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## Tierra Sagrada: Stories

Jose Rene Martinez  
*University of Texas-Pan American*

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TIERRA SAGRADA: STORIES

A Thesis

by

JOSÉ RENÉ MARTÍNEZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas – Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Major Subject: Creative Writing



TIERRA SAGRADA: STORIES

A Thesis  
by  
JOSÉ RENÉ MARTÍNEZ

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Professor José Skinner  
Chair of Committee

Dr. Steven Schneider  
Committee Member

Dr. Shawn Thomson  
Committee Member

May 2011



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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis consists of fourteen stories and a critical introduction. Each story is set in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas and features Mexican American characters. The critical introduction discusses the history of the Rio Grande Valley and traces my development as a writer. It also shows the influences Mexican American writers such as Américo Paredes have had on my work.





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Stories in this collection, often in radically different forms, appeared in the following publications: “Coyote” in Boulevard, “Clown” in Lost, and “Baby Race” in Mesquite Review.



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## INTRODUCTION

The short story remains popular among writers of literary fiction. Historically, the American short story has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. Contemporary writers of short stories are often faced with a formidable challenge, one that involves using a concentrated narrative to share ideas and emotions with readers. Because this genre requires fiction to be concise, writers “impress upon [readers] the unity of their vision of life by focusing on a single effect” (Charters 3). When done well, the result can be a powerful and lively chronicle of human experience. Susan C. Ferguson believes that “the ‘best’ short stories give us a sense of the inevitability of each sentence and persuade us that they are as complete as possible, that any addition or deletion would destroy their aesthetic wholeness” (288).

I have loved short fiction for most of my life. The intensity of a good narrative and the way it can affect readers has always impressed me. While writing short stories is not easy, I have enjoyed countless hours spent attempting to transport readers to another dimension, one that exists solely in my imagination.

\*

This is my second critical introduction to a collection of short fiction. The first was composed in 2003, when I was 22, for a master’s thesis titled The Hollow Spot. Eight years have passed, and in that time, the world has changed considerably. We can now watch movies on cell phones and take college courses online. Even our access to literature is different. As I

type, books made of paper are becoming less popular. Instead of making a trip to a bookstore, we can instantly download a text to our Kindles, Nooks, or iPads. Eight years is not a long time, but it is enough to experience innovative artistic growth. I know because, like the world, I have changed—I am not the same writer today that I was back then.

My changes, though, have had little to do with technology. Many writers now find it necessary to comment on or incorporate aspects of the latest technological advances into their works, but for the most part, I have taken the opposite direction. Rather than speculating on the future, the pieces in Tierra Sagrada (the title is the Spanish translation of “sacred ground”) attempt to capture a slightly simpler time and do so by placing the focus primarily on people—but not just any people. The characters in this collection are the men, women, and children of my home, the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas.

The purpose of this thesis is to tell the larger story of the Valley through several smaller ones. Others such as Américo Paredes, Rolando Hinojosa, Gloria Anzaldúa, David Rice, René Saldaña, and Oscar Casares have made similar efforts. While my idea may not be unique, I believe my depiction of the area is. My Valley is a place of magic and legends, love and lust, music and madness. It is populated by an evil brujo, an obsessive boy, a young accordion player with a talent for songwriting, and a woman who dances with a demon. These wild characters share the personalities and traits of my family members, friends, neighbors, and though I do not like to admit it, their emotions and insecurities often mirror my own. I suspect it is the same with most writers. In his introduction to Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), celebrated dramatist and fiction writer Tennessee Williams notes how a writer’s personality directly influences his creative work:

It is sad and embarrassing and unattractive that those emotions that stir him deeply enough to demand expression, and to charge their expression with some measure of light and power, are nearly all rooted, however changed in their surface, in the particular and sometimes peculiar concerns of the artist himself, of that special world, the passions and images of it that each of us weaves about him from birth to death, a web of monstrous complexity, spun forth at a speed that is incalculable to a length beyond measure, from the spider mouth of his own singular perceptions. (vii)

The special world Williams refers to is inside each artist and can serve as a kind of sanctuary from the harshness of society. When an artist creates, he presents his unique view of reality, a view that is shaped by his gender, culture, and personal experiences. It therefore seems that one can understand an artist by studying his art. What happens, however, when an artist does not truly know himself?

I have lived in the Valley my entire life. Its streets are as familiar to me as my birthmarks. Yet the truth is that until a few years ago, I had never really *known* the Valley, with its rich history and unique cultural traditions, and as a result, did not completely know myself. While writing this thesis, a primary goal was to learn about the place I had always taken for granted.

\*

The Rio Grande Valley is located at the southern tip of Texas and is composed of Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy counties. These counties border the Rio Grande River, a long and murky line dividing the United States and Mexico. A casual glance at today's news might suggest the area has recently become filled with violence because drug wars between Mexican



cartels occasionally cross the border onto U.S. soil. But violence is nothing new to Valley residents. Beginning in 1749, the Valley was part of the Spanish province of Nuevo Santander. Due to struggles with Spanish colonization and “natural barriers,” part of the southern border became “a refuge for rebellious Indians from the Spanish *presidios* [military posts], who preferred outlawry to life under Spanish rule. Thus, at its earliest period in history the Lower Rio Grande was inhabited by outlaws, whose principal offense was an independent spirit” (Paredes, Pistol 8). Spanish settlers eventually made permanent homes in the region, and to their credit, got on well with the natives (Paredes, Pistol 8). This resulted in blended marriages and the birth of mestizos, people of mixed European and Native American descent. From 1810-1821, many mestizos, along with Mexican-born Spaniards and members of the indigenous population, fought and won freedom from Spain in the Mexican War of Independence. The new country, Mexico, consisted of a large part of the present day United States and included Texas.

The Texas Revolution (1835-1836) was initiated by prominent American and Mexican residents of Texas dissatisfied with the Mexican government. The war granted Texas independence and set the Rio Grande as its southern border. Texas was annexed by the United States in 1845.

Over the next several decades, the “Magic Valley” (a nickname used in advertising) was primed for development due to its fertile farmland. Successful promotions attracted an abundance of white settlers from the north, and the Anglo ranchers often came into conflict with residents of Mexican heritage. Indeed, life was complicated for “Mexican Americans.” Though they outnumbered whites in the Valley, Mexican Americans and Mexicans found themselves persecuted in the early 1900s. Anglos had gained control of the region, and a system consisting of the white rancher and subservient Mexican American / Mexican laborer became common.

Few of the disenfranchised were content with the system, and an “armed insurrection” by Texas Mexicans was “[brutally suppressed] by Texas Rangers. The conflict turned the Valley into a virtual war zone during 1915-1917” (Montejano 117).

Racial tensions between whites and Mexican Americans remained strong decades later. In November 1968, over 150 Mexican American students walked out of classes at Edcouch-Elsa High School in an effort to protest inequalities and discrimination in the educational system. According to Miguel Guajardo and Francisco Guajardo, “After decades of a dominant segregationist culture throughout the region, Mexican American high school students in this agricultural community forcefully changed the power structure in the schools and in the community at large” (506). Another example of the fight against inequality is documented in Hart Perry’s film Valley of Tears (2003), which recounts a strike that occurred in Raymondville in 1979, when Mexican American farm workers refused to harvest onions in fields belonging to Charles Wetegrove. Farm workers demanded better pay since they were making well below the minimum wage, and the strike split the community, with white ranchers on one side and Mexican American workers on the other. The conflict pushed Raymondville into an economic and social spiral from which it has never recovered.

I believe it is necessary to understand the divide between whites and Mexican Americans in order to understand the Valley, mainly because past tensions have shaped the current racial outlook. Though racial tensions have quelled considerably in the last few years, if you take a walk down a street in the Valley today, it is still possible to hear Anglos refer to those with brown skin as “Goddamn Mexicans” or “dirty wetbacks.” Mexican Americans, in turn, might be heard to curse the “pinches gringos” or “stupid bolillos.” It is easy to turn a blind eye to such behavior and tempting to believe that, in an enlightened era such as our own, racism is confined

to history texts, but this is not the case. Consider the fact that McAllen, a prominent Valley city and my place of birth, remains primarily Hispanic. Yet the city elected its first Hispanic mayor only in 1997.

This is not to say that the issue of race is as simple as brown versus white. With each new generation of Mexican Americans, parts of the Mexican culture are forgotten. For instance, I am not bilingual and have trouble communicating with those whose primary language is Spanish. Also, I have noticed younger Mexican Americans often refer to illegal aliens from Mexico in a derogatory fashion. It is as if some Mexican Americans believe they are better than Mexicans just because they were born on a different side of the river, and I find this quite ironic.

\*

The Valley is not the easiest place to become an artist, especially for a young Mexican American. Saying you want to become a professional writer can be like walking around without pants—people look at you strangely, as if there must be something wrong with you. A writer is viewed as an oddity because the Mexican culture relies heavily on stories told in the oral rather than written tradition, which is unsurprising considering that members of older generations, such as my grandparents, spent their days working in the fields instead of reading or attending college.

My own literary journey began as a child. I learned to read at the age of five, and books opened new doors in my imagination. It wasn't long before I began to love literature and the experiences it provides, because as Janet Burroway and others note, "Literature offers us feelings for which we do not have to pay. It allows us to love condemn, condone, hope, dread, and hate without any of the risks those feelings ordinarily involve, for even good feelings—intimacy, power, speed, drunkenness, passion—have consequences, and powerful feelings may risk powerful consequences" (21). Throughout my youth, I enjoyed the young adult mysteries of

Donald J. Sobol and the captivating spy thrillers of Ian Fleming. Michael Crichton introduced me to the realms of science fiction, and Stephen King filled my dreams with figures of the supernatural. It was not the excitement of the texts that was addictive; rather, it was the ability of these texts to transport me to alternate locations or times in history that I found fascinating. A good writer, it seemed, could make a reader feel what it was like to be someone else.

High school and college brought changes to my reading material. I discovered Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver. These authors practiced minimalism, a writing style that relies on carefully-selected diction and sparse description to create effects. Sometimes, minimalist stories and novels come off as stilted and boring, but there are other instances in which a minimalist approach infuses fiction with a unique and vibrant power, such as in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants."

I had written bloated stories since second grade. Adopting the minimalist technique in my late teens and early twenties breathed new life into my fiction. I moved away from writing about secret agents and zombies and started to capture characters simply trying to get by in the world. The first literary story I ever wrote, "Orange Juice," is about a man going to a convenience store to buy orange juice for his sick wife. Nothing else really happens, and I remember thinking I just didn't want to screw up.

I was maturing as an artist, but there was still a missing element. The pieces I was writing sought to appeal to a wide audience and featured characters with last names like Benson, Jennings, and Clark and were vaguely set in "Anywhere, USA." I was primarily reading books by white authors, and my own fiction imitated their use of characterization and setting. Whenever I required concrete locations, I chose places like Houston or Austin, reasoning few readers would care for stories about the Valley.

At that time, having never heard of Valley native Américo Paredes or his celebrated works With His Pistol In His Hand (1958) and George Washington Gómez (1990), I naively believed nobody from my area had risen to become a great American writer. This changed years later, long after receiving my master's degree in English and obtaining a teaching position at a local college. While teaching an American literature course in the spring of 2006, I showed a video on Mexican American literature. Paredes was discussed in a brief segment, and my students wanted to know more.

I did too, and I began by reading George Washington Gómez. Though a novel, some chapters are self-contained, which made it easy to incorporate any lessons I learned into my own writing of short fiction.

Furthermore, the book captures the spirit of South Texas and its people.

\*

My maternal grandfather was born in Mexico in 1914, a year before Paredes was born in Brownsville. With little formal education, my grandparents illegally crossed the Rio Grande River in the 50s and settled in San Manuel, where my mother was born. Her status as an American citizen allowed the family to stay in the United States legally. The hardships they faced—working in the fields, buying land, and building a home—are similar to situations presented in Paredes's novel, though his book takes place in the 30s. My family members may not have been attacked and murdered by cruel Texas Rangers, but the feelings of fear and animosity displayed by Paredes's Mexican American characters would not have been unfamiliar to them. Perhaps this is the novel's greatest strength, as it speaks to, what was at the time, the rapidly emerging and developing Mexican American culture. Both my parents have numerous stories detailing how, in school, they were punished for speaking Spanish and laughed at for

having dirty hands and being poor, occurrences not far removed from the plight of Guálinto, the novel's protagonist, who feels ostracized at school and embarrassed about his home.

Much of the novel takes place in "Jonesville on the Grande," a fictionalized version of Brownsville. The city's complicated history follows:

For more than half a century Jonesville remained a Mexican town, though officially part of the United States. A few English-speaking adventurers moved in, married into Mexican landowning families, and became a ruling élite allied with their Mexican in-laws. But Spanish remained the language of culture and politics, and Mexican money was tender in local commerce. (Paredes, Gómez 36)

Whenever I read that, I wonder why Paredes does not just call the city Brownsville. Similar name changes are found in the work of Rolando Hinojosa, another celebrated Valley writer, whose Klail City stands in for his native Mercedes. Hinojosa's most revered book is The Valley (1983) and features a completely fictional Valley county. I speculate the name changes are due to political and practical concerns. Regardless, these authors taught me the entire Valley is a worthy setting for stories because the outside world has no idea what life is like in deep South Texas.

Characterization is another of Paredes's strengths. George Washington Gómez is filled with intimate portraits. Guálinto is born with a heavy burden on his shoulders, that of being, as his doomed father says, "a great man among the Gringos" (Paredes, Gómez 16). Guálinto is frequently reminded of his destiny by his uncle Feliciano, and Paredes's vision of the future becomes clear to readers. In a world dominated by whites and their culture, Mexican Americans must play the game the "white way" in order to progress. This point is made numerous times, so often that Guálinto is unable to forget it.

Assimilation as a path to success can easily be recognized in the real world. My parents were migrant farm workers growing up, and after struggling for years, my mother graduated from college and became an elementary school teacher. Neither my younger sister nor I ever had to work the way our parents did. We were pushed to study, and I am now working on a second master's degree, and my sister has graduated from Georgetown University and Harvard University.

Family is important in Mexican American culture, and this value can be seen in numerous literary works by Mexican American authors. In George Washington Gómez, it is initially tragic when Feliciano gives up his life as an outlaw to serve as a substitute father to his nephew and nieces; he is forced to put his own aspirations aside after his brother-in-law is killed. Feliciano relocates his sister's family in search of a brighter future and is entrusted with the task of ensuring Guálinto does not seek revenge for his father's death. Guálinto's father says, "My son. Mustn't know. Ever. No hate, no hate" (Paredes, Gómez 21). It is interesting to note that once Feliciano chooses an "honest" life, fortune smiles on him for a time. Before even arriving in Jonesville, he averts disaster at the hands of ritches, meets the influential Judge Norris, and is offered a job. These episodes set the stage for Feliciano to obtain power among his people and serve as a role model for his nephew. Such relationships among members of Mexican American families are hardly unique. Several of my friends have had grandparents, uncles, or aunts serve as parents, guiding and caring for them when their biological parents were unavailable.

George Washington Gómez blends the "coming-of-age" and "poor boy makes good" tales. Regarding the "coming-of-age" parts, the reader follows Guálinto from birth to his eventual emergence as a successful lawyer, and along the way, is treated to his first experiences with love, violence, and prejudice. The work is therefore in line with several others in literature.

I do not know what books may have influenced Paredes's work, but numerous books continue to focus on a boy's journey to manhood. Recently, I have read Eric Miles Williamson's East Bay Grease (1999) and Dagoberto Gilb's The Flowers (2008), each of which deals with a working-class protagonist growing up in a hostile urban environment. Furthermore, the "poor boy" elements of Paredes's novel have a connection to Charles Dickens's Great Expectations (1861), as both Guálinto and Pip appear to have their futures planned for them.

What makes George Washington Gómez unique is that it was written about Mexican Americans living in a time when they were persecuted, and few writers recorded the struggles.

\*

I find it disturbing that I remained unaware of Paredes's work until I was in my mid-twenties. I am a product of Valley public high schools, and yet none of my English teachers ever mentioned Paredes or any other Valley writer to me. Instead, I was handed copies of Elizabeth George Speare's The Witch of Blackbird Pond (1958), F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925), and Alexandre Dumas's The Count of Monte Cristo (1844-1846). These are wonderful books, and I enjoyed them, but they do not relate to the life of a Mexican American in South Texas.

Perhaps if I had found Paredes and other Valley writers sooner, my own artistic development would have flowed a bit smoother. Knowing there were other authors who had faced the same issues that I struggled with as a developing writer—those of setting, language, and cultural depictions meant for a wide audience—would have been invaluable. As a result of my new reading, I am only now incorporating lessons learned from Valley writers into my own fiction. These lessons include the use of elements such as code switching, which involves the



blending of different languages. Because I am not fluent in Spanish, I have had to rely on the assistance of others to help make any instances of code switching sound natural.

\*

Tierra Sagrada is written in the spirit of George Washington Gómez. By that, I mean the collection speaks to an audience often ignored—young and curious Mexican American readers. The collection addresses racial issues and personal relationships and offers a unique portrait of life in the Valley.

The Valley itself is a character in my thesis. I have done my best to capture the essence of the area. One of its most identifiable aspects is the heat. Temperatures are regularly over one hundred degrees, and in the title story, I give the following description: “. . . the Rio Grande Valley is hot—like putting on a heavy coat, then being wrapped in a blanket, then being set on fire” (Martínez 19). I wanted readers to feel sweat dripping down the backs of their necks. The Valley is more than just hot, of course, but I thought this was a perfect aspect to start with.

Every protagonist in Tierra Sagrada is Mexican American. Unlike the pieces in my previous collection, these stories are about la raza. Earlier, I discussed the racial issues that exist in the area. My stories “Little Bear” and “Coyote” deal with the issues differently. In “Little Bear,” a Mexican American character uses a derogatory term to refer to a white man who may be mentally ill. The situation in “Coyote” has greater intensity, as a group of illegal immigrants cross the river and try to make their way north. The narrator is a young musician on his first job as a human smuggler, and he comes to realize there is little difference between him and the illegals.

Along with issues of race, family relationships fascinate me, as the connections between parents and their children are incredible and complex. “Tierra Sagrada,” the title story, deals

with the broken connection between a father and daughter. The father has just returned to the Valley after a lengthy absence and seeks out his daughter in hopes of making amends for abandoning her and her mother. Their reunion does not go well. In “Baby Race,” a mother and son become sudden participants in a diaper derby; the story also acts as a critique of consumerism. “Sacrifice” is undoubtedly the most disturbing story in the collection and focuses on a mother who is convinced by a devil to kill and eat her baby. More shocking is the fact it is based on a true story.

Romantic entanglements add another layer to my thesis. The ways in which men and women love and hurt each other provide opportunities to explore what it means to be human. Pieces like “Cake,” “Pride,” “Dogs,” and “Chulo” display the obsessive and destructive nature some relationships can have. “Cake” is about a boy in love with a very rude girl who lives across the street. “Pride” features a crippled husband dealing with a cheating spouse. The wife in “Dogs” has given up on her despicable husband, and “Chulo” has a narrator who longs for a forbidden love. While these three stories cast romance in a negative light, the story “Squeeze,” about the search for a life companion, implies there is always hope for the pure of heart.

I have already mentioned that Mexican American culture relies on stories told orally. Music is part of this oral tradition, and numerous Valley tales have been immortalized in song. Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. states that “Música tejana, although originating along both sides of the border, was nurtured mostly in South Texas, especially in the twentieth century” (5). Indeed, ballad forms such as the corrido have long been used to recount the exploits of border heroes like Gregorio Cortez (1875-1916). My stories “Chulo,” “Coyote,” and “Squeeze” incorporate aspects of música tejana into their plots. The narrator of both “Chulo and “Coyote” is an accordion player named Balde. In earlier versions, Balde played the guitar, but because I felt

that might be cliché, I changed the instrument, as the accordion is especially important in Tex-Mex music. A character in “Squeeze” plays the accordion as well, and the story makes reference to Narciso Martínez, a great accordionist and music legend who resided in the Valley.

The oral tradition has influenced my narratives in other ways. Aspects of folklore and the supernatural are common in oral versions of local legends, and the Valley has put its own spin on accounts of El cucuy, the chupacabra, witches, and devils. I have used a few of these elements in “Brujo” and “Sacrifice.” An evil witch wreaks havoc in “Brujo,” and a woman dances with a devil in “Sacrifice.” I personally do not believe in magic, but I feel its inclusion adds a nice touch to the collection and reflects the willingness people in the area have to believe in the supernatural.

When writing these pieces, I used a minimalist style. “Summer Night” and “The Original Santa” are very short and offer only glimpses into characters’ lives, but they are violent glimpses that are meant to leave impressions on the reader. These short shorts are in the tradition of vignettes by writers like Sandra Cisneros and Tomás Rivera. “Clown,” though considerably longer, is likewise meant to have more beneath its surface than its simple structure would suggest.

The reader will notice that Spanish words appear in the text (the code switching previously mentioned). This is because dual languages, often used interchangeably, are characteristic of speech in the area. I have chosen not to italicize these words because I do not feel they should be singled out as different from English words. In the Valley, they are equal.

I have called my collection Tierra Sagrada because I believe my home is sacred. Its fields have been enriched by the sweat and blood of my ancestors. It is a place of anger, joy, and passion. I love the area, and I am proud to call myself a Valley native.

It has taken me almost four years to complete this thesis. My stories represent my version of the Valley. I have crafted characters that seem real to me and placed them in situations that mimic those in the lives of people I see and know.

I hope you enjoy your journey through sacred ground.

## CAKE

Janelly Treviño. I loved her. Her strawberry smile. Her fresh-baked scent. The way she skipped down our street, in pink shorts and a Bugs Bunny T-shirt, to meet the ice-cream truck.

She hated me because I was fat. She laughed and called me Pig.

I sat behind her in math and lifted broken hairs from her back. Very, very slowly. She never noticed. When I was alone, I ran them between my teeth.

Every day after school, I followed her through the neighborhood, and every day, she looked back, snorted, then broke into a run.

Her house was across the street from mine. I did homework by my front window. My mom asked why.

“Just because.”

My mom baked cakes. That was her job. Our fridge was constantly stuffed with slices of chocolate, vanilla, coconut, and mango. I loved cake as much as I loved Janelly. It’s why I was so fat and why Janelly called me Pig.

Janelly usually came out of her house at five. She liked trees, and there was a mesquite in her front yard. She climbed, twisted, swung on its slender branches.

Her skin was smooth as milk. Her black hair was cut short and curled.

We were eleven years old.

I went to my room. I stripped to my underwear and stared in the long mirror. My stomach was a ball of dough overflowing the elastic rim of my briefs.

“Ugly pig,” I said.

\*

Summer came, and I still sat by the window. Janelly knew I was watching so she knocked on my front door.

“She wants to play,” my mom said.

“With me?”

Janelly stood in my driveway, hands on her hips. “You’re always looking at me.”

“Am not. You’re crazy.”

“Pig,” she said. “I’m bored. Let’s play hide-and-seek.”

Her tree was home base. I was it. I counted to twenty and went to find her. When I did, she was too fast. I lumbered behind, huffing and puffing, drenched in sweat.

We went to my house for water.

“You smell disgusting,” she said.

There was a coffee table in the living room. Janelly hopped over it, back and forth. Her foot caught the edge and the table turned on its side, a leg broken.

My mom was in the other room. I tried to fix the table. Beneath the leg I found a broken cookie, the size of a dime, fuzzy with hair and dirt. Janelly took it. “It’s an Oreo. One of those minis. Eat it.”

“Don’t think so.”

“You scared?”

I wasn’t scared. I wasn’t stupid, either.

“You are. You’re a scaredy pig.” She danced in circles, waving her arms, laughing, calling me names.

I took the cookie and swallowed it. It was soft and tasted like salt.

“Gross. You’ll eat *anything*.”

Just then my mom came and saw the destruction. Janelly said it was my fault. She told pretty lies.

“Why, Noe?” my mom asked, pinching my earlobe. “Why’d this happen?”

Janelly claimed I’d tried to stand on the table. “He’s too heavy,” she said, and my mom nodded.

I was grounded with no TV for a week.

\*

Once that passed, I decided to bake a cake for Janelly, a chocolate one with sprinkles.

My mom helped, and we put it on a plastic dessert dish.

Janelly was hanging upside down from her tree’s lowest branch when I brought the cake.

“Who’s that for?” she said.

“Who else?”

She pressed her palms to the grass, unhooked her legs, and flipped. Before her feet met the ground, I caught the briefest glimpse of her cotton panties.

I gave her the cake and a fork, and she ate.

“Good?”

“Yes. Want some? Bet you do. You do, right? Have some cake, Pig.” She shoved it in my face.

My eyes and nose filled with frosting. Janelly snorted.

I wiped as much as I could and walked away, sweet tears falling over my chubby cheeks.

## TIERRA SAGRADA

Rooms at El Rey are eight bucks a night and smell like sex. A manager, squinting through bifocals, claims the place was once beautiful, and Donato believes her because he knows how things change.

He's lived at the hotel a month. He mentions being low on cash, and the manager offers a job clearing the courtyard. It's ugly and overgrown. Donato starts early each morning, always sweating within a minute because the Rio Grande Valley is hot—like putting on a heavy coat, then being wrapped in a blanket, then being set on fire.

Grass reaches his knees. He mows it and mosquitoes dine on his blood. His hands ache after hours using the shovel and hoe.

“You're a good worker,” the manager says. She brings water, wipes his face with a soft cloth, rubs his shoulders.

She's got a crush on him. It's obvious. She's never been married, and Donato knows that if he shows her any real kindness, he'll up with an instant girlfriend.

That's not what he wants.

\*

Evenings, he rests in bed, staring at piss-yellow walls. His mind is uneasy, his body exhausted.

Ten years ago, he cut all ties and left the area with no intention of returning. But the Valley had other plans.



Donato's forty.

\*

Soon he's nearly finished with the courtyard. He wants to plant a lemon tree, and the manager agrees. She gives him money from the cash register and offers a ride to a nursery, but he waves her off.

"I can handle it."

He drives through the city. Kids are everywhere, wearing earphones and moving quickly through streets.

As he pulls into the nursery's parking lot, a kid walks by and throws a rock. The windshield cracks.

Donato gets out of his van.

"Sorry, man," the kid says, lowering the volume on his iPod. "Trying to freak you out."

"Shit."

"It was an accident. I swear."

"Fine. It's okay."

"You're not pissed?"

"No." The crack is a small, lopsided eye in an upper corner. "Not a big problem."

The kid cocks his head. He has greasy skin and a hook nose. "I don't get it. What's your deal?"

"Just need to buy a tree."

"Mind if I come?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, too bad. Free country."

They enter the nursery and feel a blessed gust of cool air. Donato picks a sapling and the kid loads it in the van.

The crack in the windshield has blossomed into a thick, complicated web of spirals.

“You seem worn down,” the kid says.

“Feel like I’m dying.”

“I know about death, man. More than most people—definitely more than you.” The kid lifts his shirt. A tattoo covers his chest. It’s the face of a boy, engulfed by fire. The boy is screaming. Bits of his flesh have burned off, revealing skull. “My brother.”

Donato nods.

“Shouldn’t talk about shit you don’t understand,” the kid says. Then he takes off running.

\*

Las Palmas Trailer Park is only a mile from the nursery, and it’s where Donato’s daughter resides. Her trailer is on a corner lot and easy to find because his old car—a gray Ford—is in the carport.

He waits in the van with the air conditioner on max. He’s wanted to come here since he got back to the Valley, but until now, never has. Why today? Perhaps because of the boy and his tattoo.

After many attempts to build courage, Donato goes to the trailer, climbs three uneven steps, and raps on the screen door.

The girl who comes to the door has Donato’s face. Same broad forehead, wide lips, dark complexion. She’s twenty. “Why are you here?” she asks.

It's a nicer greeting than he expects, maybe than he deserves. "Not sure," Donato says.  
"To talk, I guess. How's your mom?"

"Dead." The girl remains behind the screen and doesn't invite him in.

"I'm sorry."

"You should be."

The sun bears down on him. He hears his heart beating and notices the girl's bulging belly. "You married?"

"Yeah. To a guy who won't take off. How'd you find me?"

"You're in the book."

There's a tear in the screen. Donato pokes a finger through and touches his daughter's stomach. "Can I stop by to see you a few times a week? I might be staying around."

She blinks hard. "Staying? For how long?"

"Long enough," he says.

"You should leave."

"Doesn't have to be like this."

"It's how you made it," she says.

\*

He can't blame her.

It was his choice. He was selfish and craved freedom from the duties of a husband and father.

\*

Late in the afternoon, Donato searches the courtyard for the perfect patch of earth. When he finds it a few yards from the back wall, he plants the tree.

A few stratus clouds linger in an otherwise clear sky.

Donato prays for rain.

## BABY RACE

La Plaza Mall was crowded Saturday afternoon. People raced through the vast consumer cavern in search of good deals.

Isabel pushed a stroller carrying her baby boy. Thin in her youth—family members once called her *La flaquita*—she was having trouble losing weight after her second child and now her figure resembled a teapot rather than a Coke bottle. She bought running shoes at Foot Locker because she planned to start exercising the following week and went to Dillard’s and got a knit bodysuit for her baby Mingo. Then she walked through the mall’s hallways, struggling with her purchases and a large bag containing her purse, a bottle, and extra diapers.

She noticed a long mat lying in the middle of a hallway. It was roped off and a man and three women, each holding a baby, stood on the mat. Other shoppers gathered to watch. Isabel tried to pass but a girl who worked at the mall stopped her.

“Do you speak English?” the girl said. She was young, probably in high school, and pretty.

Isabel nodded. The question hadn’t offended her since the mall attracted many customers from across the border.

“My name’s Griselda. How old is your baby? It’s a boy, right?”

“Yes.”

“He must be less than a year old for the race. First baby who crawls from one end of the mat to the other wins.”

“Not interested.”

“He’s got a good chance. Looks like an athlete. It’s free to enter and you could win a gift card for a hundred dollars that can be used at any store in the mall.”

Isabel wanted the gift card so she said Mingo was eight months old. Griselda registered him, and Isabel pushed the stroller through a break in the rope. She put the stroller in a corner, dropped her things, and lifted Mingo. She kissed his chipmunk cheeks and took him to the mat.

The man was happy with his big baby. Two nervous women ignored Isabel, but the third approached and introduced herself as Dana. Dana was not pretty and probably never had been. Her blond bangs were too short to hide the pimples dotting her forehead and swelling like volcanoes on the verge of erupting. She wore pink Nike sweats that matched those of her baby Katie.

“First diaper derby?”

“Yes,” Isabel said. “I didn’t even know these existed.”

“I remember mine. I entered my oldest in a race over in Weslaco. We won a crib. That was six years ago.”

“Do you enter lots of these?”

“Sure. Nothing wrong with competition. Kate’s done four races. The best she’s gotten is second place but we’ve been training hard. We’ll break the losing streak today.”

The crowd watching continued to grow. Some of its members, mostly women but also a few strange men and wild kids, cooed at the babies.

Isabel hated competitions like this. She’d tried out for the track team in middle school and had tripped and fallen, scratching her cheek badly and crying for nearly an hour. Other girls made fun of her, and she never wanted to go through anything similar, but how could she turn

down a chance at easy money? If Mingo won, she could buy a tie from Macy's for her husband and a silver chain from Sears for her daughter.

Dana leaned close. "Want a tip? Hold your baby back for a bit at the start. It sounds strange, but he'll take off quick when you let him go. Trust me."

"Okay."

It was time for the rules. Griselda explained that babies who walked would be disqualified, and parents couldn't physically assist the babies in any way. Next she told the parents to kneel at the mat's edge and put the babies in a crawling position behind the starting line, a long tape. Tape at the opposite end was the finish line.

Mingo squirmed as Isabel put him down so she held him tightly.

When the babies were on their marks, Griselda said, "Go."

The babies were off, except Mingo because his mom didn't let him. The man's baby took an early lead but stopped. One baby crawled a little and looked around. Another lay down as if wanting to sleep. Katie cried, and Isabel finally released Mingo. She hoped he'd take off fast yet he didn't move. Some parents ran to the other end of the mat and called their babies to come to them, but Isabel stayed with Mingo. The man's baby crawled again, coming forward in short bursts, almost to the finish line.

The crowd's cheers came loudly in both English and Spanish. "Come on. Andale."

Mingo wet himself. Isabel went to get her bag from the corner. The stroller was there but the bag and recent purchases were gone. "Where're my things?" she said.

Crowd members shrugged. "We didn't see nothing."

It was impossible to believe them. Isabel touched her cheek. It was burning, and she tried to calm herself by breathing deeply.

Then she turned and saw Dana getting angry with Griselda. Dana said, “You’re crazy.”

“It’s the rules. Your daughter’s disqualified.”

“I swear I didn’t push her.”

“My things were stolen,” Isabel said, approaching.

“Nobody cares,” Dana said.

“You lied about holding my baby back.”

“Don’t blame your slow baby on me. It’s not my fault he doesn’t know how to crawl.”

Isabel’s lip quivered. She wanted to cry. She barely managed to hold it in.

The man’s baby crossed the finish line and was lifted high. He was placed on his dad’s shoulders and taken on a victory lap around the mat.

“I didn’t see him cross,” Griselda said.

“Don’t give them the prize,” Dana said. “They probably cheated.”

The crowd yelled the man’s baby won fair and square, so Griselda awarded the gift card. Dana asked for a rematch and the man refused.

Isabel got Mingo. There was a dark spot on his shorts.

She put him in the stroller, and they went in search of a restroom.



## BRUJO

She lay in the alley, breathing shallow, blood pouring from the wound in her chest. David had only stabbed her once and was tempted to use his knife again, but he feared making a mistake.

A full moon watched him.

He knelt and prepared for the release of the girl's soul, just as the brujo had instructed.

At her last breath, David pressed a clay jar—an ancient piece adorned with symbols of *mágica negra*—to her lips. Then he stuffed the jar's wide mouth with the witch's cloth, and the jar shook violently. He held it in one hand, and with the other, dragged the girl's body to a corner for concealment.

Hours earlier, she'd looked radiant dancing in a nightclub, laughing with friends and strangers. David waited for his chance. It came during the single moment she lingered alone. He smiled and she let him speak. He convinced her to take a walk. She tried to scream when he attacked but he covered her mouth.

Now the light that once warmed her was extinguished and the harvesting of her soul made her body shriveled and gray, like rotted fruit.

His car was in the club's parking lot. He went there, tired. Murdering the girl had been terrible but necessary.

It was the only way to make good on the deal.

He drove to the brujo's shack.

\*

One month before, David was a different kind of lady killer. He loved all girls in the Rio Grande Valley and they all loved him. Except Noelia. He brought flowers, wrote passionate letters.

She refused him.

She refused *him*.

It was impossible to forget her. Her eyes were the work of a master Impressionist, brown and swirls of green mixing and changing with every expression. They called to him.

*Sweet, sweet lover.*

While partying heavily one night, he forced himself on Noelia.

Then he learned she was the prima of a dangerous mariguano called Xchel. The mariguano was seven feet tall, with snake tattoos covering his entire body, and he promised to dine on David's heart.

David had been scared many times. He knew what it was like to be in a fight, to stare down the barrel of a gun. Those things happened suddenly, with a rush of adrenaline.

But this was a different fear. It started as a small seed in his brain and within days spread throughout his body. Sleep was elusive. Food tasted like sand. He began to resemble the living dead.

His apartment wasn't safe so he moved in with his friend Jorge. They'd known each other since kindergarten.

"I should strike first," David said, pacing across the living room. "No point in waiting for something to happen."

"Run before Xchel finds you."

“Screw that. I’ll kill him.”

“He’s a child of the devil,” Jorge said. “I heard he stiffed a guy on a drug deal and the guy sent enforcers to kill him. They tried to hang him and the tree branch broke. Next the rope snapped. They decided to slit his throat but their knives wouldn’t cut his skin. That’s when Xchel got angry and slaughtered them all.”

“Bullshit.”

“Was Noelia worth this trouble?”

David shook his head. “She was like nothing. She doesn’t matter anymore.”

A week passed. He took a rifle and parked across the street from a strip club Xchel liked. David was a good shot. His father, a veteran of the first war with Iraq, had taught him to handle a weapon.

Xchel and two others arrived after midnight. As they lingered outside, David peered through the scope of his rifle. Xchel was a big, easy target. David squeezed the trigger.

He missed.

The men with Xchel ran for cover, but the mariguano didn’t move. He simply raised his arms, daring the shooter to fire again.

Another miss.

David sped home.

“Is Xchel dead?” Jorge asked.

“No. You were right. It’s over for me.”

“Maybe not. You could visit the brujo.”

Once, he would've laughed at the suggestion, but by this time, David believed it was the sole option. If he ran, he'd be hunted. And if Xchel truly possessed supernatural power, only the brujo could offer David assistance.

The brujo's shack was at the end of a dirt road, in a remote area filled with brush. Legend claimed the brujo was two hundred years old and communed with spirits.

It was nearly three in the morning when David arrived. The place was unusually loud. Crickets chirped. Birds screamed in trees.

He knocked on the brujo's door. Nobody answered, but the door was unlocked. He entered and was greeted by a stale odor. Moonlight served as the sole source of illumination; it poured through holes in the roof.

The brujo was sitting on the floor. "Join me," he said.

David obeyed.

A long white mane framed the brujo's face. His brown skin was heavily wrinkled, his eyes translucent. He said, "You desire the death of Xchel. He is familiar with the dark arts and is powerful, but I am more powerful."

"How do you know these things?"

"My spirits are always listening, David."

"Will you help me?"

"The real question," the witch said, "is will you help *me*?"

"I'll do whatever you ask."

The brujo cupped his giant hands together and whispered incantations. He opened his hands to reveal a crow. He sliced the crow's breast with a fingernail and removed its heart. He placed the still-beating heart in David's mouth.

“Swallow.”

Xchel died that day.

Soon David looked better. People were careful not to offend him. He liked feeling free.

But he wasn't. Not really.

The brujo eventually appeared to him in a dream and summoned him to the shack. There, the brujo used black magic to place an image of a girl to be murdered in David's mind. The girl was the daughter of a man who refused to acknowledge evil.

“Bring me her soul.”

\*

Now David offered the shaking jar.

“You have done well. I will reward you.” The brujo went to a table, prepared a strange liquid, then opened the jar and added the liquid before the soul escaped. The jar was still and David wondered if the soul had drowned.

The brujo took a cup and filled it with this new mixture.

He thrust the cup at David. “Swallow.”

David took it. His throat burned. His stomach filled with pain. Air was forced from his lungs.

He screamed as the girl's soul tore him apart from the inside.

The brujo smiled a wicked smile.

## CHULO

Every week I get my hair cut at Lola's in Edinburg. Her salon's all cheap linoleum and faded paint, with a crooked sign and cracked bell on the door. Lola is a family friend and old, fifty or sixty, with a face covered in thick powder and lips painted a mad purple. She walks with a limp and her right eye twitches. Her hands are steady, though. On my hair, she puts a fade on the sides and back and leaves the top an inch, then combs it down. Always looks good.

There's another stylist, Nina, young and hot, with bleached blond hair falling in waves over sunburned shoulders. I want to be in her chair and can tell she wants it too. As soon as I walk in she calls me pretty boy, but I can't go with her because of loyalty to Lola. Loyalty is important to me. I was just a kid when my dad ditched my mom, and before he left, he grabbed me and said, "Remember, you don't got loyalty, you don't got *nothing*."

Nina's married to a customs officer who works at the Hidalgo bridge. I figure he's probably super fat, belly bouncing with each breath, belt about to snap. She also has a boy in second grade. He sometimes comes to the salon after school. He doesn't have a lot of teeth and likes to sing about Little Peter Rabbit. I say he has a strong voice, maybe could grow up to become a professional singer. He sticks out his tongue, stained by candy, and waggles it at me.

When the boy isn't around, Nina turns up the radio and dances, hips going in fast circles and head grooving like a snake's, till Lola gives her the twitching evil eye.

\*

I tell this to my primo Pepe as we sit on a couch in his garage, drinking Natural Light and watching TV.

“Fuck her,” he says.

“How?”

“With your dick, pendejo.”

I shrug. Pepe’s different from me because he doesn’t give a damn about loyalty. He’ll screw over anybody for anything.

I need air so I open the garage door and go out front. Pepe’s house is made of brick and the windows are covered by burglar bars. He’s never felt like planting grass so there’s no lawn, only dirt with a few spots of green and a lonely rock.

Neighbors are having a BBQ. Smoke drifts up from behind a cedar fence and the wind carries the smell of fajita.

“I’m hungry.”

“For Nina’s snatch,” Pepe says, coming outside. He gets the smell and becomes excited. He knows the neighbors and we knock on their gate and a girl lets us in. The backyard’s overgrown and there’s a picnic table in the middle. A guy named Rey works the pit and the girl is his wife. They give us fajita tacos and chicken quarters with rice and beans, wet and hot on my tongue. The wife spills Diet Coke on her white blouse and Rey calls her cow. He says, “Keep eating, cow,” and the wife pretends not to care.

Pepe talks about me and Nina, and the cow tells me to leave married girls alone. She goes in her house, and Rey gets next to me and says, “Good to have your problem.” Rey’s twenty-five, two years older than me, a year younger than Pepe. His forehead has deep creases and wrinkles near his mouth make it seem like he’s always frowning.

I don't want his life or anything like it.

He asks where Lola's is, but I don't tell him.

"What's the matter? Afraid I'm going to steal your girl?"

"No."

"Think you are," Rey says. He's got this stupid look on his face and I want to punch him in the mouth, knock out a few of his teeth, but I hold back.

"Whatever," I say.

\*

Next time I go to the salon, Lola's not there.

"She had to step out, but I can do you," Nina says, big eyes smiling. Suddenly, I don't know what the right thing is. I'm thinking about loyalty but I must have the cut and won't be able to come back later.

Nina's fast with the machine and gentle with the scissors. She sprays water, and when a drop slips down my cheek, wipes it with her thumb.

"I like your tattoo."

It's my first name in cursive on the back of my neck.

"Named after a famous singer," I say.

"Who?"

"Freddy Fender."

"You sure?"

"His real name. My parents met him once. My mom had a thing for him."

She hums "Before the Next Teardrop Falls" and I sing a verse.



Lola never washes my hair after a cut but Nina offers to. She takes me to the washing station and lathers and rinses my hair. Her fingers on my scalp make me warm. It's more intimate than fucking.

“What do you do?”

“In a band. We play a mix of Tejano and norteño.”

She's wearing a little shirt and bends close to towel dry my hair. I lean forward and can see the tops of her tits, the left with a birthmark like a half moon.

“I've loved Intocable since forever,” she says.

\*

No other customers come in, so we cross the street to a Sno-Wiz stand, where I order a strawberry raspa and Nina a chamoyada.

“My son,” she says, “he loves these.”

My truck's at the curb. We get in the bed and the wind blows her hair in my face. I finish my raspa and feel ready to perform. My accordion is in the cab but I decide to sing a cappella. Nina's cheeks catch fire as I do a bit of Intocable's “Y todo, ¿para qué?”

Then I kiss her.

Her lips are salt and lime.

I want her more than anything and don't care she's got a guy. If she's not loyal to him, why should it matter to me? Forget loyalty. Nina's beside me, real, touchable, perfect.

She takes me to the salon's back room, its doorway covered by a curtain, and I tug at the fly of her jeans. We have to stop because we hear the bell on the front door. Nina looks and says it's her husband.

She fixes her pants and goes to talk with him. I hear them arguing, so I walk out. Her husband is nothing like I thought. He's big—big arms, big hands, big chest. A cowboy hat is pulled low over his brow. Not somebody I want to mess with.

They stop talking, and he stares at me. I nod at him as I leave.

\*

Pepe's pissed. The veins in his neck are tight and he cusses the balls because they won't go like he wants.

We're at Tío Bob's pool hall. It's one room, one table, and filled with guys smoking weed and listening to mariachi on the radio.

"This sucks," Pepe says. "And you too. Why'd you leave her?"

"Should've stayed?"

"No shit. You should've waited for her guy to take off."

I make my shot, miss the next one.

"Promise you'll bang her," he says.

"Go to hell."

Pepe takes his shot and the cue ball skips off the table. The other guys laugh, smoke pouring from their nostrils.

\*

I write a song for Nina called "Amor." My lyrics are pure, my melody magic. Tío Bob stops by my apartment and I show him the song. He takes my bajo sexto—a twelve-string bass guitar—and plays while I sing.

We finish and I ask what he thinks.

"Don't like it."

“Wrote it for a girl.”

“Most songs are.”

“She’s married.”

Tío Bob touches the ends of his moustache. “You’re nuts,” he says.

\*

“Who made you ugly?” Lola asks.

“Needed the cut,” I say.

Nina doesn’t have a customer, so she’s in her own chair, flipping through a magazine, not looking at me.

Lola’s usually steady hands shake. She clips my ear, drawing blood, and doesn’t apologize.

When Nina goes to lunch, Lola says, “You shouldn’t let her touch you. She’s a whore. I’ve seen her with men.”

“If you hate her, why do you let her work here?”

“She rents the chair. Her money’s good. But she didn’t have to cut your hair.”

“You were gone.”

“What about loyalty?”

“What about it?” I say.

\*

I come back at closing time, when Nina’s alone. I want to touch her and feel her hands on me.

“We shouldn’t, Balde.”

I use my Hohner Corona II and sing “Amor,” but Nina’s still not in the mood.

\*

At Tico's Place, I sit at the bar and order shots of Cuervo. There's a band playing covers of Mazz. The band plays "Estúpido romántico" and "Comprendo mi amor." The singer, he's got a scratchy voice and it ruins everything. I start yelling about former Mazz lead singer Joe López, how he's a rapist. The bartender tells me to shut my fat mouth or get out, and I give him the finger. At first I think he's going to hit me but he just shakes his head.

Nina's husband comes in alone and sits at a table. He orders a beer. I watch him drink and when he's almost finished I order a pitcher and join him.

"Saw you at the salon," I say.

He doesn't look at me as I refill his glass. He's ignoring the music too and keeps his eyes on a TV above the bar.

He drinks, though, so I take that as a good sign.

Later, he relaxes and tells me his name's Orly. We talk about sports. He takes off his hat for a second and I notice his hair's thinning. All this makes him less intimidating.

I often look at couples and wonder how they got together. You can never tell which girls will go for which guys. I once asked out this cute girl and she said no way, so I assumed she had an awesome boyfriend. The next week I saw her at a club with this chubby guy who looked like he hadn't shaved or showered for days.

But Nina and Orly, they make a decent pair.

\*

I come out of Tico's and try to get to my truck, but I stumble, and Orly offers a ride. I get in his Toyota and we head down 107.

“Got to ask you something,” he says, resting a hand on my knee. His fingers are long and thin. They belong on the hand of a musician.

He squeezes my knee softly.

“Pull over,” I say. “Have to piss.”

We stop on the grassy roadside, and I walk into long grass, unzip, and piss. I look up. The sky is a giant black nothing.

I finish and turn around. Orly is standing at the front of his car, in the beams of its headlights.

“Got to ask you,” he says. “My wife, you fucking her?”

“No.”

“Want to?”

“What?”

“I get to watch. It’s my dream.”

\*

I remember having early release from middle school, coming home, and finding my dad banging the neighbor’s wife on our kitchen table. He had a gun to her head, and his pimply ass was raised high. I ran out, hid in a storage shed out back. He found me and talked about staying quiet, how I couldn’t let him down.

I never told anybody.

\*

Now I touch Orly’s shoulder.

“Dreams, friend,” I say, “they sometimes come true.”

## SUMMER NIGHT

Screams ride a warm breeze, creep through windows, slip beneath doors. We lie in bed, eyes closed, and listen.

It's Zaida and Alonzo. We know this peeling back the covers and walking outside.

The sky is peppered with stars. Blades of lawn grass poke through spaces between our toes.

"Another round," we say.

They're in the middle of their driveway, bathed in the yellow glow of an overhead lamp. Zaida has a knife with a long, curved blade. It's aimed at Alonzo's throat.

"Where are they?" she says, shaking with anger. Her teeth clench, and sweat stains her gown.

We step onto the sidewalk. Concrete scrapes our heels.

"You need to get calm," Alonzo says. "Everything will be fine if you do."

"You took my kids."

"Relax, honey, please."

Zaida doesn't have kids. She's gotten three abortions. This news passes like a virus, and we're certain she's finally lost her mind.

A low animal grunt comes as she lunges. Alonzo dodges the knife, grabs her wrist. She brings a foot to his crotch. He falls and she stands over him, victorious.

Our breathing is heavy.

Alonzo crawls and rises. He's in boxers, so his knees are badly scratched. "You crazy bitch," he says.

We consider his strategy.

It's not smart.

The lamp flickers and dies. We sigh, go for flashlights. The beams shine on Zaida and Alonzo wrestling in their yard. He's on top, slapping. She won't release the knife. He bites her. She severs his ear.

He's crying now, like a baby, and searching the grass.

This isn't how we prefer to think of him. We prefer the way he used to be, strong and athletic.

"Threw away a shot at pro baseball," we say.

He's still crying, still searching.

Zaida stands to move toward him. She's hunched and resembles a strung-out Grim Reaper. Her cheek is bruised, her lip swollen.

We wonder what they took. It could've been anything. Gasoline, for all we know.

Our children are called outside. They've seen this before. It always scares them. "Don't do drugs," we say. They promise, and we are satisfied. We let them go.

One of us has a radio. Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" comes through. We nod to the beat.

Zadia's about to bring the knife down on her boyfriend's neck, but he punches her ankle. She tumbles, and her skull bounces on the ground like a deflated basketball.

Music is replaced by a siren. Two cops rush the lawn. They're not from this neighborhood.

They call one ambulance. They call another.

We click off the flashlights.

Paramedics strap Zaida to a gurney. She tries to escape. They give her something and take her away.

Paramedics strap Alonzo to a gurney. He doesn't try to escape. They give him something and take him away.

The cops are on their knees. "Anybody seen the ear?" they ask.

"Saw it a little while ago," we say. "Before it got cut off."

More cops arrive to ask questions. We shrug. It's late, and we need sleep. We go inside our homes and watch from our windows till they find Alonzo's ear.

Then we return to bed, pull up the covers. We lie, eyes closed, and listen.



## LITTLE BEAR

Pepe and I visit downtown McAllen to hit the clubs. We have beers at Bar 201, take shots at Dirty Bottle, and dance with sweet honeys at Flesh.

Every place is loud and hot. I love the crowds.

We leave at two-thirty because drinks aren't being served anymore and girls are gradually disappearing. Pepe's car is a few blocks away, so we do our best sober impressions while walking. Bike cops are everywhere and we don't want to get arrested for PI.

The car isn't in one of the lots you pay to use. It's further down a street, in front of a house. When we get there, a light in the house is on and a lady's peering out the front window. She sees us and comes outside in a robe and slippers.

"Don't leave your car here again. Next time, I'll have it towed."

"Whatever."

Her mouth is a hard line. She raises a hand to show she's holding a phone. It's a weak threat and makes us smile.

"I'm serious."

We're gone. I look back and the lady's only a dim, angry figure. Still, I hope we never run into her again.

\*

Clubbing always ends with a trip to Taco Palenque on South 10<sup>th</sup>. Taco Palenque is a kind of like McDonald's, except with Mexican food. It never closes, and nothing beats an enchilada plate.

Outside walls are painted to resemble adobe and windows are shaded by banners that read "Fajitas" and "Menudo." Inside, it's any other fast-foot joint—tiled walls and plastic booths.

Though we've beaten the rush of club people, there's still a small line to order. I give Pepe the last of my money and ask him to get my usual. I go to the restroom, which is empty, to wash up.

A guy enters. He stands behind me, so I think he needs the sink. I grab a paper towel and move.

"What's happening, bro?"

"Not much," I say.

This guy doesn't go to the sink. He remains in the same spot. I figure he's at least forty since he's only got a horseshoe of blond hair around his head. He's skinny too and it seems he hasn't shaved or showered in days. His eyes are red and puffy.

"Won't believe what happened to me couple days ago," he says. "My family kicked me out. I got nowhere to go. Been sleeping in my truck."

"Too bad."

"Saw the tat on your neck. Your name Balde?"

"Right."

"Little Bear. Pleasure to meet you." Little Bear offers his hand. His wrist is heavily bandaged.

I've lived in the Rio Grande Valley my entire life. Never met an Indian, but on TV, they don't usually resemble middle-aged white guys. "Cool name. What tribe you belong to?"

"Tribe of the earth," Little Bear says. He does a brief war whoop, then asks, "How you doing?"

"Don't have cash to spare."

"It's not that way, bro."

I nod and exit the restroom. The restaurant's gotten packed in the last few minutes, but Pepe's found a booth toward the back. There's a number tent with 14 on the table's edge. It's to make sure we're brought the right food.

I take a seat.

"Who's your buddy?" Pepe says.

Little Bear has followed me. He lingers at the table, hoping I'll slide over so he can join us. I don't.

Pepe asks again, and I shrug, so he turns to Little Bear. "Get going."

"Me and Balde are friends."

They both look at me, but I can't think of anything to say. A confused Little Bear reaches for the number tent. Unlike the right, his left wrist isn't bandaged and I see long, vertical scars.

"Not going to tell you again," Pepe says, stopping him.

"Okay," Little Bear says. He goes to the line of people waiting to order and starts another conversation.

"Who was that pinche bolillo?"

"Random," I say. "Started talking to me in the restroom."

“Probably a fag.”

“Think he’s just lonely. Did you see the scars? Must’ve tried to kill himself.”

“Seems too stupid to do it right.”

“Ever think about it?”

“Are you kidding? How could I ever give up all this?” Pepe says, spreading his arms .

A girl brings our food. My enchiladas are smothered in cheese. Pepe’s gotten a super quesadilla with chicken.

Nobody wants to talk to Little Bear. Somebody calls the manager, and the manager makes Little Bear leave.

“They’re kicking the psycho to the curb,” my primo says, mouth full.

\*

Little Bear’s not lurking in the parking lot, and I wonder where he’s gone and what he’ll do.

“Want to see if we can find a party that’s still going on?”

“Nah,” I say. “I want to sleep.”

## DOGS

The woman took the dogs for a walk through the neighborhood every evening. Her favorite was Sadie, the Jack Russell. The other was Zeus, a Chow mix with a coat the color of fire.

One time the woman's husband wanted to come. She said it was fine. He took Zeus.

"Let me tell you congratulations," she said. "Heard you won your game yesterday."

"We destroyed them."

"Was the other team any good?"

"Like us," her husband said. "They were missing a player, but we still would've won.

10-6. I hit a homer."

Sadie walked on a lawn and buried her nose in a patch of weeds. The woman pulled the leash.

"Victor's birthday's Saturday," the husband said.

"What'd you get him?"

"Bottle of Johnnie Walker."

She shook her head.

"What time do you work tomorrow?" he said.

"Got a visit at nine and one at ten. Then I'm done for the day."

"Not bad."

Zeus lifted his leg near a mailbox. He was old, so it took effort. The woman told her husband the dog would die soon, but her husband didn't seem to hear. He rubbed Zeus's neck. He kissed Zeus's head.

"Ever get tired?" the husband asked. "I mean, you really like taking care of old people?"

"Somebody's got to."

"Know how much Victor's making now? He got a nursing job with a private company. Takes home almost fifteen hundred a week, easy. Doesn't that sound like a better deal?"

"I guess."

"What kind of answer is that?"

The woman broke into a run. Only Sadie came. This dog was fast and pulled ahead. Wind made the woman's eyes tear.

Her husband called. Zeus barked.

She ran until the breath left her lungs. Then she sat on the curb and breathed deeply, letting Sadie lick her fingers.

A red sun melted into the horizon. Birds screeched in trees. Cars passed and passengers waved. The woman waved back.

Her husband arrived. He flexed his arms beneath his thin cotton shirt. They bulged and he smiled. "You're mad. Is that it?"

"Just felt like running."

Sadie jumped on Zeus. She bit his ear. He shook her off and made a weak lunge at her tail.

"We should go," the woman said, standing. She wiped sweat from her forehead and stretched her arms.

They started home. The sky was gray now, and there were stars.

All the houses they passed were the same: single story, made of brick, with roofs like pyramids.

“Talked to Nadia today.”

“You called her?” she said.

“She called me.”

A nervous heat filled the woman’s belly. It crept to her chest and neck. “And?”

“Says she loves me. Wants to leave her boyfriend.”

“It’s your baby. Everybody knows.”

“Dates don’t match.”

The tired dogs were panting. The woman lifted and carried Sadie like a child. She rubbed the brown spot on Sadie’s ear.

“Nadia’s playing both of you—you and her boyfriend,” the woman said. “She’s shifting the dates to cover herself.”

“Think so?”

“Of course.”

Now they were home, and she put Sadie down and tried to take Zeus’s leash. “I’ll bring him in,” her husband said. The woman tried again. This time, she succeeded. She began to take both dogs to the backyard.

“Wait,” her husband said. “We’re not finished talking.”

“What else is there to say?”

## THE ORIGINAL SANTA

The mall manager was sweating as he fired the man who played Santa Claus. Santa was hired a few days earlier to take photos with children. But he was constantly drunk and rude. The manager had no choice. A replacement had already been found.

After screaming a series of obscenities, Santa left, still wearing his costume, false beard and all. The suit fit him well because he really was fat. He'd refused to return it to the manger.

Santa slipped and fell hard on the sidewalk. He attracted attention from passersby and spit on anybody who offered assistance.

He knew he was a drunk, of course. He liked it most of the time. The only time he didn't like it was when it cost him a job. This was the fourth job it'd cost him in six months. Damn the world, he thought.

So he finally rose and discovered his pants ripped on the seat, exposing his soiled underwear. He needed a drink. He usually brought liquor from home in a flask, but when he checked the flask, he found it empty.

Was there a bar nearby? He didn't have a car, so he'd have to walk five or six miles. Too far.

He could call his wife to pick him up.

No, she'd just yell at him again.

He sat on the curb and hated everything and everybody in the entire world. He sat there for a long time.



What right did that stupid manager have to fire me? he thought. I should kick his ass.

It was a fantastic idea. The best he'd ever had. Santa went back inside. He was looking for the manager when he saw a line of children waiting to take pictures with his replacement, a young punk relying on a pillow to make his belly appear large. The punk was sitting on a throne located in the center of a poorly-constructed enchanted workshop.

The *original* Santa—that's how he now thought of himself—let out a wild scream and charged the punk, who saw the attack coming. Fortunately, the punk wasn't in the process of posing with a child, so he stood and prepared to fight.

The men collided and fell and wrestled on the floor.

Children were screaming and crying.

Security officers arrived.

When the excitement died, the original Santa discovered he was missing two teeth. The punk had only minor bruises.

The original Santa spent the rest of the holidays in jail.

## SACRIFICE

That evening, the baby taunted her with a sloppy grin. She bathed him in the bathroom sink, cleaned his face and chest, his penis and legs and feet.

He was such a dirty baby.

A devil stood beside her. Lorena, he said, you're mine.

What about my husband?

Carlos is never coming back. He ran away with that puta from his work. He despises you more than anything.

Not true.

Oh, yes.

Tears ran down her cheeks.

The devil licked them with a forked tongue. His breath was sweet like perfume. Dance with me, he said.

She hesitated only a moment, then forgot the baby. The devil bowed, took her hand in his claw, and led her to the living room where a band of demons played a waltz.

Lorena noticed how graceful he was, how his hooves glided across the floor and his tail never got in the way.

They danced till sunrise.

\*

It was impossible for the devil to visit every night due to a busy schedule. When he didn't come, she lay in bed listening to the baby cry. Her husband had wanted a son badly, but once the baby came, Carlos didn't care anymore. He started whoring around and breaking Lorena's spirit.

The devil first knocked on her door a week after Carlos left. She recognized his horrific form immediately, of course.

He promised to let her touch his horns if she let him in.

No, she said.

You want to.

Never.

Don't make me angry.

Lorena saw a flash of power in his crimson eyes. There was no choice. Her door opened wide.

\*

The horns were thick and hard, like antlers.

\*

The nursery's blue walls had children painted on them. The children were supposed to be happy. Instead, their smiles looked grotesque, their teeth jagged.

Welcome to hell, they said.

Lorena scribbled over their mouths with a black marker.

The devil entered. He stood over the crib while she cowered in a corner. The baby had been wailing for hours.

Take the baby if you want.

Give him to me.

How?

With this, the devil said, offering a fiery sword.

She rose, went to the crib, and grabbed the sword's handle. She cut off the baby's legs and feet. She cut off his head.

You're a natural at this.

Lorena took the body parts to the kitchen and cooked them. The devil set the table and lit candles.

\*

You're beautiful.

I don't believe you.

Would I lie?

\*

Police arrived in the morning, long after the devil had disappeared. They said Lorena called them, though she retained no memory of doing so.

She wiped the dry blood from around her mouth and let them search. They found the remains. An officer vomited.

What happened here? another asked.

Lorena held her wrists out for the handcuffs.

## CLOWN

Ricky had a job to do. It was a job he'd once enjoyed, but lately he'd been wondering if it really suited him.

He paced around the apartment he shared with his cousin Dora, a chunky girl currently away on vacation. He went to his bedroom and lit a cigarette. His lungs burned as he inhaled. It was like breathing fire and courage, and he loved the way it made him feel.

The costume was on his bed. He removed the shirt and shorts he wore and pulled on the one-piece suit. A seam running down the middle divided the costume in two. The right side was pink, the left yellow. To supplement the money earned from his work-study job at the university, Ricky worked a second job as a freelance clown. This Friday at 4 p.m., he was scheduled to perform at Janet López's sixth birthday party, which was being held at Bill Schupp Park in McAllen.

He was going to be late. He still had to put on the makeup and rainbow wig. He sat at the dresser mirror and painstakingly applied the foundation. The stuff was thick. After that, he painted on the blood-red smile. The smile spread well over his lips and into the centers of his hollow cheeks. Then he dotted the tip of his nose with red. Now he was ready for the rainbow wig, so he slipped on a wig cap before securing the puffy Afro to his head. The wig was soft and he ran his fingers through it, puffing it out even more.

For Ricky, the road to becoming a clown had been short and smooth. The thought had existed in his mind since his first visit to the circus as a kid. He'd been intrigued by a clown's

ability to make people laugh. Yet Ricky's biggest inspiration came in the form of Bozo. Every weekday morning, Bozo delighted kids across the country by telling jokes, acting in skits, and giving away prizes on his TV show. Who wouldn't want a job like that? As Ricky grew older, his dream of becoming a clown was surpassed by another dream, one that involved becoming a writer. The clown idea was resurrected when, as a student regularly struggling to make ends meet, he began to crave extra pocket money. So he placed an ad in the paper and became Bumbo the Clown. He was naturally funny and very tall, features that made him a wonder to those he entertained. He made about fifty bucks plus tip for each party he worked, but as time passed, he found himself becoming bored with the clown lifestyle—it wasn't something he truly cared about doing anymore. He would've quit, but he needed money too badly; the rent had recently been raised, and he was fond of having food in the fridge.

Other than Dora, no one was aware of his alter ego. He preferred it that way. He didn't want any of his friends to know because he was afraid they'd make fun of him. God only knew what his fraternity brothers would come up with if they were to discover his secret.

Ricky filled the pockets of his costume with special magic tricks, balloons, and small toys to give away as prizes. He also took cigarettes and a lighter in case he got the chance to sneak a smoke.

When he arrived at the park, Janet's father was standing beneath a shady tree near the parking lot, looking at his watch. The party was taking place at a picnic area in the center of the park. Mr. López motioned to Ricky, who felt like moaning because he could tell it was going to be a long afternoon.

"You're late." Mr. López looked about fifty. He was short and stocky. He was bald, and his head reflected the sun's glare.

“I had car trouble. My battery died and I had to—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Bonko.”

“Actually, it’s Bumbo.”

“Whatever. I’m deducting ten bucks from your fee. I think that’s only fair. You need to be where you’re supposed to be, when you’re supposed to be.”

“But I can explain.”

“Take it or leave it, Bunny.”

Ricky sighed. “I’ll take it,” he said.

A beautiful woman broke away from the party and came toward them. She had a swimmer’s body: long, thin, and muscular.

“Bumbo?”

“Yes,” Ricky said.

She turned to Mr. López. “Why are you pestering this poor clown?”

“We were discussing payment,” the old man said.

“Come on, Bumbo. Party’s this way.” She took Ricky’s hand and led him toward the picnic area. “Sorry if my husband is upset with you. I think he’s mad because you were late.”

“You’re right,” he said, giving her hand a slight squeeze. Her hand was soft, dry, and as smooth as a joke delivered by Bozo. Ricky was certain Mr. López was loaded—the geezer would have to be in order to catch such a woman, who was at least twenty years younger.

Ricky turned to look at Mr. López, who walked slowly behind them.

They arrived at the picnic area and were greeted by the smells of hot dogs and hamburgers. There were women clustering around tables, drinking wine coolers. There were men huddled around the barbecue pit, drinking beer. Kids of varying ages ran wild.

Mrs. López released Ricky's hand. "Time to get to work," she said.

"Guess so."

"Come here, Janet."

A pretty girl who wore a pointy birthday hat suddenly materialized next to Ricky. Mrs. López gave the girl a hug. Janet looked at Ricky. The awe she was experiencing was evident because her almond eyes were as big and bright as balloons.

"Hi, Janet. How old are you today?" He was using his clown voice. It was much higher than his regular voice and Dora had once said he sounded like a cross between Michael Jackson and Kermit the Frog.

"Six."

"Wow, you're a big girl. Call your friends over and I'll show them something really cool, okay?"

The kids and a few adults gathered around to watch as Ricky made balloon animals, an art he'd learned from a video. The video had taught him to make giraffes, dogs, and snakes. As he twisted them, the balloons made squeaky sounds similar those made by dry door hinges. When he finished with the animals, a woman asked him to take a picture with her baby. As soon as Ricky took the baby, it started wailing. The picture was taken and Ricky gladly gave the baby back.

Then he said, "Who wants to play some games?"

They played Duck, Duck, Goose and Red Rover. Throughout the games, he stole frequent glances at Mrs. López and wondered under what circumstances he might further enjoy her company.

Ricky gave everybody who participated in the games a toy.



Next he performed his magic act. One summer he'd taken magic lessons, so he was able to mystify his audience. First, he bit a quarter in half and then restored it. He also put a coin on a table, covered it with a handkerchief, and made the coin disappear.

It was tough work and he needed a break. He enjoyed a hot dog and piece of cake while Janet opened her presents. She received many nice things, such as a snow cone machine and several dresses. As a child, Ricky never had good birthdays. His parents hadn't been able to afford a snow cone machine or expensive clothes. Typical gifts included shoes that'd gone out of style, underwear, or toys way past their prime.

Mrs. López touched his shoulder. "How're you doing?" she asked.

"Okay. It's a long party."

"I liked the magic. Where'd you learn?"

"From Whitestone the Magnificent. He was said to be in league with the devil, you know."

"You're funny," she said.

"That helps in this line of work."

"I'm sure it does. What made you want to become a clown, anyway?"

"Isn't it obvious? Clowns get all the girls." Ricky gently wiped the beads of sweat accumulating on his forehead. "So what's your first name?"

"Sandy, like the beach."

He'd already decided she was worthy of knowing his true identity. "I'm Ricky."

"Really? I honestly thought your parents named you Bumbo."

Soon Janet asked him to play tag. He was it and he chased the kids, always allowing them to barely escape. Later, they dog piled him. He wrestled with the kids and one girl kicked him hard in the nuts. When he caught his breath, he wanted to kick her back but didn't.

Nearly two hours had elapsed since his arrival. Though exhausted, he continued to entertain. Despite the lack of appropriate music, his performance included a bit of break dancing. While Ricky was dancing, a boy launched several water balloons, most of which collided with trees. However, one exploded against Ricky's chest, drenching the front of his costume. Everybody laughed hard.

"That's the funniest thing I've seen all day," Mr. López said.

"Shit," Ricky said.

Janet pointed at the clown. Her finger was straight as an arrow aimed at his heart. "He said a bad word."

The other kids followed Janet's lead. They pointed at Ricky and shouted. Ricky's head was spinning because he wasn't sure how to make things right. Almost all of the parents were intoxicated, but that didn't prevent them from voicing their anger.

Ricky had never wanted a cigarette more.

"We don't appreciate that kind of language in front of the kids. It sets a bad example," Mr. López said. He took a beer from a cooler and chugged it. He tossed the empty bottle on the grass. "You need to watch it, Bingo."

"Bumbo."

"That's what I said."

"No, you called me Bingo."

“Right.” Mr. López reached into his back pocket and removed his wallet, which was thick and held a lot of cash. “Here’s forty bucks. You’re done, clown face.”

Ricky took the money and breathed deeply in order to control his rage. Mr. López turned away and put the wallet in his back pocket, but he didn’t realize it was loose and slipped out. It lay on the ground for a minute, the brown rawhide partially concealed by long blades of grass. Ricky picked it up and briefly considered returning it, but he noticed nobody was watching. The angry mob around him had dispersed; the kids were now playing on the merry-go-round and the adults were lost in conversation. He tucked the wallet away and went to the restroom, which was in a small building in a corner of the park.

The restroom was dirty. Streamers of toilet paper adorned the walls. He grabbed a steamer, stood in front of the sink, and wiped his face.

He lit a cigarette.

He almost dropped the cigarette when he heard somebody coming in. Ricky was shocked when he saw who it was.

She said, “Hey, what’re you doing?”

“It’s the restroom—what do you think?” Normally, he wouldn’t have spoken to anybody like that, but right now he wasn’t concerned about coming off like a jerk.

“Can I bum a cigarette?”

He lit another and gave it to her. “I just need it sometimes,” he said.

“Me too. Those kids can be monsters.” She took a long drag, and the smoke slowly floated from her lips.

“Janet’s a nice girl.”

“She is, or at least, she was. She’s probably going to be using that word you taught her.”

“I didn’t teach it to her. I mean, she knew it was bad. She’s definitely heard it before,” Ricky said, observing himself in the mirror. His makeup was badly streaked and he looked horrible.

“I’ll bet you’re good looking without all that makeup,” she said.

He pulled off the wig and wig cap and tried to clean his face again. A lot of the makeup remained, and he was certain he’d have to scrub hard at home to fully remove it. “Best I can do here,” he said.

“Not too bad.”

Passionate images flooded his mind. The humiliation he’d gone through would be more than worth it if he ended up making out with Mrs. López. He tossed his cigarette into the sink and leaned in to kiss her but she pushed him away. “What’s wrong?” he said.

“I’ve got a man.”

“A man with money.”

“Makes life easy,” she said.

“Well, he’s got money because he’s a cheapskate. He knocked ten bucks off my fee for being late.”

Mrs. López showed Ricky her empty hand. Then she reached behind his ear and magically removed a twenty. “Here’s a generous tip,” she said, shoving the bill into his palm. She dropped her cigarette on the floor, stamped it out, and left the restroom without another word.

Ricky went home, where he showered and counted all the money. It was more than six hundred dollars.

He realized being a clown still had its rewards.

## PRIDE

It was real late when we got a call saying my bro had flipped his rig. We headed to the hospital and passed the accident and his eighteen-wheeler was turned over, crushed up like a tin can. He was coming back to Hidalgo after dropping off a load in Houston, so there wasn't much to lose. A couple of friends said it was lucky Carmelo was the only thing damaged. His spine got all fucked up.

He came home from the hospital a few months later but life was a bitch because he couldn't do anything anymore. He couldn't get dressed by himself or even sit on the can to take a shit. His wife got out of their room and slept on the couch in the living room. "It's just easier," Katrina says, but I knew that was crap and they just didn't feel like talking or maybe they didn't want to even be near each other too much. Whenever they did talk it was weird, like they barely knew each other.

Then this one Tuesday Katrina started talking when we were eating breakfast. "Got book club tonight," she says. "Be home late. That all right?" My bro, he just sat there with a stupid look on his face like he hadn't heard her.

"Sounds fine to me," I say. I was trying to help, make it not weird, you know? But she didn't like that and looked at me mean.

"Carmelo," she says, "is it all right?"

"Yeah," he says, but we all knew he didn't give a damn one way or the other. Then he just ate his pancake, drank his milk, and rolled his wheelchair out of the kitchen. Like he was

saying fuck you to us. Like we didn't matter. Katrina, she looked tired all of a sudden. I thought about giving her a pat on the shoulder but then I just got up and went outside.

My car was a piece of shit. It was this brown '79 Ford Pinto. The windshield was cracked. There were these stains on the seats that I hoped were coffee. It didn't have a radio so I sang like a jackass on my way to the school where I was in the eleventh grade and what a great thing that was.

Not really. I spent the day watching these ugly teachers tag the blackboards. Algebra, history, literature—they're different languages. Wished I could understand because when I didn't, I started thinking about Carmelo and his legs. They looked like twigs. I always had to help him take a bath. Didn't like it.

So after school I went to work. I was a cook at this fast food joint called Burger Palace. Yeah, it's a rip off of what you're thinking. Even promised "meals fit for a king." Maybe king of the lardos. Maybe. But I still liked the job. It was pretty cool. The manager liked me. He even let me be in a commercial. This was before Carmelo's accident. I got to dress up as a king and wear this purple robe and plastic crown, and I got to sit on a throne and wave around a wand that looked like a French fry. There was another guy, one of the cashiers, he was dressed like a magic dude and he asked what I wanted to eat. So I pretended to think and then asked for a double cheese, curly fries, and choco shake, and the magic dude, he waved his wand and got me the food. I took a bite of the burger and that was it.

I was like a little famous then, and I got this hot chick who worked up front to go out with me. Her name was Elma. She was two years older than me, and she had good legs and long hair. I'm a leg man so this was nice for me. She also had green eyes with little brown specs in them.

We got off at eight and I drove her home. She always talked about Carmelo, which sucked but I let her because she thought it made me feel better.

“Carmelo doing okay?”

“Don’t think so. He spends his time on video games. Feels sorry for himself all day. Mind’s crazy, after the shit he’s been through. Can’t even work anymore. Probably feels like a loser since we live off Katrina’s salary. Hell, I know it’s tough but still.”

“Cut him a break,” she says. “He’s got post-traumatic stress disorder.” This Elma was a psych major at the community college. She knew what she was saying.

“Okay.”

“Hey, at least Katrina’s hanging in there. I mean, for now, anyway.”

That made me feel funny inside. It made me mad and I gripped the steering wheel tight. My chest hurt. “What do you mean by that?”

“My parents are divorced. I know the signs.”

“They’re not my parents.” I say. “And they’re not getting divorced.”

“Okay, Benny,” she says. “Sorry.”

My hands were white since I was squeezing the steering wheel so hard. I let loose. I thought I might’ve made Elma scared, but she didn’t show it. When I dropped her off she kissed me on the lips and said we’d talk tomorrow.

I started thinking about Katrina. Yeah, she was hanging in there like Elma said, even though my bro and me never let her know we cared. She worked for a dentist, and since Carmelo’s insurance money ran out, she was working lots more to keep us stable. I helped out too, but it’s not like I was rolling in the dough. Anyway, I thought it’d be good if I swung by the

book club and gave her some leftovers I happened to have. So what if it wasn't much? It was something, right?

She'd been in the club for a little while. The meetings were at Barnes & Noble on 10<sup>th</sup>. I'd never gone in. No reason to. But she'd told me one time that everybody sat on the side where there were chairs and a coffee bar. All fancy pants. So I went there with a #3 Combo (bacon cheese, order of fries, but no drink). Katrina wasn't around and the people there didn't look like they were in a book club. I asked a girl who worked there and she says, "Club meets Mondays. Everybody knows that." Now I'm thinking I messed up, got the day wrong. But, no, that couldn't be it. Katrina always went on Tuesdays, and it was Tuesday. I couldn't figure it out.

I got home nervous. My heart was pounding and my palms were wet. I kept thinking about what Elma said. It bothered me even more when I saw Katrina wasn't at home. Carmelo was sleeping in his room so I just waited on the couch. About an hour passed and she came strolling in. Man, she looked like another lady. She was smiling and moving easy. I'd forgot how crooked her teeth were.

"Hey," I says. "You look funny."

She sat on the couch and laughed. It was a big laugh, her mouth hanging open. "Funny how?"

"Happy, I mean."

"Is that funny?"

"For you it is."

She laughed again. It was bigger this time. I could see that little punching bag thing at the end of her throat. "You think so?"



I nodded.

“Day started out rocky,” she says, “but ended up being wonderful.”

Now it didn’t sound right to me. None of it did. I say, “Your book group must’ve been fun.”

“It was. Place was packed.”

“What’d you read this week?”

Her eyes met mine. I couldn’t hold it and looked away. “*The Shining*,” she says. “It’s about a haunted hotel. Ghosts, crazy dad, psychic kid. Stephen King stuff.”

This was a book I’d actually heard about, mostly because it was popular.

“You read it?” she says.

“No but I saw the movie on TV last night.”

She stopped smiling and her face got pale. Then she looked tired again and kind of scared. “Must’ve missed it,” she says.

“The one with Jack Nicholson. Scared the hell out of me.” I got up.

I went to my room and fell down on the bed. What was Katrina lying for? I called Elma.

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Should’ve called her on the lie.” Elma sounded mad.

“She’s like my sister,” I say. “I can’t accuse her without knowing what’s going on. I’ve got to find out as much as I can. After that I’ll decide what to do.”

“Got a plan?”

“I could follow her next week. It’s probably innocent stuff.”

“Possible,” Elma says, “but what if it’s not so innocent?”

“Then I don’t know,” I say. “I guess there’ll be trouble.”

I spent the rest of the week nervous and a little sick. It was like torture. Whenever Katrina was around, I got mad and scared. When she said she was going to book club again, I was ready. I got the day off from work and killed the hours after school by hanging out with buds I hadn't seen in a while. Then I went on to stakeout the dentist's office where Katrina worked. She was off at seven-thirty and I was waiting in my car across the street. I felt like a sleazy private dick.

Using the techniques I'd seen in movies, I tailed as she drove to steakhouse nearby. It was called Bob's Place and it had cowboy crap outside. I wanted to go in, see what she was up to, but things weren't that easy. If I went inside she'd see me for sure, so I just drove in circles around the place. Then I figured out Katrina had gotten a table near a window and if I parked close I could see her fine.

She was alone for like ten minutes. She was drinking a margarita. Looked tasty. A man with two good legs and a head of wavy hair came in and sat with her. He reached over the table to touch her cheek, romantic. He kissed her. That's when Katrina, she changed. You know, right until then, I always thought of her as *almost* pretty because, while she was thin and had smooth skin, she was always too damn timid. But when she started flirting with this guy who wasn't her husband, she got excited, flushed.

It couldn't get any worse. That's what was going through my head. I wanted to go in the place and bust the guy's head. I was gonna do it, but then I figured it wasn't my job to make such a stand. It was my bro's. Katrina was his woman and nothing I did or said would have the same effect.

I was back at home quick. I punched on the door of Carmelo's room but he didn't answer. I went in and turned on the light anyway. He was there on his back, sleeping like a dog. His face was stony and flat. I woke him.

"What is it?" he says. "What do you want?"

"You know where Katrina is? Do you?"

"Should I?"

"Bro, I'm not sure if you care but I'm gonna tell you since it's important."

There were blankets covering his lower body. He sat up and pushed them off. He was in boxer shorts and his thin, crooked legs were right there. "So get on with it. I don't got all night. I'm listening."

Ever since the accident, Katrina was trying to get Carmelo to feel, I don't know what, but something. Well, she finally did it. He listened to me and seemed to snap out of the spell he'd been under for so long. "It's all my fault," he says. "I drove her to it and I've got to make it right. That's that only way to go. No other way."

"How're you going to do that?"

"How do you think? By kicking this guy's ass. I bet they're still at the restaurant. We can go there. We can do this."

"You gotta talk to her," I say, "but the guy looked tough. He's not some little kid, you know."

"My legs don't work, but it doesn't mean I can't fight." His wheelchair was next to the bed. He got in and went to the closet. He started looking like crazy, and then he pulled out this worn and chipped bat. It was a Louisville Slugger. Nice one. "Remember this?" he says.

I remembered. It was the bat he'd used about seven years earlier, when we lived in another city, in another state. Man, that was another life. Back when Carmelo was eighteen, he was this huge baseball star at a university in Austin. I thought he was the next best thing after God. He hit homers the way most people brush their teeth, without even thinking. Our dad would take me to watch Carmelo practice, and I guess everybody thought we were a happy family. Not even. Our mom died when I was born, and our dad beat me for it. Only me, though. He beat me for anything. My body was always covered in bruises. This one time, he came into my room and yelled at me for bringing in mud. He threw me to the floor and kicked me. Carmelo got his bat and came back swinging. He smashed our dad in the head. Our dad was still breathing when me and Carmelo got in his car and drove away. We drove for hours and didn't stop till we were too tired to keep our eyes open. We ended up here, in the Valley of South Texas.

Now Carmelo was practicing swings from his chair and I knew I had to help him. "You sure about this? You sure this is the best way?" I say.

"This guy, whoever he is, he's insulted me, you, and Katrina. We got to have pride in our family. This son-of-a-bitch is not getting away with anything. You got to be there with me. I need you, Benny. We always stick together."

"How can you go and say that? If you'd felt like this before, if you'd let Katrina get close with you, none of this would've happened."

"Doesn't change shit. You with me or what?"

"Yeah, I'm with you." My voice was shaky yet he didn't seem to notice. It didn't matter anyway because I promised myself I wouldn't let him down no matter what. He'd done lots for me and it was time to repay.

I helped him dress and then we went to my car. I picked him up and got him in the seat. He never let go of the bat even once. I folded his wheelchair and put it in the trunk. Carmelo didn't say anything. He was breathing heavy.

We got to the restaurant and parked near the window but Katrina and the guy were not at the table anymore. I was happy, at least for a second.

"Gone," I say.

"No they're not." Carmelo pointed to a truck at the other end of the lot. Katrina was leaving her own car behind and was getting into the truck. The man, standing tall, was the truck's driver.

"What should I do? You want me to follow?"

"Fuck, yes. See where they're going."

They were going to the Golden Ray. It's a motel close by, just off the expressway. Not a fancy place at all. It's run down and ugly but I guess it does the job. The man left the truck and went to get a room.

"Let's move. We can talk to her alone. This doesn't have to be ugly."

"No," Carmelo says. "Not yet. Sit tight." He was shaking a little. His muscles were twitching, like they couldn't wait to get started.

The man came back quick. He was cocky. He walked that way. He parked the truck and he and Katrina went toward their room. They held hands.

A bit later Carmelo says, "Okay, let's roll."

I got out and set up his chair. When we were ready we went to their door. My bro ordered me to kick it in.

"Or I could knock," I say.

“Just do it.”

I smashed my foot against the door. I thought it'd be easy because the door looked thin and weak. It moved in the frame but it didn't give an inch. I tried again and this time the sides cracked and the door flew open.

They were already out of bed. The man, he came forward slowly. He had this look on his face, like, “What the fuck's going on?” He wasn't wearing a shirt but he still had the jeans on. Katrina still had all her clothes. She went to the bathroom and stayed there, her head poking through the doorway like a scared kid. She was crying.

Carmelo rolled to meet the man, who still wasn't sure about it. The man says, “Who're you?” and my bro, he lifted the bat. The man tried to move away but Carmelo was good with the wheelchair and forced the man into a corner. Even in his condition, Carmelo could swing hard and the bat hit the man's knees with the same loud crack it made when it hit a fastball. The man fell and covered with his arms but Carmelo didn't stop. He broke the man's arms. The man was screaming. Blood was coming out of his nose. Carmelo wouldn't let up.

“That's enough,” I say. “Come on.”

My bro, he was possessed. He didn't even hear me. I had to yell at him. Then he stopped. “It's your turn,” he says. “You got to.”

The man was just lying there. He didn't look like he could take much more. Carmelo rolled to me and handed me the bat.

“Don't want to,” I say.

“You don't let me down,” he says.

It wasn't fair but I still did it. I gave the guy two good shots in the ribs. I heard the bones crack. He didn't scream after that.

“All right,” Carmelo says and I nodded. I gave him the bat. He rubbed the blood off with his hands. Made it almost clean again.

I looked at Katrina. She’d sunk to the floor. She was curled like a baby and trembling. I went over. Her eyes were shut tight. I tried to talk but it didn’t matter. She wouldn’t open her eyes.

Carmelo wanted to go so we took off. I pushed him out to the car. The night was real starry and calm. Somewhere there were sirens but they weren’t for us. We got in the car and I’m like, “Where to?”

“Hungry,” he says.

We went to Burger Palace. Not the one I worked at. We got some burgers and onion rings and chicken fingers. We were eating and not talking. It was like before.

“You okay?” I finally say.

“Fuck.”

“That a yes?”

“It’s a fuck,” he says.

We finished and I was taking us home when Carmelo said no. “Keep driving.”

“What about Katrina?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

So I kept going. Drove for hours. We didn’t stop till we couldn’t keep our eyes open anymore.

## COYOTE

I always wanted to be a musician but my stepdad wouldn't buy me an accordion and called me a joto for singing in the high school choir. After graduation, I found an apartment and hung with my friends Walo and Don and my cousin Pepe. Walo plays drums, Don electric guitar, and Pepe had a synthesizer, so I saved cash to buy a bass and accordion. We formed a group called Los Amigos and played a mix of Tejano and norteño. I was lead singer. The group crumbled within a year because Walo fell in love, Don was busted for drugs, and Pepe's synthesizer broke.

Then my mom died from diabetes, which meant I had to fix things with my stepdad. His name's Juan and he's a coyote. He lives in McAllen and has a partner named Manuel who smuggles people across the Rio Grande from México and takes mojudos to big cities.

A few days ago, Juan offered me a job driving five illegals to Dallas. "No es nada," he said.

He and Manuel charge two hundred per head to cross the river plus fifteen hundred for the ride north.

My cut will be real nice.

\*

Once upon a time, I had a naïve belief about loyalty. I thought you came out better if you always kept your word. Eventually I learned that wasn't true. You have to take what you want when you want.



That's how this world works.

\*

I stand beside my stepdad's blue van and smoke a Marlboro even though I know smoking's bad for my voice. The sun goes down. I throw my cigarette away and enter Juan's house. The floorboards are loose and the walls need paint.

He's asleep in the bedroom. He's snoring but it sounds like growling.

Juan came into my life in a strange way. I was still a boy when I caught him trying to steal my mom's car from the parking lot of the M. Rivas Food Store. My mom was going to call the cops, but sly Juan, he sweet talked her.

It wasn't long till they were married.

He went to prison for burglary some time later. A gringo inmate began causing trouble, so Juan decided to take care of him. The gringo fought like the devil and Juan's teeth were knocked out as he strangled the gringo with his fingers.

Since Juan's jaw was broken and never fixed right, his face is misshaped and scarred. He has an empty teardrop tattoo beneath his right eye to celebrate the kill.

Now I shake his shoulder and say, "Vámanos."

He stirs and puts in his fake teeth. They look like a row of Chiclets. "Need to take a dump."

"I'll be in the van."

\*

It's hard not to turn on the radio while I'm driving. I want to listen to Qué Pasa 99.5, but my stepdad, who's riding shotgun, will get pissed because he thinks music is for stupid kids.

Manuel and the illegals crossed last night. Juan met them and took them to a safe house, which is where we're heading.

"I picked them up on Old Military Highway," Juan says. "They're from Michoacán."

"My grandpa was from there."

"I know. You look like him."

"You never met him. He died before you married my mom."

"I saw pictures."

"Okay."

"He looked like an asshole."

My body tenses and Juan laughs. His laugh is coarse. I hate how he busts my balls every chance he gets. When I took this job, he said it would be different between us and I believed him.

But I guess things never really change.

\*

My grandpa's name was Augustín. In 1948, at thirty-three, he left Michoacán, the city of his birth. He left the state of Morelia to come northeast through Guanajuato and San Luis Potosí, finally arriving in Reynosa, Tamaulipas.

There, he met the girl who'd become his wife.

They must've known great fear standing on the banks of the Río Bravo. The fierce river was murky and wide, its currents deadly.

"Desvístense," the coyote said.

They removed their clothes and placed them in trash bags. They held the bags while floating across the river on tire tubes.

\*

The safe house is quiet. I park in front and Juan goes inside. He returns with Manuel and the rest.

The mojudos wear empty expressions and look exhausted. Clothes hang off their wasted bodies. They carry belongings in trash bags.

Manuel has a pack with flashlights, a cell phone, and other supplies. “Necesitamos agua,” he says.

His hair is gray. His eyes are yellow where they should be white.

I can tell he doesn't like me. Another coyote means less money for him. He already spends too much bribing the right people for protection en el otro lado—on the other side.

Though the van is big, it's crowded once everybody gets in.

We go to a Stripes and Juan buys many gallons of water.

\*

It's worse than hell for the illegals. Juan and I have to drop them off several miles from the checkpoint just south of Falfurrias, and Manuel will lead them into the thick, ugly brush. He knows trails to go far around the checkpoint and through ranches to avoid being caught by the Border Patrol.

The walk is long and perilous. Snakes fill the harsh terrain, and even an experienced coyote can get lost, especially at night. But the real thread comes with morning. Daytime temperatures can get well over a hundred degrees.

The sun, it can cook you.

Reports of illegals found dead in the brush are common in local papers. Manuel tries to avoid such problems because they're bad for business. This is why he needs water. The trek will cover at least twenty miles, maybe more.

Still, if somebody can't finish the walk, Manuel will leave him behind.

Juan and I will pass through the checkpoint since we're American citizens and wait in Fal for Manuel's call. The call should come tomorrow or the next day.

Then we're supposed to pick the illegals up again and since there're no more checkpoints, the next part's not complicated. I drive the first hours. Juan drives the rest.

\*

My grandparents settled in the Valley. My grandma quickly got pregnant, and my mom was born about a year after the crossing.

My mom, the American.

\*

Fal is over an hour away. It's a weekday, so traffic on Highway 281 isn't bad.

The mojudos are sleeping or resting with their eyes closed. I can't take the lack of music anymore and reach to turn on the radio. Juan slaps my hand away.

"No sissy stuff."

I've never heard Juan sing or even hum a tune. I wonder what music might come from his ugly mouth.

\*

Steve Jordan, "The Jimi Hendrix of the Accordion." His album *Turn Me Loose* shook my soul and made me want to play the squeezebox.

I thought about him before Los Amigos played our first gig. It was at a bar called Sofia's.

We waited in a corner, and I noticed my armpits were wet.

"Relax," Don said.

I couldn't.

"You ready?" Walo asked.

"No."

"Too bad. We're on."

We took the stage and started to play. My hands caressed my Hohner Corona II and I sang an original song called "La primera vez."

The audience members cheered.

\*

In Rachal, twenty miles from the checkpoint, I see a Border Patrol car behind us.

"Don't worry," Juan says.

After a few minutes, the car disappears.

\*

Soon I pull over on the roadside and let Manuel and the mojudos out. Before they disappear into the bush, I look at their tired, solemn faces. I see the faces of my grandparents, of my parents.

I see my own face.

"Suerte," I say.

## SQUEEZE

He played his accordion the way other men breathe—naturally and out of necessity. He was old, eighty at least, but his hands moved with such grace it was as if they were divine. Each night he stood outside the café and sang about love.

When I put a dollar in his plastic cup, he paused to say thank you.

I drank tea with my friend Ana. She owned the café, and every so often, leaned close to brush away a comma of hair that kept falling on my forehead.

“You know the old man?” I said.

“Not really.”

“But you let him stay.”

“Does he bother you?”

“No. I like him.”

She ran a long blue fingernail across my arm. “Me too.”

The music ended at ten.

While heading home, I saw the old man walking in the street, carrying his accordion case like it held something sacred. I rolled down my windows to offer a ride. He told me where he was going and slowly got into my car. “You’re a fine boy,” he said.

“The way you play,” I said, “wish I could do that.”

“Must have passion. Without it, you can’t squeeze.”

I nodded, pretending to understand. Then I drove. I changed radio stations and found “Muchacha bonita” by the great accordionist Narciso Martínez.

The old man hummed the melody. “El huracán del valle. I knew him. His hands were magic.”

I turned off the radio and pulled into the crowded parking lot of a bar. The old man said he would play and sing outside the bar till the early hours of the morning.

“True music,” he said, “is the sound of love.”

“It’s that simple?”

He laughed and opened the car door. “I play for my wife. I think she’s beautiful. Yes, she’s the most beautiful woman in the entire world and all my songs are for her.”

“She’s lucky,” I said.

“And you? Do you love?”

“I’m divorced.”

He looked at me. His face caught the light of a streetlamp, and I saw my reflection in his eyes. “That’s not good. You should love.”

I left just as the first notes were pumped from the instrument. I thought of Ana, of how she pressed her lips to my neck when she hugged me.

I thought of her, and I listened. The wind seemed to carry the old man’s song for miles.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

My name is José René Martínez, and I was born in McAllen, TX on February 9, 1981. I graduated from McAllen High School in 1999 and immediately enrolled as an English major at the University of Texas – Pan American. I earned my BA in English in 2001 and my MA in English in 2003.

I returned to UTPA in the summer of 2007 to pursue a MFA in Creative Writing with an emphasis in fiction. I received my MFA in the spring of 2011.

Currently, I teach English and creative writing at South Texas College in McAllen.