckles**

Angelo and Terra walked past the neighborhood's houses and got to the park. He was exhausted. His mind was racing. Work. Work. Work. He needed to get back to work. Sophia. Sophia. Sophia. He needed to get back to her and explain how things could work. There was a way. If they believed in each other. They could make it work.

Underneath the climbing dome, the shadow of the geometric shapes on the sand pinpointed where their grade-school treasure was buried.

It was dug into the sand by less than the six feet he remembered burying it as a kid. The plastic lunch bag was pulled out. A handful of metal wire puzzles were inside. There were made into different shapes- triangles, polygons, metal airplanes, bicycles. The toys were rusted, interlocked, and unsolved.

They sat on the dome's shapes.

"I remember these!" Terra said.

"It's better to keep him in quarantine and not mention the results to him or Marlow."

Negative. Jacinto's test came back negative.

"I knew they were right. What is it then?"

A wave of anger swelled inside Angelo. Was she taking sides? It didn't matter. "Maybe the mold in the house, I don't know. He used to get allergies."

"You should be relieved."

"Maybe it's a false negative."

"You can test him again if you want, but he's negative and you're negative. It's too coincidental that you all tested negative, don't you think? Let's celebrate. Are you hungry? Do you want to go to Red Lobster?"

"That's a sad substitute for New England food, don't you think?"

"You used to love Red Lobster."

Terra jumped off the geometric dome climber and turned around, "Should we bury them?"

The puzzles looked like they were meant to stay buried.

"Yes," he took her share of the toys, put them in the plastic bag, and covered them in sand.

"Let's go."

Angelo and Terra stared into the giant fish tank the way they did when the Rincons had enough money to spend on a franchise restaurant.

Two lobsters were clawing at each other. Six were corralled on the other corner. There was a seventh beneath the bunch. From across the tank, one lobster head and claws were freckled with dark blue and bright orange spots. The gleaming colors amid the red and dark crustaceans was an unexpected site and Angelo squinted his eyes to make sure he was seeing right. He took out his phone to check what exactly the lobster was.

Terra arrived and sat down, “Put that away, will you?”

Angelo turned his phone over to Terra. “This lobster looks like that one, doesn’t it?”

“Looks delicious.”

“I think it’s a calico-colored lobster. The freckles are almost golden.”

“I wonder if they taste any better.” Terra requested a basket of golden biscuits.

“How long are you staying?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I can stay if you need to go. I don’t mind taking care of your dad and checking on Marlow. We can keep each other company. It’s helped a lot being with you guys. I’m writing again. Stupid things, but it’s nice to write. I don’t know why I ever stopped.”

“Are you going back to Connecticut for Christmas?”

“No, my aunt called saying she’d be okay visiting with her friends for the holiday parties. That’s it. That was my only reason to go back.”

“Could you help me convince Marlow to go back to school?”

“I’ll try, but he’ll know it’s coming from you. You’re terrible at giving advice. You don’t practice what you preach.”

“I preach?”

“You’re surprised.”

“Has Marlow told you anything about the conspiracy?”

“He talks about it a lot. I just listen.”

“I’m worried about it. I want to see what it’s about.”

“You go from one extreme to another. First, you want to leave back to New York. Next, you want to stay and get your hands dirty.”

“I just want to know.”

“Curiosity has killed a lot of cats.”

The biscuits arrived. Terra ordered a lobster roll, she read the waiter’s name tag, “Landry. Hi Landry, have you ever seen any lobster like that?”

Landry’s squinted his bloodshot eyes. “Who? Me? Are you asking me? Wait, are you asking if I’ve ever seen a lobster?”

Terra looked at Angelo and bit into her lobster roll, “Never mind, thanks, Landry.”

“You want me to get you that lobster? I can ask to get you that lobster.”

Angelo interrupted, “It’s not what you think, don’t worry about it. It’s just that lobster over there is nothing like I’ve ever seen. Can we talk to your manager?”

“What about it?”

“It might be a calico-colored lobster, they’re rare.” Angelo showed Landry the Wikipedia page on his phone. “One in 30 million.”

“Whoa. Are you serious? Is it a different species?”

“No, it’s still a lobster, but it’s a rare lobster.”

“True,” Landry looked into the tank. “Poor little guy, he’s at the bottom of the bunk bed fest. Okay, I’ll get Thelma.”

Terra finished the basket of golden biscuit bread.

Thelma arrived, “Hi, good evening, Landry told me you asked about a specific lobster?”

“Yes, do you see that one there?” Angelo pin pointed to the freckled one. “That’s a very rare lobster, I think. Have you ever seen one like that before?”

“No, I can’t say I’ve noticed. Our shipment comes, I only count them, that’s all. Would you like to have that lobster?”

“No, thank you. I’m trying to see if maybe you all should save that lobster, it’s very rare. Look,” and Angelo showed her the images on his phone.

“They do look similar. But I’m afraid I can’t do anything about it, unless, you would like to eat it.”

“No, but maybe we could call someone. I don’t know who you could call but maybe a veterinarian clinic.”

“Why would I call a veterinarian clinic? What would veterinarians know about lobsters, they’re not sea experts, they don’t work at Sea World. Hell, most veterinarians don’t know the difference between a rabbit and a hare. Why would I call them?”

Landry brought the clam chowder soup order.

Terra asked for another basket of bread.

“You’re right. Never mind, what about the zoo?”

“At 8 pm at night? The zoo is closed, son.”

Angelo looked at Terra devouring her food. Maybe she would chime in. “You’re right. Can I have that lobster?”

“Sure, how would you like it prepared?”

“I’d like it raw and in a small container filled with water.”

“Boy, what the hell is the matter with you?”

“Nothing, it’s just that that lobster is a calico-colored lobster, and it shouldn’t be in a tank getting ready to be eaten. It’s rare. It needs to be saved.”

“Son, I had a big imagination myself when I was a kid. But sooner, hopefully sooner than later, you’re going to have to let go of dreaming things up. I see that lobster and all I see is how many more sales I have before the next shipment comes in from God knows where. We’re in Hell

Paso, there ain't a god damn ocean anywhere near us. The closest would be the Gulf of Mexico. I used to live in Galveston, I know. And I'm not sure how we get all this food from, but it's here, and my job is to get it out the door and into people's stomachs- not order a veterinarian check up on a someone's dinner. So if you'd like the lobster, you can have the lobster, just make sure you let me know how you want the lobster cooked. Do you got that? Can I get you a refill on your drinks, sweetie?"

"Yes, please, and more bread, too," Terra added.

Landry with his head down came to their table, "I'm sorry about your lobster, man."

"It's okay, Landry. Thank you for getting me your manager."

"Is it true what you said about Freckles? Is he really 1 in 30 million?"

"I think he might be, look," and Angelo showed him the pictures on his phone.

"Wow, that's amazing. A Calico-co lobster. Why don't you order it?"

"He wouldn't be able to live with himself," Terra interrupted.

"You can order it, I'll put in the order, get it out of the inventory system and I'll put him in a little baggy for you. You all can meet me in the back and I'll give it you."

"Out of all the things I was expecting, this wasn't it- a rescue mission. Can you order some more bread, Angelo?"

"Can we have some bread to go?"

Freckles sat in a gallon jug cut in half filled with sea water. Angelo carried him carefully into the house.

Inside, Marlow was watching TV from the couch with his laptop open and by his side.

"What's that?"

“It’s a calico-colored lobster, we found it at Red Lobster,”

“Your brother is a saint, Marlow,” Terra announced. “Do you want any bread?”

Marlow declined, “Can’t, too many carbs,” he got up from the couch, went to the kitchen, and leaned over the table, staring at Freckles. “They just let you walk out with it?”

“Sort of.”

“What’s his name?”

“Landry donned him Freckles,” Terra said.

“Who’s Landry.”

“Freckles’ godfather.”

“How’s dad?” Angelo asked.

“He’s doing better, he’s asleep.”

“Freckles went to sleep?” Terra asked, “Just kidding,” and walked away into the living room.

“You know, Angelo, I think the four of us together, we’re like like this guy, right here. There’s something special about us.”

Terra jumped back into the kitchen with Marlow’s luchador mask. “Can I come tomorrow?”

“No, Terra. The Conspiracy wants to meet with Angelo.”

“I want to join. Everyone has a job in the Conspiracy. I want one, too. I’m bored.”

“Fine, I’ll ask, but don’t bet your heart on it. You’re not very stable right now since your breakup. And they’re looking for mentally sharp people.”

“I’m mentally sharp!”

“Sure, as sharp as a butter knife, Terra, no offense, you’re still a little tender. It’s only been a few days since you broke up with Marius. And I’ll have to tell them about that if you want to get involved.”

“I’m over it, Marlow. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Angelo asked.

“As serious as a heart attack,” she crossed her hand over her heart and then her throat.

“Fine. I’ll ask dad, but why not? A family that works together, stays together.” Marlow concluded.

“You think I’m family, Marlow?” Terra snuggled her head onto his chest.

Marlow stopped petting Freckles and gently pushed Terra off his chest, taking his mask and putting it over his face.

Terra interrupted, “There’s something terribly wrong with this country. It’s not like it used to be. Dreams aren’t like they used to be. Everyone is making everything up. The world is going up in flames and everyone is putting the blame on us. As if we’re the ones with the closed minds. As if we’re the ones who don’t want to see. We’re the only ones watching. Look at your dad. The only thing left is his restaurant. Those people came and take whatever they want. And then they want to tell us how to live our lives.”

“What the matter with you?” Angelo looked at Terra, leaned in closer, “Quit it.”

“That’s how they got Wilfredo. They got him with the food. But not me, not anymore. I’m quitting all that junk.”

“You haven’t eaten junk in years,” Angelo said.

“Yeah, Marlow, you’re the fittest one of the Rincon brothers. You’re kind of hot.”

“Don’t talk like that, Terra,” Marlow said over his shoulder, “It’s lazy being seductive. Anyone can complement anyone like that. Besides, what do you want me to say when I hear something like that? You want me to take you to bed, is that it?”

“Jeez Louise, Marlow, it was a compliment. But that wouldn’t be a bad idea. You boys need to get laid.”

“I know, but that’s how they get us. They make us think that we’re animals. We’re not animals, guys. We’re God’s creatures. We’re stewards of the Earth, beginning with this country.”

“You believe in this?”

“I do. If you don’t believe in it, keep an open mind. We’re not all that crazy. There are a few bad apples that get away from us. But we’re not entirely wrong. If you don’t believe in the cause yet believe in me, believe in us.”

“On one condition.”

“What?”

“I’ll keep an open mind if you do, too.”

“I’ll try.”

He believed in him. He believed he could change his mind. There were only a few Rincons left in the world. And Marlow wasn’t going to be the last.

“Who am I meeting tomorrow?”

“Do you remember Ardo Frisbey?”

He did. Ardo was Wilfredo’s secret boyfriend.

## **Maybe**

Angelo called Mr. Contreras.

“Yes?”

“You’ve transferred all the assets to Marlow, why?”

“Because he asked me to.”

“That’s not what we agreed on.”

“I don’t remember agreeing on anything. Your brother is the sole beneficiary of the estate.”

“I thought I had mentioned to you my brother’s precarious situation.”

“Maybe. But that doesn’t exclude him from the legal rights he is owed to by my office. He is my client and his grandmother was my client. It’s my fiduciary duty to do what is best for both my clients. Agreeing to what he requested of me, which isn’t in anyway outside of my duty, was part of that.”

“What happens to the estate if something were to happen to Marlow?”

“Has anything happened to him?”

“His mental state is questionable.”

“According to who?”

“According to me.”

“Is he able-bodied?”

“Yes.”

“Can he call me?”

“Yes.”

“Then he is most likely in a free, able, and willing state to do as he wishes.”

“What happens to the estate if something happens to Marlow?”

“It would go to his next of kin. Jacinto most likely, he is his father, and you are his half-brother, unless Marlow has signed anything to you. Does he have a will or testament with designations of his estate?”

“No, could you have him do that?”

“Maybe.”

“What does that depend on?”

“If he asks me to or not.”

### **The Digital Library**

Ardo arrived at the desk in the computer lab. He swung his backpack to his chest, set it on the table, and sat. A pom pom beanie hugged his head. The blond five o'clock shadow extended from his cheeks to his neck. Bags under his eyes were red and purple from the cold. His blue eyes were alert, but tired.

Angelo imagined what life would have been like if he hadn't helped Wilfredo and Ardo keep their secret. It should have been said out loud. Whatever help he felt he gave was now a reminder of being guilty. They could have stood up to Jacinto. But it was too late.

“I need more people like you, people I can trust.”

“If you trust Marlow and Jacinto, you can trust me.” Angelo looked at Ardo's face swollen from a hangover. Eyes suffering sleepless nights.

Ardo bit the zipper of his messenger bag open and took out the genetic testing kit. It was labeled Genetika.

“I'm not a reptile.”

“We're not that conspiracy.”

At least Marlow didn't believe in a reptilian human society.

“I'm not the father.”

“How do you know you're not?” And showed a crooked smile. “You're not afraid of needles, are you?”

A wave of redness swelled Angelo's face. He hated needles and looked away. Sharp metal objects going into his skin. The thought made him cringe. It was unnatural for his skin to be pierced. Anything could be on the needle's tip. A bug, dust, lint, a tiny idea of something floating inside him made his insides churn.

An elderly man came out of the library office. He wore brown straight-legged Dickies, a white collared shirt, dusty, brown boots, and a steel iron handlebar mustache. Age-wise, he could have been their grandfather. He placed one mug in front of Ardo. "I put some ice cubes to make it cool quicker." He extended his hand to Angelo, "Nice to meet, you. I'm Abraham."

Ardo blew on the hot chocolate and sipped.

Angelo reached and shook Abraham's hand.

Abraham sat down and unwrapped the transparent plastic off the box. The genetic testing kit spread out on the table: three needles covered in plastic casings, two strips of white paper, and a red vile for disposal.

"It's just a prick of blood from your five finger tips, painless."

There was worse things in the world than blood oaths. An innocuous role playing game, a game of playing important, knowing something that nobody else knew, a treasure hunt, for the sake of keeping life interesting, the farthest stretch, a patriotic hobby. Why not?

Abraham pricked Angelo's finger and dabbed it with a gauze.

"Jesus Christ."

"Don't be a sissy." Abraham squeezed Angelo's index finger over the piece of paper. Red drops in ruby shapes absorbed onto the white strip.

"I used to work at this company. You don't need all five fingers." Sweat began collecting on his brow. Another four needles. "You want a blood oath. Is that what this is?"

“I’m mapping The Conspiracy’s genes.”

“That’s bad news for Marlow and Jacinto.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They’re going to find out they’re not white. You’ll have to kick them out.”

“Do you think The Conspiracy is about being white?”

“It’s race friendly?”

“Why do you think I’m involved?”

“Because you’re white.”

“Why do you think Jacinto and Marlow are involved.”

“That’s my million dollar question. The irony is as white as the elephant in the room.”

“I’m asking honestly. It doesn’t make sense to me either.”

“Have you told Jacinto that? He loves white people. Marlow is going to be upset, too. He learned to play the banjo in high school because he loves blue grass.”

“The Conspiracy isn’t about making this country better like your father thinks. Jacinto is caught in so many webs he doesn’t even know he’s trapped. The Conspiracy is also not a vocation as Marlow thinks.”

Angelo’s eyes squinted, the blood fell on the strip of paper. So far Ardo did not believe in a human reptile species, white supremacy, or flat earth. Despite the needles, he felt relatively safe.

“There has never been one country or one race, just the idea, and it’s not fair to live by that fantasy anymore. It’s just not true. Maybe it needed to be true for a while. But not anymore, not on my watch.”

“What are you doing here, then?”

“Wilfredo.”

“What do you mean?”

“The day he drowned, from inside the arroyo, he called me. He told me I had to promise him something.”

“What did he ask you to do?”

“He asked me tell your dad about him and I.”

“Did you?”

“I tried.”

“How?”

“You might not believe me. But I saw your dad in the gay district one night. I thought it would be a perfect place to tell him. But when I got near, a man bent over your dad’s knee and kissed him on the cheek. That was enough for your dad to start a brawl. Before the cops came, the crowd was packed, I tried to get him out, but he thought I was crowding him. He turned on me and beat me to the floor. He didn’t recognize me. I know he didn’t. There was nothing in his eyes. That’s when I knew I could never tell him. Instead, I needed to convince him.”

“He can’t be convinced. You should have told him.”

“Angelo, Angelo, Angelo, since when are people convinced of anything? You have to trick them.”

“If you knew Wilfredo had drowned, why didn’t you say anything?”

“I hoped he had gone missing, too. Maybe he had disappeared, or run away, I wanted to believe that as much as your parents- so I stayed away.” His eyes filled with tears. “Have you ever convinced yourself to believe in something to keep reality from swallowing you. I didn’t want to make it true. I didn’t want to lose my grip on reality- my reality. Because in my reality, Wilfredo was still alive. I couldn’t stop believing, Angelo. Angelo, I’m so sorry. I tried, but I couldn’t stop.”

I kept one of those bulleting fliers with me. The one with his high school picture. He looked so sweet.”

“Years later, after I saw your dad at the bar, and after I left the hospital, knowing how angry he was, I thought of such a stupid idea. I began putting Wilfredo’s poster on the community boards, again. That way Jacinto would see him and maybe by some miracle, I believed it would soften his heart.”

“Why didn’t you just tell him?”

“I didn’t want him to hate Wilfredo. I needed to trick him into believing in Wilfredo and I. I tossed the orange speaker into your dad’s backyard, the orange pill-shaped one. It was the one Wilfredo told me he was looking for in the arroyo the night he drowned.”

“You could have just told them.”

“Maybe you’re right, but I’m too deep into this to go back. I made a promise to Wilfredo. And I don’t want Jacinto to keep away from the truth. He should know, but he needs to know the right way. He needs to discover it first, in his heart. I’ll rise up the ranks here soon. I’ll be able to change the course of the Conspiracy. The Conspiracy will soon be about justice. Do you know what justice is?”

“It’s what you’re trying to do, I guess. Bur you’re wasting your time.”

“Smart people like you don’t need justice. The country and all the conspiracies that make it don’t mean anything to you. If you want something you find a way to get it.”

“That’s not smart, that’s hard work.”

“Are you saying I’m dumb or lazy?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“I tried making it on smarts alone like you. But what’s the use if half the country believes you’re an abomination. I can’t imagine hating someone for liking pink instead of blue. People like your dad believe we’re unnatural. And they can’t believe we’re on their side. I love family as much as they do. I believe in a free state, too. Obviously more than they do. But they’ve made up their mind up about that. It’s an exclusive club, and we’re not in it.”

“You haven’t stopped picking fights since grade school, since you lost the student council election to Wilfredo, since your parents moved you to a new school after you punched him.”

“I didn’t tell Wilfredo to be ashamed of who he was. I didn’t push him into a closet. The conspiracy did that.”

“How’s that?”

“Not The Conspiracy, I mean the conspiracy.”

Knights of Columbus, Freemasons, Skulls and Bones, he might have expected too much, a conspiracy that made common sense. Not this one. This one made perfect sense to him. At some level, sophisticated or not, an undeniable clandestine logic was hidden, and that was the least requirement for a conspiracy.

“The Conspiracy likes to keep things exactly as they are. It doesn’t like to change. The status quo is the true conspiracy. But nothing ever stays the same, does it?”

The third needle pressed on his finger. Abraham squeezed it over the paper. It dropped into the third box. Drops of red rubies splashed on the strip.

“It sounds like you and Jacinto are from two different worlds.”

“I’m close to convincing your dad we’re not the enemy. I’ve managed to get as many genetic DNA tests as I can from The Conspiracy. Before all this blows up, I’ll show them where they come from. And one day, in the history books, it’ll be seen that all the people that were part

of The Conspiracy or not shared the same blood. We'll be eight billion human beings on earth soon. The world is drowning in people, forget the water. The real Conspiracy should be about justice. Justice to the earth, justice to humans, justice for Wilfredo. You think people like Wilfredo and I would be appreciated. Some of us spawn, but not all of us are looking for offspring. We can help balance the population. Nobody wants to say that, nobody could, too politically dangerous to put paper and pencil and do the numbers. Too many Jacintos. I'm not a smart man like you. But the more of us, the less of everyone. There are more rainbow flags more than ever. And you would think that's a good thing. The Conspiracy doesn't see it that way. They want the old days, the status quo."

The plastic casing snapped and the pin pierced Angelo's ring finger. The finger's blood dripped onto the empty box of the paper- a tiny Pandora's box waiting to be decoded.

"You look like Wilfredo."

"That's impossible. We're not blood related."

"There's something in him that's in you. It's hard to explain."

Abraham got a new plastic casing, covered Angelo's thumb with it and pressed it. Sweat dripped from his head.

"The only thing that keeps our blood separate are the ideas in our head."

"What about skin? Skin does that too. What are you trying to say?"

"It's what I want people to feel."

"What do you want them to feel?"

"It's what I want them to think."

"What do you want them to think?"

“That they shouldn’t... That they should... I don’t know. All I know is that... if... my idea, my single, tiny, useless, idea survives me, and goes beyond me, to someone after me, like my blood, I’d like for it to be that. I’d like for it to be theirs. That feeling. That idea.”

“I never heard of an idealistic conspiracy. You’re in the wrong line of business. Conspiracies are nasty business.”

“This whole country feels like a conspiracy.”

“Because it is. And you were right. It’s an exclusive club, and you’re not in it. Nobody wants to save the Earth. And nobody thought Wilfredo could save the world.”

“I wish I was as smart as you.”

“Now that I think about it. Maybe what you’re trying to say is that every country is dominated by one conspiracy. Because only one conspiracy can dominate. One conspiracy invades, divides, conquers, and kills the last. It’s like blood. It’s like ideas. But every idea gets conquered and mixed in with the rest. That’s progress.”

“And I just one tiny piece of that to remember Wilfredo.”

“I wouldn’t want to be in a conspiracy. Too much blood, sweat, and tears.”

“And secrets. Lots of secrets. Enough secrets to make you go crazy. The conspiracy made us a secret to begin with. I’m not a secret. Heterosexuals have all kinds of skeletons in their closets-bisexual, pansexual, transexual. Hush, hush. I’ve had enough of keeping secrets. The whole world is trying to make things secret. But all you have to do is turn on your television or phone and see that there’s a bunch of crazy people running things.”

“Is there a test for crazy? I hate crazy people.”

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

“You’re too fabulous for that.”

The needle pierced into Angelo's ring finger. Blood dripped.

"You hate crazy people?"

"I hate crazy people."

"You hate your father?"

"I hate crazy people."

"You hate yourself?"

"I hate crazy people."

"You hate Wilfredo?"

"I hate crazy people."

"You hate the man who killed Josefina?"

"I hate crazy people."

"Have you come to save us all from our craziness?"

"Yes."

"Will you help me?"

"On one condition."

"What's that?"

"You keep Marlow out of it."

Abraham closed the blood-soaked litmus test paper. He curled and flexed his bicep, showing a tattoo of a cross wrapped in a snake and an eagle landing its claws on the wooden beams.

"I'll look after Marlow. He has a good heart, no matter how confused he is."

"The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb." Abraham smiled.

He had left for a reason. That was why he felt the urge to go back, to New York, to his work. His covenant was to his future- his future. He wanted to be their keeper, to love them, but there was a nagging feeling to pull away- to stop and run. If they weren't alive, would he be there?

Yes. He would. They were his only family.

But would he?

“Repeat after me. I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands one nation, under God, infinitely divisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

“For long as we both shall live.”

“You're snappier than a Cracker Jack box, Angelo.”

“Molasses-flavored and caramel-coated.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“To listen, that's all.”

“With assignments like that, you're Conspiracy is going to grow in leaps and bounds.” He caught sight of a security guard walking outside. “There's someone outside.”

Ardo looked behind him, “It's just Joe.”

Joe came into the library, “How 'ya boys doing?”

“We're doing okay, Joe. Just found us a new member, can you believe that? The sky is the limit for us.”

“Where's Abe?”

“Right here!” He waved at Joe. “How come I don't see you at church anymore?”

“I've been busy with the family. I'll make it out there this Sunday. See you guys tonight for poker, take care.”

“How many members do you have?” Angelo asked.

“We can’t be sure. Some of us need to go into hiding. It’s impossible to know. But there are a lot of patriots out there. Are you a man of God, Angelo? Would you burn if I sent you on an errand to a church tomorrow?”

“What religion do you practice?” Abraham asked.

“I like them all, haven’t made up my mind which one to follow, they’re all so great.”

“You should go to church either way and pray. My grandmother’s sister was a nun. I asked her if there ever was a time prayer didn’t work for her, and she said the one time prayer didn’t work for her was when she didn’t pray. I could never read the Bible the way she could. She noticed and one day she gave me a book for my bible, Don Quixote. It’s still on my night stand. I get lost keeping all the stories in my head. So many people and places. I’d like to hold all the stories in my head for just one minute. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve tried. Do you what I mean?”

“I think so.”

“My mother was a librarian, a teacher’s teacher, didn’t get her genes until I bloomed in old age, when I learned to sit still. And now I have to contend with the CPU. The internet. I never dreamed I would live to see something like that. Behold! Dreams never dreamed come true! Just before this I spent two hours looking at Edith Piaf videos. I didn’t realize I liked French music. It reminds me of sitting on the couch watching my parents dance to the tombstone radio. I need to use the loo, excuse me, boys.”

In the restroom, a wave of gratitude came over Abraham. He felt lucky to feel so young. He couldn’t believe he was still learning at 89 years old, that he had young friends. It was high school all over again. He hoped Ardo would become his grandson, maybe not officially, maybe not by blood, but by friendship, by the love of learning and asking questions with impossible

answers. At this rate, he would die with a friend not being sure about any single thing. And that was okay with him. He felt like a kid again. Not knowing things didn't scare him. He wasn't young, he didn't have time to lose.

In the computer lab, Angelo helped and packed Ardo and Abraham's things. At the front entrance, Ardo hit the handicap button with his hips and the doors swung open to the library's lobby. They walked into a short hallway just before the restrooms, a row of black and white photographs lined the walls.

Ardo cocked his head towards a photograph on the wall. The man in the photograph was nearly identical to Angelo, black eyes, black beard, brown skin. The man in the photograph wore a striped tie with its colors hidden in sepia and a pair of framed glasses. A white collared shirt underneath a jacket. Lapels embroidered with folkloric flowers.

"This man has been looking at me every day, persisting me to look closer. Look closer. He's your doppelgänger. An early Westerner searching for Manifest Destiny, a true explorer."

"Who is he?"

Ardo's knees denoted an index card below the frame, the man inside the picture was *Unknown*. "Despite reincarnation, incantations, or infleshing, I don't doubt that you and this man share a connection, a purpose."

Purpose, a word Angelo was jealous of hearing almost as much as he was jealous of Marlow for being able to forgive and forget. Purpose was the one thing in life that had evaded him. Maybe that's why he had become a data analytics expert and had become a hired gun for people with ideas on how the country ought to work.

He needed to get back to work. To New York. To Sophia. Beautiful, married Sophia. It could work. Why not? Out of all the crazy ideas he had heard, the craziest one of marrying Sophia wasn't the craziest anymore.

Abraham came out from the restroom, "You boys ready? I guess we'll meet again once we get the results back." He caught site of the picture. "Is that you Angelo?"

"I don't think so."

"What a great story that would be, being an old cowboy, even if it didn't end up being true."

Outside, Abraham packed his things into a green Buick Oldsmobile and drove away.

"I have something you can help me with."

"What is it?"

"Meet with my director. He's a priest at the cathedral."

"What do you need me to do?"

"It's just a box. Don't open it. It's a secret."

"It's been years since I've been to church."

"Aren't you curious to see what's changed?"

At the house, Marlow was preparing tea for Jacinto. Should he tell him everything he knew about Wilfredo and about Ardo? Should he let him keep believing in his own conspiracy? So far, there were three. How many more could there be?

He wanted to find out. For better or worse. He wanted to know.

"How did it go? Did you meet Abraham?"

“Did you all take Freckles to the zoo?”

“They wouldn’t take him in,” Terra hollered from the couch.

“What did you do with him?”

“We set him loose in the Rio Grande.”

“You did what?!”

“She’s kidding. The zoo took him in. He’s fine. They gave him a warm welcome when they saw him. You were right, Freckles is rare.”

Angelo put the box on the couch in the living room.

Terra asked, “What’s in the box?”

Marlow grabbed the box and Angelo snapped it away. “He asked me not to open it.”

How rare the feeling of keeping a secret. Or maybe it was that after all the years of working hard in New York, saying all the right things, keeping his own secrets, he was ready to keep someone else’s secrets. Still, he took it to his room and opened it.

There was a transparent plastic bag with dry wild mushrooms.

### **The Gargoyle**

“What are your sins, my son?”

The saints in the stained glass windows watched over him. He imagined his Church wedding with Sophia. Would the Church let him? Where was his Confirmation certificate? In a drawer somewhere.

“I doubt...”

“Doubt reminds us of what we risk if we fail.”

The Cathedral was as quiet as a library.

“What are your sins, Father?”

Doubt.

Father Santiago looked through the lattice and saw the hunched shoulders of the eldest Rincon brother. He needed someone to confide in. A person from the world he was escaping to, the world outside of the Church, the world of the state, he needed to share all his doubts.

“You look like me when I was younger.”

“I doubt it.”

“We could be the same man. Only with different convictions which makes all the difference between men.”

Angelo leaned in and saw Santiago. He was right. From behind the confessional, it looked like he could be seeing himself one day in the future.

“Sister Jennifer had plans for you to replace me. You gave a speech introducing your step-brother Wilfredo as class president.”

“You remember Wilfredo?”

“After what your family has been through who can forget? Afterward, she asked you, if you had any interest in becoming a priest. You would have been good. Did you ever consider it?”

God, no.

But the answer was yes.

“I don’t remember thinking about it.”

The night Wilfredo disappeared he had prayed. The rain would not stop. Wilfredo wouldn’t come home. The rolling thunder, lightning, and rain had made him quiver in bed. By midnight, half of his prayer had been answered- the thunderstorm stopped, but Wilfredo never came home.

The morning Josefina was taken he had prayed for a fury of revenge. It never came.

“Ardo sent a box with me.”

“Oh, God.”

“I hear you. Why did he send them with me?”

“He’s a Protestant.”

“I didn’t take you for the psychedelic kind of priest.”

“Not anymore. College was a different story.”

“How come Ardo knows?”

“I became friends with Ardo after he became closer to the Church, after the shooting, after your mother passed.

“Step-mother.”

“That incident had a tremendous affect on people. It’s hard to imagine.”

“So you and Ardo started tripping on mushrooms?”

“No, but I told him my experience in college.”

“And now he sends you mushrooms?”

“Yes. What would you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“At what point does virtue become a sin?”

“You’re asking me, father?”

“Please, call me Santiago.”

He stood from kneeling. “Do you mind if I sit?” And pulled the chair from the corner of the confessional near the lattice and sat. The candles’ scent reached his nose. The quiet Christmas outside the door, the idea of God, so quiet. He missed it.

“I am patient with the Church’s patrons. But the things they say. The things they believe, outside of Church. It terrifies me sometimes. I love Ardo. I don’t believe I’ve misplaced my faith.

I wanted to help him. I came into it believing that if I listened I could help. All that did was make him believe it even more. I gave up. I can't wage a war on beliefs."

"I wish I could help."

"I think you can. Believe in him."

"I'm not patient like you. I'm not like you."

"What do you believe in, Angelo?"

The confusion exhausted him.

Everyone had their conspiracy. He wished he could call them all crazy and say they were all wrong. All of them were wrong. But they carried a piece of reality he couldn't deny. Every conspiracy had a small piece of logic that made sense of the world. Their world. Whose ever it was. It wasn't enough to call them crazy. Not when Marlow was involved. Not after Wilfredo and Josefina disappeared. Maybe that's why he drank. New York felt dangerously distant now. His work. Sophia. Sophia. Sophia. His shot at his own conspiracy. They could make it work somehow. He believed in it.

"I believe you don't always get what you want."

"Are you quoting the Rolling Stones?"

"A rolling stone gathers no moss."

"What stone is that?"

"Me. I'm the rolling stone."

"Okay, rolling stone. Before you leave will you take the mushrooms?"

"You mean take them-take them?"

Santiago laughed, "Just take them away from here, please?"

Angelo held the box.

“I’m leaving, Angelo. I’m going into hiding. Away from the Church, away from The Conspiracy. I need someone to replace me and look after Ardo.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I have to get back to New York.”

“The big apple. I miss big cities. Maybe I’ll see you there one day.”

“You shouldn’t lose faith so easily.”

“Losing faith is never easy. It’s painful.” His heart felt it.

“You need to think about Ardo and everyone else.”

“Maybe I know the answer to my question. When does virtue become a sin? When it destroys the thing it was protecting.”

“What are you protecting?”

“Knowing true north. Direction. But everyone’s compass, the one built into their heart, points in a different direction.”

“People need you.”

“The ones who know true north will be fine. Everyone believes they know true north. Who am I to say otherwise? That’s what beautiful and terrifying of belief. It doesn’t need anyone’s approval. Every decision I’ve made has been made on the faith that things would turn out for the better. Every decision is a leap of faith. There hasn’t been any faith inside me for a long time. I can’t say I believe in anything anymore. My virtue has destroyed what it was made to protect.”

The sound of rain rushed from the stained glass windows.

“Let’s go outside. Another rainy day in the desert, I wouldn’t miss it.”

Outside, the rain clouds moved in gray. The white breeze lifted the scent, mortar, concrete, and slab and patted prickly leaves. The desert's plants always thirsted for water.

In the park across the Gothic Cathedral, underneath a covered bench, they sat. No matter where Angelo was, clouds were the same everywhere. Looking up, the gargoyles took his attention away from the clouds.

“The gargoyles on this cathedral have human faces. They're worn down.

“Some gargoyles are distorted human faces, animals, chimeras, goblins. They function as waterspouts and make the rain fall away from the walls. Too much water at the base of the church can erode it and compromise the building. If gargoyles didn't have faces, they would be called grotesques, not gargoyles. Can you imagine them without any faces?”

A parishioner waved at Santiago.

“My duty follows,” and he stood and left.

From the bench, Angelo said goodbye. He opened the box from Ardo, took the bag of mushrooms out, and picked one from the bunch. The walls of the mushroom looked like the trees of a branch. He smelled it, tasted it, and ate it.

### **Many Whos**

From: Rincon, Angelo <angelo@electricavenue.com>

Sent: Thursday, April 29, 2021 4:13 AM

To: [REDACTED]

Subject: Re: XYZ Gen

I had a dream last night that I think explains my current situation. Do you believe that dreams mean something? I can't be sure. Are you?

I saw a man on top of a pyramid. I think it was a pharaoh. I think it was me. It could have been. I'm not sure. He stood on top of a pyramid pointing his finger to an ocean sky. In the reflection was another pharaoh floating above him pointing his finger to the pharaoh below him. The two pyramids looked like an hourglass.

The pyramid collapsed. But when it fell I felt the immense pressure of gravity. Is it gravity that makes us think of everything in pyramids. We've always lived by gravity. It's what gives us our atmosphere. It keeps us safe. But we've only lived in gravity. When the pyramid was flat on its side, I saw that it had roots underneath it and a wild plant grew on it, it had become a bog, and from the bog hundreds, no millions, I couldn't even see how many, I couldn't imagine it, trillions of little threads buried themselves into the ground.

And it buried itself deep and I went underground with it. Underground I saw that everything was connected. I saw the connections like trees, branches, like the brain connections, like the internet, like leaves of a tree, but more of them, and everywhere, they floated like if they were underwater.

You asked me to tell you why I am leaving you a paper trail.

You wanted to know what the conspiracy is, but not who. You wanted to know what it is. You think that knowing it that you can control it. But you can't. The Conspiracy is everywhere and is everyone.

There is no who behind it.

There are many ones.

Many whos.

## Holy Shit

From: [REDACTED]  
Sent: Thursday, April 29, 2021 9:27 AM  
To: Rincon, Angelo <angelo@electricavenue.com>  
Subject: Re: Re: XYZ Gen

Holy shit, what did you take?

## Family Reunion

“I had a dream last night,” Marlow whispered aloud.

Angelo asked, “What about?”

“I was trapped, in a forest, there were a lot of trees. I’m not sure where it was, but it was on fire. Trees on fire avalanched down a hill. A kangaroo jumped out of the fire, and there was a koala, with its fur burnt. From the forest I could see the city. There was a church, I think it was Notre Dame burning. That happened, right?”

“It was a nightmare, that’s all.” He poked the fire, went to the couch, laid his head down.

“How come you can’t work from home?”

Because home couldn’t be at that house anymore, it was in another city, far away. He had tried hard enough, or maybe not, if there was something he could do none of the options were good ideas. There wasn’t any other option in his mind or heart. He needed to leave. At least, he had seen them all. They were safe. “I have to get back, Marlow. I need to get back to work. Jacinto is going to be fine. You’re going to be fine. Did you talk to your lawyer?”

“He’s pretty sure I won’t do jail time. The jails are packed. The courts are backed up, too.”

“Everyone is safe and sound then. You see? You don’t need me anymore.”

“I’ll be back before Christmas.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, little brother.”

### **Shatter Proof**

From La Guardia, he made a quick stop at his apartment. He was tired but bored and felt the urge to go out- he missed the hustle of escaping sleep. He dropped off his things, and took the R Train to the Lower East Side to meet with his coworkers.

As he had hoped, the buzzing neon lights woke him up. Down the twisted staircase, the lounge area glowed pink, purple, and orange. The stairs took him to the basement and it opened up to an empty dance floor. The underground music echoed in between the walls. The karaoke hall was two doors down, soundproofed. There he was greeted by a big yell coming from Luke. Across Luke was Ava.

Ava Cortez had her brunette hair straightened, almost sharpened, nothing like the natural wavy hair that lengthened to the middle of her back in grade school. It was almost always straightened. Her ribbons had disappeared. If she had wrapped it in a ponytail it would have been done using a black band. There were no more casual scrunchies or bowed ribbons. She was wearing gray. She never work pink anymore. Neutral colors were her favorite because how easy it was to shop for shoes. Express was her preferred mode. Simplicity, there was enough to think about other than clothes. Her wool sweater was gray with a black golden-buckle belt.

Luke was drunk and welcomed Angelo with a drink. “Maybe you can settle this for us. Who do you think is going to win in 2024?”

“Politics? It’s our job not our life.”

Luke manifested control over his slur with a laugh, “I can’t figure you out, Angelo. You don’t talk like either-or. I’ve known you for a year and I haven’t gotten any closer. You use collective words like community and *we* a lot- strangely a lot. It makes me think you have a social conscience about things. There’s hardly any religious influence in your vocabulary, except God damn it. You don’t say God bless you, you don’t say good morning or good night, you just say morning or night, sometimes you don’t say anything and disappear from the party. You dress like you’re going to talk about politics. But then other times you dress in board shorts. I’ve got it. You’re an independent! Or worse, you’re in the neo-placebo-tea-party!”

“You got me, Luke,” he drew his hands up and smiled his perfect teeth, “I’m a closeted conservative.”

“Well, come out, it’s okay. There’s plenty of us here. Look around, what do you see?”

“Frugal, cautious, personally responsible libertarians.”

“What are you? A wealthy socialist?”

“A conservative spender.”

“An authoritarian libertarian.”

“An equalitarian feudalist.”

“A communal imperialist.”

“A capitalist fascist.”

“A feudal republican.”

Ava watched Angelo from the corner seat of the table, “A young lesbian trapped in a man’s body.”

Luke burped, “Not that I care what you are. You’re my friend, my colleague. But I want to know if you’re one of the 55% of people holding out, or the 65% giving in.”

“You guys have trust issues. Now stop drinking before you hurt yourself, Luke.”

“I was only asking a question,” Luke slurred. “What are you Ava?”

“Complicated.”

“I haven’t met a woman who wasn’t.”

“I’m sure you haven’t met a man who wasn’t, either, Luke.”

“I’ve been called a genius by a few of our coworkers.”

“I’m sure your admirers see things as simple as you do- no offense. Like minded people tend to think alike.”

“I feel slightly offended.”

“You asked if he’s in the 55% of people holding out or the 65% giving in. You might want to check your math on that poll, but just so you know I could prove a point to anyone if I hired an economist, too,” Ava sipped on her drink.

“That’s right! Bury people with enough general statistics they’ll stick with the first opinion they had from the get-go. Facts are irrelevant. It’s what people believe. If people believe the world is flat. It’s flat. If people believe the virus is fake. It’s fake. Belief fuels the needle.”

“You do have trust issues,” Ava confirmed.

“Someone is always lying.”

“But specifically, someone is lying to you.”

“Yes.”

“Or are they lying to you about something you believe is true?”

“Yes.”

“Which one?”

“Both.”

“Are you dizzy?”

“I’m just saying. That’s the way it is.”

“Which way is that?”

“That’s the way the country works.”

“Now we’re talking about the country, not just you. You’ve projected yourself onto 330 million Americans. For the sake of argument, let’s continue. How does the country work?”

“It goes one way for some time and swings back.”

“You are brilliant, Luke, my God! It’s astounding.”

“I’m astounded listening to you talk about how the country is in a perpetual state of chaos. Everything is fine. Look out your window? How disastrous is reality? It’s a lot calmer than you’re making it out to be. I lost my father when I was in my twenties, you don’t see me complaining.”

“You’re right, Luke, things are chirpy.” Ava tapped her drink twice on the table and shook Luke’s hesitant, wobbly hand.

Angelo’s round came to the table, “Luke what do you think about Russia’s involvement with the elections?”

Luke bit his tongue, “Russian involvement, bull shit!”

“I’m sorry, Ukrainian?” Angelo prodded.

“Not that it actually happened,” and Luke poured himself another drink.

“How fake do you think the news is, Luke?” Angelo asked.

“We work in consulting, why are you asking me? I can prove any point that you want to make- I just need an economist.”

“It’s the same shit,” Ava finished her drink.

“Agreed,” Angelo raised his glass and nobody reached to clink it.

Luke pushed his beer close to the edge of the table. “Ava, seriously? We were just talking about this before Angelo got here. Kidding aside, you should be Republican. What the fuck, Ava? You above all people should understand why it’s important Republicans win. I mean for Christ’s sake, your dad owns Electric Avenue, do you know how many people would go after him if the Democrats win?”

“I don’t blame you for being confused. We weren’t all raised the same way. It’s complicated.”

“You’re not making any sense, Ava.”

“Your summer outfit in winter doesn’t make sense. You dress like you’re going to a yacht every day, except you don’t have one. Do you, Luke? And you’re the only one who hasn’t bought a round. I’m guessing that the case because your assets aren’t all that liquid, am I right, or is it because your dad, like mine, keeps most of it for us?”

“Republicans make people believe that every Democrat wants a fucking yacht, that’s my point.”

“Luke, stop talking, you confused your own outfit’s political statement.”

“You’re fucking paranoid, Ava. You’re constantly talking shit about Reagan. If trickle down economics didn’t work, why has the economy’s wealth spread so well, so efficciffiiently You’re the richest one of all of us here, Ava. You should know.” Luke’s sip dripped from the side of his mouth onto his khaki trousers. “I’m sorry, I’m not making any sense, excuse me, I need to take a tinkle.” He nearly stood up, “You should take a piss, too, Ava, chill yourself out for bit.” He rose and his legs hit the bottom of the table. Losing his balance, his forearm collapsed onto the table and a pint of beer came down on its side. The beer avalanched onto Ava.

Ava slammed the edge of the table onto Luke’s thighs, locking him in.

He squirted saliva and it landed on her face. She swiped it off her lips.

Released from the table, Luke grabbed Ava's ass, "I'm sorry, honey."

She lifted the empty pint off the table by its handle and swung it across his face. The glass shattered on Luke's neck. Blood splattered on Angelo's shirt.

People stood, shoved, and shouted. It took moments for any bouncer to get there. Ava squeezed through the crowd. Angelo was pinched before reaching the front door. The bouncers took Angelo's face into a wall, his neck under a half-nelson, and his ass into the street.

Outside, minutes later, the cop patrol arrived. Luke pointed at Angelo and Angelo countered the accusations.

"He's a fucking liar," Luke pointed at him.

The camera footage was lost, nobody had a recording of what had happened. Enough people were pointing fingers and Angelo started pointing fingers, too. Then another fight broke out. The cops rushed in and Angelo ran.

A few blocks down Angelo walked into a movie theater looking for Ava.

Sunday night at 11:15 the Angelika Theatre was showing the re-released Argentine movie *El Secreto de Sus Ojos*. From the escalator, he arrived from the first floor to the underground auditoriums. The credits rolled, the floor lights led Angelo to his seat.

"I've decided I'm quitting first thing tomorrow," Ava whispered to Angelo from behind him.

"You might get fired, which is what you wanted anyway, isn't it?"

"You're right. This is better. I'll be let go, instead of letting go."

“You’ll tell Adam, what happened, I don’t think it’s a big deal. He was drunk. If anyone gets fired, it’ll be him.”

Once the movie began, there was another person in the theater. In New York’s five Burroughs, with all the traffic and lights there was plenty of space in between seats in movie theaters on Sunday nights. They sat down, hunched back into their seats, and kicked up their legs. The lights faded out the room into darkness, and there was just enough people to talk as if they were alone- in whispers.

“Angelo?”

“What?”

“You don’t think I’m a frustrated Republican, do you?”

“No, I think you were right about being complicated.”

“Angelo?”

“Yeah.”

“I profiled you.”

“You didn’t.”

“I’ll tell you, but you can’t tell Adam.”

“Adam knows?”

“He’s the boss. You’ve been using your work laptop and cell phone more than your personal ones. I’ve only been getting information from your work stuff.”

“Oh, good. I was worried about my privacy.”

“I can tell you like your privacy.”

“That’s not creepy, Ava.”

“Why don’t you post anything with your friends or family?”

“I don’t hang out with people that take a lot of photos.”

“You don’t have a lot of friends.”

“It’s just me. Are you hungry?”

“Why don’t you post more? You have a better personality than you show.”

“My friends don’t take pictures of me when we sit and talk. Can you believe that?”

“I can almost dream what you dream.”

“What do I dream?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“I profiled, you, too.”

“What do I dream?”

“I couldn’t imagine the depths of your dreams.”

“No, but that’s why you used my data to profile me, and not my dreams. What did you see?”

“Your basic consumer category is female, Latin, 28-34 years old. You earn over six figures on a good economic year. That would put you at the higher earnings generally, but your browsing, clicks, and purchasing ratios don’t prove that. Your location, Manhattan, is restrictive. You’re a single mother. Financially independent.”

“Republican or Democrat?”

“It’s tough to say. Most of your peers, in parallel with age group tendencies and dispositions in the country after college, have a changing social media profile. Most likely you graduated from a small, liberal arts college where you practiced a sport. If I had to guess I’d say softball, outfield. You might have been a theater kid. That would explain why you follow entertainment and performance art on your page, old and new movies, you’re a cinephile. Your

personality is extroverted. In college you were more liberal. You follow memes, news, yoga, astrology, fast meal prep, and literature pages on your social media accounts. You're an avid reader and have a flare for new age medicine. The most notable change has been your dedication to the environment. Most recently you began following recycling, sustainability, and environmental pages. Like Gen Z, the world is on your mind, and you believe we can save the earth."

"Republican or Democrat?"

"It's hard to say. Your socioeconomic background is in the top percentile for your age group which in all likelihood makes you conservative, but that depends on your upbringing. Where did you live?"

She nudged her head in pantomime.

"Despite your spending, you are the top percentile of your social circle, and your social circles are varied, you bounce around, group to group, friends to friends, world to world. The spending forecast model shows you'll be at a top 1% net worth, but I think that's because I know you personally."

"Nothing what you've said is personal."

"Okay. Your concerns involve the word economy. The word economy is not just a news headline. It means something to you. That explains why you follow so many small business pages and are involved with micro-financing boards. It's why I think you believe you can steer Electric Avenue to be a higher ESG-rating kind of company. You're going to deal with the word economy like your father, directly, involved."

"Republican or Democrat?"

"You attended private schools through college. You follow key liberals in your social media accounts but also have key conservatives on your page. You're either a journalist or open-

minded. Given that you aren't, that makes you a swing voter. You may or may not have voted conservative in the past."

"Shh, don't say that."

"Okay, I'll say it slower," he raised his voice, "You might have voted Republican!"

"Sssshhhhh!" The other person in the theater objected.

"Sorry! You're a history buff. So much so that last week you followed a professor that specializes in the esoteric subject of American government in the 1770s. You liked posts featuring the Founding Fathers, Enlightenment thinkers, and the Federalist Papers. You prefer to re-establish the separation between Church and State. You believe there's enough space in society for everyone to get along. In regards to institutional religion, you lean towards Catholicism. You have a keen interest in astrology. You're a Gemini. You identify as her, she, and heterosexual. You believe in progressive social agendas in capitalism that could improve family life in the country for men and women in your situation."

"What my situation?"

"You're a single mother, adaptive, disciplined, and modular. You believe in things like a minimum wage indexed for inflation, a three-day weekend, maternity and paternity leave. You are likely to be married, but none of the data showed that you will be or have been. You're a seasonal shopper, every three months you spend enough money to make up a 8% of your annual gross salary. You're frugal and save approximately 5-10% of every paycheck. You shop online."

"Everyone shops online."

"You make consistent, planned, committed purchases. You tend to buy one phone and pay it off. Your car loan is ending after five years but you used public transportation because you want to save the planet. That's it."

“That’s not bad.”

“I know, it’s like I know you.”

“And what do you think of me? Be honest.”

“I’m comfortable with you. We share similar interests and hobbies. We have chemistry and compatibility. Going out together is relaxing and necessary for both of us. We enjoy our company. But you value your privacy as much as I do. In that regard, you also value your space. There’s something private in your space that you won’t ever show, not anyone. But it comes out sometimes when you blush. I can’t put my finger on it. I can smell it when I kiss you on the cheek.”

“I’m the least self-conscious person you have ever met, Angelo.”

“Irrefutably. You are.”

“Should we get married?”

“Yay.”

“When?”

“Next week.”

Her heart pulsed. His, too.

“Everyone is getting married.”

“On, purpose, too.”

“We can try it and see how it works.”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Where would we live?”

“Here.”

“Anywhere here?”

“Yes, but it would have to be your place. Mine is too small.”

“My dad could buy a place as a wedding present.”

“You’ll have to choose for the both of us. Just don’t put me on the deed.”

“Why?”

“Do you believe in prenups?”

“Should I?”

“Messy.”

He stopped talking- finally. But he never said enough.

Angelo, Angelo, Angelo, she didn’t hate him. He was honest, too honest. Too smart for his own good. Another fact of life. The fact was that it was possible to love someone after being in love with them. After hating them, after accepting their flaws, after all the dreams were upended, after the truth was said, after every lie was uncovered, after every game was played, a creature behind two eyes was still looking at her. He was still cute in a dumb kind of way.

His heart sank in regret the moment he said those words, but he couldn’t feel regret, not yet. Without his knowing, mistakes were being made that would cost him an elongation in time of his breaking heart. One that could not be repaired by his own wanting.

“Besides, your dad only knows me as the educated Mexican.”

“I told you, you misheard that.”

“I heard you perfectly fine. No que me importa, guera.”

“Don’t talk in Spanish.” She couldn’t keep him forever, instead she bit his shoulder. She wanted to hug him, but she couldn’t anymore. There wasn’t any point. It was too true what he said, but everything stayed unreal.

One day in the future, they imagined, in separate minds, living together when their hearts were at peace with the life that was given to them. If they had been born 88 years old they would

have known. But because they were born infants, they did not know when to leave and when to stay. Ava should have left. Angelo should have stayed. And in that way they both made the decision for their own futures without ever leaving the delicious taste of the present, a blessing and a curse.

“Angelo, why are you still seeing Sophia?”

“I’m not, not anymore.”

“Finally. When are we marrying?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Why are you scared?”

“I’m not scared.”

“Being alone doesn’t scare you?”

“How can I be alone when I have you breathing down my neck? I can smell the nachos, when did you get nachos?”

“Don’t deflate, I mean, don’t deflect.”

“I’m hungry, that’s all I’m saying.”

There was no separating Angelo from himself. Angelo was Angelo. Relationships were relationships. Love was love. Heartbreak was heartbreak. Hearts actually broke.

“You’re full of shit, Angelo. Do you know that?”

“Did my profile say that, too?”

“You fall in line with your category.”

“What’s that?”

“Heterosexual male. Male.”

How could he say so much? Her family wasn't like him. What portion of his genes had the ability to verbalize fantasy, what code? If he had been born Aquarius he would have been her perfect match, but he was a Virgo. Oddly enough, he was a good listener. Yet, strangely, whatever judgment he arrived at he kept to himself and listened all the more. That was the fucking trick. He listened. She dug her head into his shoulder.

“I don't think I can ever give you what you already have.”

She waited.

“You have a sister, a father, a mother, you live comfortably. I'm barely making my way here. If we get married, I couldn't do anything that you don't already have. Besides what if I have to go back. What if I have to go home?”

“That's your ego talking. There's a perfectly simple solution to the problem you're talking about. But you can't say it, because of your pride and fantasy world. You want to be the breadwinner. You want to be the smarter of the two of us. All I asked is if you wanted to get married. You think too much.”

“I tend to do that a lot. Someone told me I'm too smart for my own good. I'm beginning to believe that. I hope it's not too late.”

And it was too late for her. Her heart sank and she let it stay there, she moved her head away, and thought about what new future could happen for her and little Beau. Little Beau would be her man. There was only room for one ego outside of hers, and it was her son.

“How's Beau?”

“He's good. He's at a fourth grade level in math and reading.”

“Do you think he'll be valedictorian like his mother?”

“Of course, how else?”

“Have you talked to Sloan?”

“No, there’s no need. He wanted to go missing, I let him. I don’t think I’ll ever tell him. It’s been four years. I’m not interested in him being interested.” After she learned that Beau’s dad had a wife, after learning Beau’s dad was in love with his old life, after meeting Sloan’s wife, Sophia, she knew she would be a single mother for some time. She looked at Angelo, and saw the possibility of him becoming another Sloan. After hating him, there was still a desire to see him happy, with or without her. Did he imagine the same for her?

He did. He wished he had the courage to make a final decision on the matter. To take her hand in marriage and never look back. Never go back home and always look ahead. There was so much to look forward to. Those things that he looked forward to, what were they? Were they distractions? Were they destiny? Was it the constant offering of something new on every block in every city? This moment what did it mean? Did it mean anything? Was it to be kept or to be had? Was it both? He couldn’t decide. God damn it. Angelo, Angelo, Angelo. Decide.

Where could their desire make sense? They didn’t. They weren’t supposed to. Desire wasn’t the problem. And if it was, their hearts toiled to strike it out of their hearts. Was this love? It was passion. It was ardor. What was missing was Angelo’s commitment and the fantasy of having a child of his own one day would be the way to fix it.

“Do you want to have another kid?”

Ava watched the movie and smacked her lips.

She couldn’t erase the feeling of his fingertips from her flesh. The want of weight over her, that desire to be dressed after sex, one foot after another, one leg into each pant leg, but first the panties, and then her bra, and then her shirt. She couldn’t hate him, because he had loved her before and after sex. After the deed that created so much uncertainty after the few men she had been with,

it was with him that after the deed had been done she felt like a child being taken care of by her best friend, her best lover. Still, she wanted to get rid of it, and she finally did. She hated him.

“No, I don’t think I want another kid.”

They fell asleep in the auditorium. An usher woke them up. The theater lights illuminated their faces. They were pale, sleepy, and groggy. They walked out leaning their weight against one another’s bodies wishing they weren’t dreaming.

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## Vita

Diego A. Rico completed his B.B.A. in finance and accounting and graduated with honors from the University of Texas at El Paso in 2012. He interned on Wall Street for two summers, but opted to live and work in Texas as a fraud auditor in the technology sector. Before joining the M.F.A. in Creative Writing, he worked as a financial analyst in an international telecom company spread along the US-Mexico border.

Before studying writing, Diego A. Rico wrote, directed, and produced short films. His first short film, *Gift of Gab*, premiered at the 2014 Chicago Latino Film Festival. The short film received a Remi Award at WorldFest-Houston International Film Festival 2014.

His second short film, *Sunrise*, competed at Cine Las Americas in Austin, Texas and Taos Shortz Film Fest in 2015. It was selected as part of the Festival de Cannes 2015 Short Film Corner program.

He published a poem titled "Ant's Nuptial Flight" in the Rio Grande Review in Fall 2019. That first publication was in the same issue featuring Tracy K. Smith's poem, "Hill Country," translated by one of his professors, Andrea Cote Botero.

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