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And They Were Thirteen

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AND THEY WERE THIRTEEN

A Thesis

by

DANIEL SANCHEZ

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2011

Major Subject: Creative Writing

AND THEY WERE THIRTEEN

A Thesis
by
DANIEL SANCHEZ

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December 2011

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ABSTRACT

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In the critical introduction to my thesis, I explore how the progression of my creative work straddled the gap between fiction and nonfiction and how, in trying to make the creative work a combination of both, I failed to make it work as successfully as I could have as a narrative. I then segue into my research on Joseph Campbell's monomyth and how it has even affected narratives focusing on teachers. I then explain how elements present in my work coincide with aspects of the monomyth. Because of the prevalence of the monomyth in American pop culture, I make an effort to explain why it is necessary then to "pervert" or "corrupt" the aspects of the monomyth that coincide with my work so that I may avoid the common tropes and clichés inherent in narratives that find some basis in the said monomyth.

DEDICATION

To Shoney and Melissa, for helping me through all of this – I couldn't have done it without you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Professor Jose Skinner, for helping me to see the strengths and weaknesses in my work, and the positive remarks he made on those assignments I turned in when I first took a class with him; that's what first led me to think I could be a writer. I would also like to thank my committee members: Dr. Braithwaite, for first encouraging me to apply to grad school and for taking the time to help me find the current structure of my work and Dr. Charlton for giving me a different vantage point on my work.

And of course, much thanks to my family. Without them and the faith they have given me, I would not be who I am today.

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INTRODUCTION

Bridging Nonfiction and Fiction: From the Classroom to the Page

First Steps

I never thought that I'd write about my students, but then again, I never thought I'd be a teacher either. Four and a half years ago, when I enrolled in the MFA Creative Writing program at UTPA and started teaching seventh-grade math, I thought that teaching and writing would be somewhat mutually exclusive aspects of my life, that I would have to divide my time between my duty and my desire. And for some time, that is exactly what happened; I would teach seventh-grade math from 8 a.m. – 4 p.m., then drive to UTPA for class or to some restaurant to discuss what I had written with a fellow writer. It was during these dinners with my classmate that we became friends and our discussions expanded to work, which I liked to rant and rave about. It was during one of these bouts of exposition that he first suggested that I start writing about my students.

The original draft was really nothing more than a free writing exercise. At a solid twenty seven pages, it was divided unequally into three sections. The first focused on an incident that took place at the Valle Vista Mall with one of my female students, the result of her pubescent crush on me during my second year of teaching. The second was about a club I sponsored during my first year as a teacher after the original sponsor was arrested for allegedly molesting a former

middle school student. The third was the unsettling realization that despite being thirteen or fourteen, my students were either sexually active or possibly on the cusp of becoming so. There was no thematic thread consciously tying these three pieces together; basically, these three sections of the original draft were simply three gut reactions to my first two years of teaching.

There were, however, certain guidelines by which I wrote the original draft. I crafted a persona through which the voice of the speaker would come through: pessimistic, cynical, bitter, and frustrated. One reason for this was because as a writer I didn't want to create just another *Stand and Deliver* (1998), *The Ron Clark Story* (2006), or *Freedom Writers* (2007), films that glorified teachers and the effect they had on their students. While these films and stories like them have their place, as narratives they are also completely predictable; at the end of the day, someone's life is going to be changed, tears are going to be shed, and someone, most likely the teacher protagonists, is going to feel that their lives have been vindicated by proxy of their student's successes. I wanted to avoid this by using a negative persona who sees life, and therefore his students, pessimistically, someone who didn't believe that what he was doing professionally mattered. As a writer, this wasn't that difficult to accomplish; pessimistic by nature and in a job I didn't wholeheartedly choose, it was relatively easy to tap into my frustration and focus it to produce a version of myself that had a penchant for blatantly referring to students as idiots, who intentionally sought to be derisive of the charges given to him by the state. This, in turn, led to passages such as this one:

“Mr. Sanchez! Mr. Sanchez!” It's Lynette Saldivar.
“Guess what I did last Saturday! Guess what I did!”

Lynette's braces flash across her face as she smiles broadly, eyes gleaming in excitement. She reminds me of Hammy the Squirrel from Pixar's *Over the Hedge*, always bouncing up and down, always smiling, always perky. She's a natural cheerleader.

In other words: a perky idiot.

I arch an eyebrow. “Give me a minute, Lynette.” I fold my arms across my chest, hold my chin in my hand.

“What are you doing?” she asks after a moment. She doesn’t remember the last time I did this to her.

I lean in deviously. “Looking for the part of me that cares.”

She’s a good kid. Stupid, but a good kid.

Or this one:

“Sir, why are you teaching?” Mireya asked.

“Because I can’t sing or dance. Get back to work.”

“No, I mean, really, why are you here?” She leans in her seat. “It’s obvious you hate your job.”

I grab my head and crack my neck, the three, four snaps echoing in the room; Mireya’s question has captivated them. April shudders. I smile like Heath Ledger’s Joker and answer. “You’re right, Miro. I do hate my job. But I love making you all miserable even more.”¹

It was this original draft that was workshopped in a class made primarily of other teachers. While most missed the point of a workshop², various aspects became clear. One classmate of mine, V. Moreno, said the following:

“Vignettes seem geared for shock value, but not necessarily for the reader to gain insight into the kids or the narrator....Generally these students and their behaviors are very negative stereotypes. I found them predictable, not invalid, but believable in a broad sense. Again, I have known kids like these and I am afraid

¹ The revised version of this scene is on pages 46-47 of this thesis.

² I received more tips on teaching rather than on the actual writing.

they are clear to me because I am familiar with them, not because they are well developed.”

My professor of the class (the same professor that prompted me to join the MFA writing program), Dr. Jean Braithwaite, also gave me useful feedback.

“I think you need to do more work to establish that the narrator’s fear of dumb, hormone-addled, flirtatious girls is realistic, not crazy or selfish. If this were mine, I’d manage it by putting the accusation against Harmon³ earlier on...Just give us the background against which it makes sense that when a 14 year old starts talking about her sex life one of your first and strongest feelings is self-preservation rather than having every thought focused on protecting and guiding her.”

In hindsight, this sort of feedback isn’t surprising. The original draft had no structure; it was the equivalent of textual vomit: real, disgustingly so, but without form or purpose. There were however a few morsels of food in that refuse that could be washed off and salvaged, so I consulted with Dr. Braithwaite regularly. She suggested the use of composite characters, the hybridization of scenes that would allow me to keep those moments that absolutely had to remain in the narrative. With this in mind, I went back to work, identifying those key scenes, folding students into one another. Another piece of Dr. Braithwaite’s advice included the use of index cards to build the structure of the piece. I was wary of this tactic, but went ahead with it; orange cards indicated the “present timeline” (which was my second year of teaching) and lime green cards indicated the past (or my first year of teaching). Paragraphs that indicated an

³ This was one of the fictional names that I used to disguise who the person accused of sexual molestation.

opinion or attitude were in white, and usually placed behind one of the colored cards on the corkboard that I used to manage my narrative.

I had to admit to some guilt at this particular stage: I was losing a sense of truth and validity. I felt torn; in one draft lay the truth, unfurnished, unbeautiful, but the God's-honest truth, and in the other I had an actual narrative complete with conflict and characters devoid of stereotypes, but it wasn't the absolute truth. It was no longer completely nonfiction.

Conversations were fabricated and inserted in events that actually did take place; lines from one conversation were grafted onto others. Events, appearances were exaggerated; separate incidents were strung together for the sake of narrative cohesiveness. Dialogue spoken by one student was written for another. But I persevered, determined to do what was necessary to complete this work: treating it like a piece of fiction, molding people and situations to fit my design, my need.

My narrative.

The end result was my second draft. Instead of three sections, the general structure was such that it alternated between the diegetic past and present of the text, between my first and second years of teaching respectively. The faculty member who was accused of molesting a child was introduced much earlier within the narrative and was used in conjunction with a flirtatious student to establish the reasoning behind the narrator's attitude. To create sympathy for the protagonist, I didn't allow him to make as many derogatory comments about his students; but by the time such actions/attitude were justifiable, the narrative was at its end and therefore this aspect of the narrator didn't take the spotlight as it had throughout the original draft. When I submitted it to the creative nonfiction workshop that I took again with Dr. Braithwaite, it was for the most part well received. I, on the other hand, still had my doubts. After taking such a hold

on the reins, something seemed off. After receiving their line and end comments, I did one more thing to the second draft: I color coded it. Truth was changed to blue font, personal thoughts to green and anything that wasn't for the most part true was red. Lo and behold, eleven of the twenty six pages were either completely red or mostly in red. This placed me at something of a crossroads; either go back and rework the subject matter in such a manner that it was for the most part truthful, surrender the text to fiction, or take a stand and insist that the narrative was legitimately nonfiction in spite of the freedoms taken with the source material.

Ben Yagoda addresses this dilemma in his book *Memoir*. In speaking of “typewriters that never were sledge-hammered, fastballs that never were hurled” (264), Yagoda says that there can be two possible positions (outside of reworking the text). The first is judgmental; marketing narratives as memoirs despite the inclusions of untruths is false advertising. Yagoda points out that the “...stories in memoirs weren't just stories. They were commodities, containing within them impossibly tangled issues of ownership, propriety and truth” (26). What Yagoda is pointing out here is that nonfiction is a commodity whose worth is tied directly to its truth-value⁴. The implication here seems to be that if a nonfictional work's truth value is compromised, then as a commodity it is essentially worthless. And if the marketing angle isn't sufficient, Yagoda quotes Ruth Kluger's position that when a memoir is revealed to be a fabrication⁵, “when it is revealed as a lie, as a presentation of invented suffering, it deteriorates to kitsch”(246).⁶

⁴This differs from the work of David Sedaris. While he does work under the umbrella of nonfiction, it a general understanding that he has exaggerated some aspects. However, his work is appreciated more for his excellent writing rather than its inherent truth value.

⁵ Of course, I am speaking here of a work that is bordering on or is a complete fabrication (a la *Forbidden Love* by Norma Khouri) rather than truth adorned with a lie or two (say, *Breaking Clean* by Judy Blunt).

⁶ For the writer with literary ambition, this is most likely the issue at hand. Writers of this sort rarely care about economics in any form.

The second position is more flexible. Yagoda, in describing the position, writes that the “memoir, as a genre, is universally understood to offer subjective, impressionistic testimony. It doesn’t pretend to offer the truth, just the author’s truth” (265). In other words, “Get a life, people” (265). This position is also taken by creative nonfictionists working in Hispanic traditions. Lee Gutkind, in his preface for *Hurricanes and Carnivals: Essays by Chicanos, Pochos, Pachucos, Mexicanos, and Expatriates*, writes that “In their excitement to write and make their opinions heard, sometimes writers in Mexico cross the line between fiction and nonfiction” (vii) which is allowed because “Traditionally, readers will allow the writer some dramatic leeway if they know that it is in the service of a higher moral truth...” (viii). Ilan Stavans, in the book’s introduction, puts it this way: “The essays in *Hurricanes and Carnivals* are jazzy, itinerant, unpredictable.... Truth isn’t only relative in them, it is also inconsequential” (6). Yagoda picks up this thread on the subject of Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan Indian activist, and her autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. Turns out that there were some, or rather, “many inaccuracies in Menchu’s account” based on the investigations of Middlebury College anthropologist David Stoll. Stoll has gone on to say that “You can understand and defend her narrative strategy, of folding others’ experience into her own, making herself into a kind of all-purpose Maya” (Yagoda 259).

The easy decision for me to make here is to agree with nonfictionists working in the Hispanic tradition since I’m Hispanic and that therefore I’m just continuing in the literary traditions of my culture; my father is from El Salvador and my maternal grandparents are from Mexico. But there are two main problems with this. While I am racially Hispanic, the truth is that I’m not culturally Hispanic; I don’t identify with culturally Hispanic people regardless of their nationality. While I speak Spanish, while I enjoy Hispanic cuisine and while I have

Hispanic friends, I am culturally acclimated to the land I live in—America. However, the bigger issue lies with the logic: my only reason for taking this position, that I’m licensed to have some leeway with the truth, would simply be because I lucked out on the genetic lottery and was born Hispanic—which is, of course, illogical! To allow race to be a factor in deciding the truth value of anything, let alone a text, doesn’t make sense; truth is independent of race. Even if the tradition of a culture is to be flexible with the truth, it doesn’t address or debate the role of untruth within nonfiction.

In my opinion, a better investigation of this matter is seen in *The Nonfictionist’s Guide* by Robert Root. Root claims that

“nonfiction is the written expression of, reflection upon, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experience....The idea of reality or fact is implicit in the definition – ‘observed experience’ refers to something that is happening as the writer records it; ‘recollected experience’ refers to something that happened which the writer later recalls and reports; ‘perceived experience’ refers to something that happened or exists that the writer has found verification for through research, testimony and deduction confirmed by reliable primary and secondary sources and conscientious consideration of evidence. Note that this assumes....the honest intention of recording or reporting the truth”
(178)

For Root, “Nonfiction depends upon a tacit agreement between writer and reader where the writer will play fair with the facts in exchange for the reader’s trust that the writer is sincerely

trying to discern and depict truth” (183). This is not what occurred in the case of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*:

“Eventually it was revealed that one of the powerful concluding scenes in the book, where Capote visits one of the murderers in jail, never happened in real life. Capote entirely fabricated the scene. For the purposes of a novel it was an effective scene; for the purposes of the nonfiction it was a deception, a distortion....” (184)

For me, this example has been especially problematic; pivotal conversations that, within the diegetic, precipitated life-altering decisions are fabricated or made from combining various moments of actual conversations. This matters because, just as in Capote’s *Cold Blood*, I use conversations of this nature; while they are effective for the purposes of my work, they are still nonfictional deceptions and distortions. Root says: “In fiction you can change the names, the identifying characteristics, the locale, the period of time; you can’t do that in nonfiction and have it still be nonfiction” (189-190). Yet Root also quotes Vivian Gornick and her memoir, *Fierce Attachments*: “that on a few occasions in the book that I had made a composite out of the elements of two or more incidents—none of which had been fabricated—for the purpose of moving the narrative forward” (190-191). Root agrees that this is acceptable in a memoir and summarizes Gornick’s position by saying that she, Gornick, “hasn’t fabricated her material, but fashioned it” (191). This seems to be the only artistic liberty Root is willing to grant:

“A writer who decides to collapse two or three events into one for the purpose of making clearer the overall impact of the events is different

from the one who narrates events that never happened in order to convince us that he was there or that the events happened” (191).

Where, then, does this leave me and my work? Root would argue that my work, as it stands, is fiction because various sections of the text lie outside of the boundaries of observed, recollected or perceived experiences. Ruth Kluger might say it’s kitsch. And while I might have had every writer south of the border willing to back me up, I can’t honestly say I agree with them or their position on nonfiction. In the end, all I know is this: All I’ve done, all the liberties I’ve taken with the source material has been for the sake of the narrative. The dialogue in fabricated conversations has either been taken from actual conversations or imagined to the extent that the person in question would have spoken; I’ve done my best not to put words in mouths that would not have spoken them. Events referenced in said fabricated conversations actually happened or were said to happen. Events that take place in the narrative, actually did take place. But as truthful as I’ve sought to be in my work, the truth is that I’m not as truthful as I could’ve been; as fictional as I’ve sought to be, the fact remains that I will always draw heavily from my own life.

Tara Ison tackles this issue in her article “The Names Have Been Changed to Protect the Innocent: A Fiction Writer Struggles with Nonfiction Tendencies”. She writes from both sides of the coin. On one side, “Twenty years of....shared intimacies stretched to a shape he wanted and nailed to the page like skinned hides left to dry” (108) left her victimized in the screenplay by a close friend who was a writer. On the other side, she stooped to do the same when she used her family as the foundations for characters in her writing: “The brother character wasn’t my brother; the little girl wasn’t me. But the dynamic was there, and the odd, specific moment I thought I’d forgotten, glaring, exposed to air” (115). This article isn’t about whether or not to call a work fiction or nonfiction even if it’s obviously based off the true events and relationships;

Ison instead focuses on the cost to authors who choose to take from their lives and fictionalize it on the page. The key question she seems to asking herself, a key question I have been asking myself is “how much, as a writer, am I willing to pay for my work?” (121). When her friend chose to put their friendship on the page as the script for his play, their friendship failed because he “betrayed the pact of mutual secrecy upon which relationships are based” (112). When she based a character off her brother, he didn’t react overtly to it, both of them acting as if the book didn’t exist. In my case, it’s not only my family that would take issue with what I’ve written, but my employers as well; no school board would ever retain a teacher that depicted student-teacher relationships with a touch of subtle sexuality between them. In fact, just writing on the subject would be disastrous; the suspicion would be that depicted events on the subject were nonfiction even if there weren’t any evidence to back up such guesses. In spite of the cost, Ison ultimately acknowledges that she’s still going to borrow from the relationships in her life, forcing me to realize that I, too, have already made the same decision: this thesis is proof of that.

Next Steps

Understanding, then, that I will draw from my life and my work to write, the emphasis is then placed on how I will fictionalize my life. Part of my attempt to do so far has been in the use of the Hero’s Journey, or monomyth, the term that Joseph Campbell borrowed from *Finnegan’s Wake* by James Joyce, a pattern he observed in narratives of various cultures across the world: “the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern....: a separation from the world, a penetration to some sort of power, and a life-enhancing return” (28).

Campbell noted that while narratives didn't have all the stages that he identified, but that they did follow what he called the "nuclear unit of the monomyth" (23): the pattern of departure, initiation and return, believing that the reason cultures across the globe shared these features was rooted in their respective initiation rites where a child metaphorically leaves their community and comes back an adult. However, the psychological or sociological reasons as to why the monomyth is a recurring pattern across the narratives of the globe is irrelevant to this paper. What does matter is that it is a pattern and that on some level, sociologically or psychologically, it appeals to us no matter the medium.

We see this in modern culture with Christopher Vogler, who originally wrote a seven page memo called "A Practical Guide to The Hero with a Thousand Faces" when he was working as a story consultant for Disney and then eventually developed it into a book, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. In adapting *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to facilitate the writing process in film, Vogler argued that "Stories built on the model of the Hero's Journey have an appeal that can be felt by everyone, because they [the stories in question] well up from a universal source in the shared unconscious and reflect universal concerns"(5). However, some stories find popularity solely in certain cultures.

Robert Jewett and John Jewett Lawrence first explored the concept of the American monomyth, defining it as a monomyth that shares characteristics with the classical monomyth but has characteristics that are inherently characteristic of American narratives in their book *The American Monomyth*. They would later expand on this concept in *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Their argument was that while the classical monomyth derived from rites of passage common to cultures across the globe, the American monomyth "derives from tales of redemption", secularizing "the Judeo-Christian redemption dramas that have arisen on American

soil, combining elements from the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil” (xii). While Campbell derived the monomyth from the classical myths across the globe, Jewett and Lawrence derived the American monomyth from popular films such as *Death Wish*, *Jaws*, *Dirty Harry*, *Walking Tall* and the Star Trek franchise—i.e. the Judeo-Christian redemption dramas. My focus, however, is on the American monomythic hero, who they identify as:

“distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task and extraordinary powers....originates outside the community he is called to save and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner” (47)

According to Jewett and Lawrence, the American monomythic hero falls into two categories and they use protagonists such as Captain Kirk of *Star Trek*, Paul Kersey of *Death Wish*, Buford Pusser of *Walking Tall*, and Martin Brody of *Jaws*, to exemplify the category they’ve entitled as the Violent Redeemer, the hero that has come to epitomize the narratives welcomed by the masses and even appears in movies depicting teachers, such as *187*. In *187*, Samuel Jackson portrays Trevor Garfield, a teacher that after being assaulted and stabbed with a knife by a student, moves to Los Angeles and begins substituting. Like the place of previous employment, he’s faced with lack of student motivation and gang violence. Even so, Garfield is determined to “redeem” this community of students– even if it means culling those that put their own desires before the educational needs of the many. After a series of escalating incidents between him and student named Cesar, Garfield resorts to drugging him, cutting off a finger, and asking if he, the student, is done by writing the question on the severed digit. When another student, Benny (who had defied Garfield in class and had been threatening a female teacher who

Garfield had been growing close to), shows up dead, it is implied that Garfield murdered him. Ultimately, Garfield submits to Cesar's game of Russian Roulette in an effort to teach him the futility of his gangster mindset. In doing so, Garfield embodies the Violent Redeemer of the American monomyth. He is an outsider to the Los Angeles community since he originates from the East Coast, much like Captain Kirk is to the alien communities he redeems in episode after episode or Martin Brody is to the community of Amity Island. His methods for bringing order (read redemption) to the community of students are disapproved by the community's rules of discipline even though the administration, the closest correlation to a democratic institution, is powerless to handle the problem themselves; no school board has ever approved lopping off the fingers of problematic students or culling the herd by permanently removing defiant and threatening students. He's also sexually segmented, meaning that he refrains from sexual activity; even though he grows close to the female teacher, they never consummate their relationship and when a promising student attempts to repay his kindness by stripping naked to sleep with him, he firmly declines. Finally, he has pure motivations and is convinced of the righteousness of his actions; when confronted by the female teacher, he proudly stands by his violent decisions. He is so committed to the conclusion that there was no other alternative that he willingly waits for Cesar to confront him over his decision and risks his life—and ultimately not only loses, but fails in his goal—to make a difference in the life of Cesar.

However, most films portraying teachers don't feature a Violent Redeemer like *187*. Lawrence and Jewett identified another common embodiment of the American monomythic hero, the Heidi Redeemer, named after the female protagonist from *Heidi*, whose "means of redemption....are psychologically and religiously manipulative rather than violent"(74). Save for the means of redeeming the community, the Heidi Redeemer still fits the paradigm of the

American monomythic hero: “The unselfish redeemer, lacking in any sexual consciousness, achieves marvelous solutions through which she restores Edenic happiness and everyone lives happily ever after” (74). This is exactly who we see with Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*, Ron Clark in *The Ron Clark Story*, and Erin Gruwell in *Freedom Writers*. In all three cases the protagonists are sexually segmented: all scenes portraying Jaime Escalante with his wife are sexually chaste, Ron Clark never develops any kind of a romantic relationship with anyone and Erin Gruwell ultimately loses the romantic relationship she did have with her husband in her attempt to redeem her community of students. In all three cases the protagonists are outsiders: Jaime Escalante is different from the other Hispanics portrayed in the film and a new teacher; Ron Clark is a recent arrival from a Midwestern setting to New York; Erin Gruwell leaves Newport Beach to teach in Long Beach. In all three cases the protagonists have been given a redemptive task no one believes is possible—to make a group of unwilling, unmotivated class of students succeed. In all three cases the protagonists have extraordinary powers as evidenced by their ability to succeed with unorthodox teaching methods where all others have failed. And in all three cases the protagonists have pure motivations and have no need to undergo character development: Jaime Escalante wants nothing more than for everyone in his class to pass the AP Calculus class; Ron Clark wants nothing more than for everyone in his class to pass the state test; Erin Gruwell wants nothing more than for everyone in her class to succeed and finish high school instead of dropping out. Ultimately, all three of them are morally infallible.

Now in presenting Lawrence’s and Jewett’s conclusion that the American monomythic hero was unrealistic, I want to make it clear that I am not casting suspicion on the historical validity of the actual figures and transpired events that some of these narratives are supposedly depicting; what I am focusing on is the narrative itself, on the portrayal of the educational hero

and the manner in which it is presented to the audience. The criticism that follows applies to both the Violent Redeemer and Heidi Redeemer and it is that he/she ultimately offers “vigilantism without lawlessness, sexual repression without resultant perversion and moral infallibility without the use of intellect” (196), implying that “if superheroes were present, they would solve a vast array of problems quickly and painlessly” (83). Ultimately, what’s worse is their impact on the audience because “Those who identify with the redeemer figures and seek to emulate their feats in real life will find that targets of redemption are not as easy to change” (83). These members of the audience who want to emulate these redeemer figures are taught by these heroes (educational or otherwise) “not to place their cards on the table, not to admit their own emotional needs....that they require no growth or adjustment to adversity” (84). In other words, the educational heroes as portrayed in these films teach us that the ends justify the means (see the lengths to which these educators go to in order to redeem their respective communities of students), that it is necessary to channel our sexual energies into the redemptive task at hand (since none of our educational heroes are sexually active and succeed in their redemptive task, the implication is that sexual abstinence is necessary for success), that reaching students so that they can begin to succeed when they have previously failed is simply a matter of effort (the various communities of students succeed because their respective educational heroes try harder than anyone else had before their arrival to the community) and that successful teachers all have pure intentions and are morally infallible.

This is, of course, problematic.

Now, again, I am not disputing the real life events that form the basis of some of these narratives. What I am disputing is the pedagogical function of these narratives. People cannot/don’t operate outside the democratic process of law and then claim to be doing so solely

for the good of the community. And while some people do find it necessary to ignore their sex life in order to achieve their goals, that does not mean that their experience is the rule or precedent that others must follow in order to succeed. Success is not a matter of trying hard enough—it is entirely possible and unfortunately probable that one can do one's best and still fail. And finally, part of being human means being morally fallible—that sometimes we have noble pursuits for less than nobler reasons.

One attempt at a compromise between an ideal portrayal of teachers and a realistic rendition is seen in Will Silver from *You Deserve Nothing* by Alexander Maksik. Will in many ways is Heidi Redeemer, inspiring change even in one of his most problematic students (Colin) and urging his students to challenge the establishments that are their upbringing, families and respective cultures. Further reinforcing the fact that Will is a Heidi Redeemer and not a Violent Redeemer is when Will fails to physically confront a protester heckling some Jewish students on the streets of Paris and it is an interesting commentary by Maksik on our pop culture and what we expect from our heroes in that Will's failure to be a Violent Redeemer is what disappoints some of the male students that he has inspired. However, Maksik plays with the role of the Heidi Redeemer by taking Silver's means of inspiration (read redemption of his community of students) to its logical conclusion. Will inspires his students through broad strokes of existentialism, urging them to live life passionately; a problem arises, though, when his passion is sparked by a student. I believe it would go too far to say that Will's role as a Heidi Redeemer is flawed; even in his illicit relationship with a student, Marie, he is attentive to her needs, putting them before his own. This can be deduced when he lets her choose the course of action when she finds out that she is pregnant and then stays by her side, comforting her throughout the

entire ordeal.⁷ Far from simply casting Will as a flawed character, I believe that Maksik instead turned the concept of the Heidi Redeemer on its head by taking what makes Will a Heidi Redeemer and using that to cause his downfall. Maksik then keeps Will's heroic status intact by giving him a strong sense of integrity; Will never admits to having done wrong, he refuses to. He keeps his silence, stares back at his accusers before walking away.

Steps Yet to Come

Now I first stumbled on the monomyth concept while browsing articles on Wikipedia out of boredom and in doing so, was startled to find aspects of the monomyths echoed in my work. The narrative begins when the narrator reluctantly enters the world of teaching. Supernatural aid comes in the form of his father, who propels him into this world. The threshold guardian turns out to be a student. After completing the five chapters that comprise the creative part of this thesis, I mapped the monomythic elements and even made suggestions for where the story could go⁸:

- **Departure/Separation**
 1. **Call to Adventure** = Dad suggests that the narrator should teach
 2. **Refusal of the Call** = not so much refusal as reluctance
 3. **Supernatural Aid** = God? Could also be Dad. In the narrator's mind taken the physical role of God
 4. **Crossing of the First Threshold** = first year teaching/ meeting Craig

⁷ An alternate interpretation is that he chose to let her decide to avoid shouldering the guilt of making the decision.

⁸ Whatever isn't in the thesis is marked by an asterisk

5. **Belly of the Whale** = 2nd year teaching, when the narrator becomes fully enmeshed in teaching
- **Initiation**
 1. **Road of Trials** = dealing with parents, children specifically as a teacher
 2. **Meeting with the Goddess** = date with Jenny
 3. **Woman As Temptress** = Mireya, later the prostitute serving as a proxy for Mireya
 4. **Atonement with the Father** = moving out of his father's house, establishing himself on his own; later, confessing at his father's headstone*
 5. **Apotheosis** = giving in to his sinful desires is a form of death for the narrator; ergo, the opposite of apotheosis
 6. **The Ultimate Boon** = knowledge of who he truly is
 - **Return**
 1. **Refusal of the Return** = narrator doesn't feel that he's worth loving, worth being a part of the community*
 2. **The Magic Flight** = NA
 3. **Rescue from Without** = someone will need to rescue the narrator from the feelings of despair, guilt; best structural choice (to bring it full circle) is that this needs to be a student or a former student; a better choice would be to have a community rescue so as to riff on the traditional American monomyth*
 4. **Crossing of the Return threshold** = first actual "date" with Rescuer; date could just be a budding friendship*

5. **Master of Two Worlds** = being both a student and a teacher? A sinner and a saint?*
6. **Freedom to Live** = acceptance of what he has done*

The intent of this structure is twofold – first, to use the design of the monomyth as described by Campbell to appeal to the audience since it is apparently fascinating to the human psyche. Part of my reason for attempting to illustrate the recurring image of darkness in the second chapter of my work is to create the idea that the narrator is in the Belly of the Beast. The reason Jenny is mentioned various times before introducing her to the reader is to build her up and show the reader the pedestal the narrator has placed her on in his mind, the goddess that she is to him. Craig takes on the role of the Threshold Guardian, albeit a less-than-idealistic mentor figure that guides the narrator into the world of teaching. The third chapter details the issues and problems common to teachers, exemplifying the Road of Trials for the narrator. The teenage Mireya is, of course, the Woman as a Temptress. The stage of Apotheosis, though, is where things begin to change. Instead of the moment of transcendence, the narrator undergoes a moment of moral decadence, succumbing to his desire for teenage Mireya by employing the services of a prostitute. This is important because this specific incident sets the narrative apart from others; the narrator actually experiences moral loss instead of just brushing with it; in other words, the narrator doesn't just experience temptation—he gives in to it, setting off a chain of events in both the plot and character arc of the narrator that diverge from other narratives.

This is why the narrator is different from other traditional American monomythic heroes. In studying this recurring figure, I came to agree with Lawrence and Jewett's conclusion and decided to consciously present a corrupted or perverted version of the American monomythic hero so as to avoid its inherently unrealistic nature. The narrator isn't sexually segmented as he

clearly has sexual feelings and desires; although not currently part of the work, the plan is to successfully incorporate this aspect of his. The narrator doesn't originate from outside of the community; while he does appear to do so during his first year of teaching, by the second year he is teaching in the community he was raised in. The Edenic nature of his community isn't threatened by an outside force of evil; in anything, he is the unrealized threat to the community, which also means that the object of his redemptive task lies not with the community but with himself. Although not shown in the present state of my work, I do intend to show the closest equivalent of a democratic institution, the leadership at the narrator's place of employment (the principal, assistant principals, head of HR, etc.) to be incompetent in dealing with the danger to the student community—i.e., the narrator. Additionally, the narrator doesn't have pure motivations like the other American monomythic heroes, Violent and Heidi Redeemers. At best, teaching was a job he didn't want and at worst, it's a job that he only just endures. My intent in doing this is to present a realistic narrator, a person raised to have high moral standards that succumbs to his desires, deviating from his status as an everyman to become the unrealized threat to the community. I believe that the majority of narratives featuring educators, whether they be in film or literature, fit the paradigm of the American monomythic hero with few exceptions such as Teachers.

The second intention in using the monomythic structure is to finalize the transition of the current work from nonfiction to fiction. Currently, the piece is in a state of transition, poised between fiction and nonfiction, which is, frankly, just another way of saying it doesn't work as fiction and there's too much fabrication for it to be nonfiction. There are two breaks for the narrator: the first is when he loses his temper with his Pre-AP students and the second is when he employs the services of an escort to serve as an outlet for his sexual desire for a high school

student. It's not that these incidents are unrealistic (in fact, punching the filing cabinet in a rage actually happened) but rather that there isn't a narrative arc building up to these climaxes. As it is, because it is more nonfiction than fiction, there isn't a sense of rising action preceding them and what I actually have is exposition or set-up for future conflict. Therefore, when the climaxes are presented, they appear to come out of nowhere, inconsistent with what has been before.

What I need to do is focus on the Road of Trials—the monomythic equivalent of the rising action in Freytag's Triangle—and raises the stakes. Janet Burroway, in *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*, describes it as a power struggle, where each time the power shifts from protagonist to antagonist and back again, “the stakes are raised, each battle is bigger, more intense than the last, until (at the crisis moment), one of the two opposing forces manifests its power in a way that the other cannot match” (166). What I have is a semblance of this; each chapter, which focuses on a new student, is supposed to be a new battle where the stakes are raised just ever so slightly till the climax where the narrator gives in to his lust, using the prostitute as a proxy for his former student. But instead of the stakes increasing with each student, the stakes remain the same: loss of job and reputation. With each chapter, the narrator does come closer to this: the first hint of him possibly giving into temptation comes in Chapter Two and the idea was that the events of Chapter Four would leave the narrator vulnerable and therefore more susceptible to the temptation lodged in the recesses of his mind. In the background of all this is the narrator's faith, the result of having been raised in a fundamentalist and conservative Christian tradition and one of my goals is to draw a parallel between the narrator's faith versus his actions and the persona he presents as teacher versus who he is as a person. Ultimately, my end goal is not for the reader to sympathize or identify with the narrator; I do not want the reader to feel that they can step into his shoes or that he is one of them. Rather,

I want the reader to empathize with the narrator, to understand where he's coming from and why he believes and behaves the way he does. Part of the reason I want to do this is because I feel that there is a miscommunication between those with a conservative faith and those who would be the average reader. Readers unlike the narrator, unlike the people who share the narrator's faith, sometimes struggle to understand the guilt welling up within them when they fail to adhere to the tenets of their faith. In other words, I want the reader to understand the narrator's faith.

Therefore the irony here is that I need more deception and less truth in order to shed light on the truths of the human condition that is our sexuality, the roles we play in society and the difference between our faith and our actions. I think Frederick Busch, in "Truth, Lies, Fact, Fiction", made an excellent point when he wrote that "In the writing of fiction, fact and truth are less easy to reconcile....that facts are hardly the truth" (29, 35), leading him to conclude that "fiction is useful when it gets us to some truths" (35), that we then as writers must "Labor to lie well and dream of lying wonderfully" (35). This, then, is where I find myself, four and half years since I first endeavored to become a writer: lying to tell the truth, using the Hero's Journey to bridge the gap between nonfiction and fiction, and realizing that my life, my profession will always be a source, an inspiration for my writing.

After four and a half years, I wouldn't have it any other way.

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CHAPTER I

YOU NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST

The sexual harassment seminar, conducted prior to beginning the school year, is a requirement for all employees, especially for newly-certified 7th grade math teachers like me – basically, it’s my first lesson on being an educator. Raymondville Independent School District has only one building for sixth, seventh, and eighth graders: Myra Green Middle School, a mausoleum of education west of Expressway 83. I take the TX-186 exit that morning and see what I assume to be the county prison, the sun crowning over the horizon and glinting off the dew-tipped barbed wire fence.

I pull into the alley that is the parking lot, the trash bins and homes to my left covered in graffiti and overgrown weeds. The seminar’s held in the library, a room with water-stained ceiling tiles and barred windows. Men and women, most between forty and sixty years old, settle in twos and threes at the tables, sipping their Diet Cokes and their Circle K coffees. The names of past students and couples scar the table surfaces: “JUAN LOVES ROSA”, “DAVID WUZ HERE”, “SOUTHSIDE 4EVA.” No one speaks to me, most likely imagining that I’m someone’s son or nephew.

I don’t care. I don’t want to explain that I’ve never dreamed of teaching or that I’ve never been particularly inspired by *Stand and Deliver* or *The Ron Clark Story*. Instead I sit in the wooden chair, my back to the library doors. Condensation from my non-caffeinated root beer

dampens my fingertips, numbs them. My dad wants teaching for me. It's practical: there will always be kids, there'll always be work. *A todo se acostumbra uno, menos a no comer*, he loves to say, something that gets lost in translation when I tell my friends that the only thing they'll never get used to is not eating. He's right, in a sense; I got used to him. When I graduated from high school at seventeen, I couldn't think of anything to counter his advice or anything better to do and well – he's my dad, *mi `apa*, and good Christian sons don't go against their father's word. Later, when I finished a math major, I suggested foregoing the ceremony commemorating my graduation, or at least the party my father wanted to throw in my – his – honor. Of course, he felt personally insulted. Outside, the sound of the weed-eater being used by the groundskeeper vibrates through the walls, through the windows, reminding me of the four years I spent working with my father in his lawn care service and the two decades he had spent eating grass and choking on the dirt his lawnmowers, trimmers and leaf-blowers spat in the air in order to send me to college.

A todo se acostumbra uno – yeah, maybe.

Displaced air washes over the back of my neck, interrupting my brooding. I think it's vent or one of the fans standing on the shelves, but instead I hear the floor creak behind me – it's a corpulent man, dressed in a flannel shirt and khaki pants, trying to fit himself through the double doors. His bifocals are large, circular panes of glass that magnify his eyes, making them proportionate for his size.

“You're the rookie, right? I'm Craig.” He doesn't bother extending his hand, choosing instead to simply park in the adjacent chair. “Uh, word around town is that you drove into three feet of water on the day of your interview. That shit true?”

I smile and scratch my head, initiating the routine of being good-natured over an act of stupidity that had cost me three thousand dollars. “Yeah. I was being stupid. It was raining so hard I couldn’t see and what I thought was pavement turned out to be water; the street had flooded. Um, ended up having to call home after the principal pulled my car out with his truck.”

“Guess they forgot to teach you that in college, huh?” He snickers to himself, jowls rippling beneath his jaw. “I wouldn’t worry about it if I were you. I had a similar experience a while back.”

“During the storms? You drove your car into a ditch?”

“Not exactly.” He turns to me, smirking, his lips cutting into his fat cheeks. “Drove my truck through the front window of the corner store down the street a few years back. Shit wasn’t my fault, though.”

“You weren’t driving?”

He arches his unkempt eyebrows and shrugs, eyes twinkling behind his glasses. “I admit that I *was* in the driver’s seat. But Destiny was on my lap at the time – and she was an experienced cowgirl if you know what I mean – and so me and my hands were otherwise occupied. Best I figure it, it was all *her* fault.”

Great – now I have a mental picture. I clear my throat and continue: “I take it the police didn’t agree with you.”

“Fuck no. Bastards were jealous I was getting some.” He laughs. “You’re okay, rookie. What’s your name?”

We shake hands, his dwarfing mine. “Uh, believe it or not, it’s Romero – I’m only white by skin color.” I have a feeling that if I give him my first name – Joaquin – he’ll mangle it with his English pronunciation to the point that it sounds like my parents named me after the slang term for masturbation. “So, um, what’s with the seminar? You guys get a lot of sexual harassment cases?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s just the district covering its ass.” He shakes his head, his silver bangs bobbing against his glasses. “Nothing to worry about.”

Craig invited me to lunch, his way, he said, of welcoming me to Myra Green Middle School. Considering my lack of experience as a teacher, I was grateful for the gesture. We ate at Lupita’s Restaurant, hole-in-the-wall, where the quarter-square foot tiles were cracked and a red checkerboard cloth covered every table. The cups filled with salsa was made up of too much tomato and were complemented by greasy, stale platters of chips. He ordered the cheese enchilada plate with a side of *chile relleno*, three soggy tortillas wrapped around strips of white cheese oozing out the ends were covered in maroon *mole*; I smelled the cinnamon used in the sauce. The poblano pepper in the *chile relleno* was a sorry excuse of one, a miniature version in which very little ground beef could fit. I stuck with some nachos. It was here he invited me to Mini-Con, a party sponsored by the Anime Club he ran that was going to be taking place next week.

I show up at eight o’clock, the sun glaring from just behind the nearby homes. According to Craig, the old armory had been renovated into a gym so the city wouldn’t have to spend money building a new one. Students mill about, lugging Xbox 360’s, PS2’s, and a few

Nintendo Cubes, cables and wires trailing behind them like the tendrils of mechanized jellyfish. I make my way to where Craig guards eight projectors.

“Romero, glad you could make it. Hey, come here. I want to introduce you to the Threesome – just don’t tell `em I call `em that.”

The Threesome is what Craig calls the three members who form the core of the Anime Club, two eighth graders and a seventh grader whose zeal for anime and drawing is unmatched on campus. We find them in front of large screen, one of them in a chair and manipulating a three foot long controller studded with buttons and dials and topped off with dual joysticks. A green HUD overlays the digital landscape on the large screen, readouts displaying ammunition counts, heat output, range of targets, damage percentages, available weapons, and a mini-map in the corner. The seventh grader sits on the next table, dangling her legs back and forth like a toddler on a swing, her sketchpad at her side.

“*You* have a copy of *Steel Battalion*?” I turn to Craig. “Where the hell did you find it?”

“Met a guy at Comic-Con last year. Bought the last one he had.”

I glance back at the screen. “The detail is amazing.” The HUD goes fuzzy as static engulfs the view. “What just happened?”

“He died.” He takes a swig of his diet coke. “City-boy here wasn’t watching the heat output and the nuclear reactor powering his mech overheated, went critical. He blew himself up by being stupid.”

“Still looks like fun.”

He smiles and motions for me to follow him. “Why do you think I bought it?”

A group of students pass by us in what I think is Halloween costumes while we stop by the pizzas. As some of them introduce themselves, Craig explains that these students are cosplaying, dressing as their favorite anime character. One wears an olive green sleeveless hunting jacket over his black shirt and cargo pants, a black bandana pulled over his left eye; his sandals don't seem to fit with his overall costume, but he assures me that its true to character. Another Hispanic boy, hair dyed blonde and gelled to stand tall over his head, wears blue boots with yet another sleeveless orange jumpsuit, held tight against his portly body with a blue sash. A teenage girl wears the ever popular Catholic schoolgirl outfit. I gesture toward her. "Um, I know I'm new here and all, Craig, but I'm pretty sure students aren't supposed to dress like that."

"No shit, Sherlock; that's why I invited you here. As I'm sure you've noticed, I'm getting old. Knees are shot, can't support my weight when I shit. I think you would be a good replacement for me. I'm too old, too fat, too close to retirement to force these kids to follow the rules. You're young; the kids will like that because they can connect with you a lot more than with an old asshole like me." He stuffs a small slice into his mouth.

"I'm not sure about this, Craig. The kids have been here a week and I still don't have a clue about how to run a classroom, much less a club. This whole teaching thing, everything that implies, isn't something I want to rush into." A robotic contraption made from plywood, PVC and duct tape pattering around catches my eye. A boy nearby wrestles with a large radio controller, biting his lower lip as he struggles to make the robot pick up a Coke can. "What's that?"

Craig burps and wipes the offending gas from his nose. “Um, you see the high-school teacher over there? He runs the Robotic Club and this thing here won several regional awards, so we bring it to inspire the kids.” He stops to look at me. “The usual shit.”

“Shit?”

Hazel eyes un-focus and his don't-give-a-shit demeanor fades, the corduroy shirt rippling in the breeze generated by the giant fans whirling by the garage-like doors. His breath leaves him and he seems to sink into himself, defeated. Swaths of skin stretch and wrinkle as muscles and tendons alternately tense and relax; a fly landing on the bristles of his eyebrow brings him back to attention. He smiles, lips pulling back into his jowls, and stares out by the open garage-door frames where several students, including the Threesome, lean against the greased rails. “The truth, Romero, is that most of these little shits are gonna end up with nothing but a dirty needle jammed in their vein or selling themselves for the same fucking needle. What, you think this donkey show changes anything? So they get worked up about it – big fucking deal. A month later they're back balls-deep in shit. All this club does, the only thing that fucking robot does is cover our ass with the school board so the district can say that we're trying to show the kids that there's something better. It's all a bunch of shit, Romero – what your people would call *puro mierda*.”

I glance out the open doors, settling my gaze on one of the abandoned homes of the neighborhood and wonder if the seventh grade member of the Threesome or the others milling around us, enjoying the breeze easing in through the building, can hear our conversation. “That why you want to quit?”

He shakes his head, grey-speckled bangs bobbing across his ample forehead. “Jus` want you to know what you getting into. Everyone’s feeding you a bunch of bullshit right now, saying that you get a chance to make a difference in these kids’ futures. And what no one wants to admit is that three years from now none of these kids are gonna remember us in any significant way.”

I can’t argue with him; I couldn’t remember any of my middle school teachers. I say nothing, mulling over this bit of reality that no one had mentioned. Meanwhile, a sensation like spider legs crawling across my arm tickles the hairs on my neck, warms my ears. Anna, a sophomore parading as a Catholic school girl, stares at me, her eyes dancing. She chews on her index finger, the buttons of her white wrinkled blouse undone just enough to reveal her budding cleavage, hanging untucked past the immense belt buckle glinting in the mid-morning light. The short plaid skirt barely makes it to her knees and would have revealed more if it hadn’t been for the tall socks and scuffed Doc Martens. Realizing she’s caught, Anna smiles, braces glinting, and promptly remarks that I would make a cute boyfriend before striding away.

I wonder if this is why some teachers drink.

About a week later I go ahead and invite the Anime Club to bring their lunch and eat in my room instead of the cafeteria. It was something my high school English teacher, Ms. Hauff, used to do with a few select students, current and old. And like she used to, I sit at my desk, nibbling my ham sandwich, chips; granted, I’m reading the latest in the video game industry off a website instead of the literary magazines that used to clutter her desk. The students trickle in twos and threes, glancing every five seconds at me, unsure as to why a teacher would allow them

to do this. Every single one of them is a nerd, evident in their plush pubescent bodies, layers of baby fat just beginning to balloon over their belts, in the unkempt hair that hangs over their faces and that hasn't been touched with a comb, gel or hair spray. It helps that I identify with these kids that are now settling into desks, grouping them together to facilitate eating and talking; the resentment they feel for the popular kids speaks to my own, buried in the memories of my psyche, resurrecting it. I toss back the bottle of root beer, savoring the taste of vanilla, relishing the emotions restored anew. I guess I finally get to wreak my revenge on the football players and cheerleaders of my past – albeit on the next generation that has taken their place. And for now, I foster those that have taken mine.

There is one, though, that sticks out in this group of non-conformists, the seventh grader of the Threesome. She's sitting apart, but not alone. Just off to the side of a group of two eighth grade boys and a girl; enough to be part of the group, enough to not be bothered while she draws, knees pushed and propped beneath her. The roots of her hair are black like the Mexican ancestors that came before her but she has hidden them beneath a shade of red, an incandescent burn rivaling the fluorescent lights above. Unlike the other female students, most of her hair's pulled into a ponytail, only a few long bangs falling across the left side of her face. Eyelashes sag beneath the weight of eye liner. There's no other makeup that I can tell. The mandatory yellow shirt and khaki pants limit her fashionable possibilities, but she makes up lost ground by covering both wrists in numerous bands, bracelets, and bangles, covering both arms in twin flares of looping neon color and sheathing the white of her Converse sneakers in lines and lines of unreadable script. She seems oblivious to the general buzz of conversation.

I toss the trash left over from my lunch, notice the time and start herding the students out, organizing them to restore the desks to their original position and dispose properly of their trash.

Some thank me for allowing them this haven from the cruelty that is the cafeteria, others simply walk out. I go back to my desk to gather the worksheets for incoming class. We're going over long division today, a skill I was surprised to find that they didn't have. Truth is, they don't even have basic multiplication skills, which sort of makes division a moot point; it's rare to find a student that doesn't add repeatedly to solve single-digit multiplication. Furthermore, long division is a process derived from the concept that is division, which means that it's not enough to know conceptually what division is – it's imperative to know the steps of the actual algorithm.

I'm starting the projector and document scanner when the false redhead speaks up.

“Mr. Romero? Thanks for letting us eat here.”

I can't help noticing she's clutching her notebook and binder against her chest the way toddlers grasp teddy bears for comfort. “You're welcome. I figured you guys in the Anime Club would enjoy eating somewhere else besides the cafeteria.”

She takes a step backwards, towards the door. “We're used to it. Can we keep on coming though?”

I slip my left hand in my pocket, rub the back of my neck with the other. “I don't see why not. As long as you behave in here, you're more than welcome.”

She bobs her head. “I'm Isis, by the way.”

“Cool name. Don't know anyone else who has that.” I point at her notebook. “You draw a lot?”

The bell rings for class and she waits for it to stop before answering. “Yeah. But I suck at it. Can't color worth – ”

“Hey, leave the language at home, ok?” I grin to ease the sting of scolding her. “Look, you gotta get to class now, but if you ever draw something that you think is worth it, let me know and I’ll get it laminated for you, ok? Drawings’ll last longer that way.”

Again, she bobs her head in agreement and leafs through her notebook before tearing a page out. She mumbles a thank you as I take it from her hand and leaves before I have a chance to look at it; my students are coming in and they are my priority, so I just slip it, face down, in my desk. The day goes by, ends and I’m grabbing my things when I remember Isis’s drawing. The texture is typical of generic sketchbooks, hard cardstock that’s rough to my fingertips. Lines of graphite blur from faint to solid, materializing from the page into a depiction of myself, sitting at my desk, absently typing away at the school desktop. It’s not realistic; my features have simplified, drawn as they would have been if I’d been a character in a manga. I recognize the rolled up sleeves, slightly loosened tie and undone collar button, the scar on my right eyebrow.

Remarkable considering I never noticed her looking at me.

After spending Mini-Con with Craig, I don’t really see much of him for a while. Days come, days go as my students and I fall into the routine of ineptly-taught lessons, every day exemplifying the gap between my somewhat intuitive understanding of basic mathematics and their lack of deductive reasoning. My students and I are still testing the limits, toeing the line that had been drawn between my desk and theirs. They keep pushing, testing how many rules they can break to see how much they can get away with; I keep disregarding the consequences I have warned them about, hoping like a naïve, bleeding-heart liberal that bestowed kindness will transform into obedience.

As Craig should've said, it was *pura mierda*.

One student is mandated by the courts to meet her parole officer every Thursday for ninety minutes after school because of the multiple fights she has been involved in the year before; four months later, she breaks her parole officer's fingers when the poor woman tries to confiscate her cell phone for recording fights in the restrooms. At one point, a male student of mine gets up and flips another boy's desk over, pins him to the floor and proceeds to kick him repeatedly in the head; even after my student sends him to the hospital, administration refuses to press criminal charges. One student vaults out the window another had opened. We catch a student shotgunning a blunt in the restroom, inhaling the vapors from the lit end; again, administration doesn't press charges and therefore he never leaves my class.

So, of course, administration thought the perfect way to reward this behavior, and others like it, was to host a school dance in the cafeteria during school hours so that instead of instruction that they may or may not need, they could bump and grind against each other beneath the strobe lights and possibly make out in a dark corner. A few students were kept behind as punishment but the number was inconsequential considering how many really didn't deserve to attend; several teachers pulled the short stick and had to watch them. For once, God altered my chances and instead I'm a chaperone standing off to a side, watching the masses of minors jump and jive and flail their arms and legs in rhythmic, spastic seizures. Most are sweating, their bodies flushed with adrenaline and unknown controlled substances; the air's stale and stifling, making it difficult to breathe.

I hate it.

I'm standing up against the wall, arms folded, my left bicep cupped in my right hand, the left clenched in a fist and out of sight. With each pulse of the hip-hop cadence, my heart beats back stronger till I can feel it reverberating against my rib cage. The veins in my forehead fill with blood till they flare blue underneath against my pale skin.. Seeing these boys who think they're men, these girls who think they're women reminds me of the same kind of idiots I shared my secondary education with who were as hormonally ahead of me as I was academically ahead of them. Just like those jocks and unrequited crushes of my past, these are too busy prancing and preening, contending for status within their own insipid pecking order to actually do anything worth crowing about; a small crowd has formed around one of their own that is pulling off some imitation of a dance routine they're familiar with. Speakers vibrate with each bass-reinforced beat, the music exploding in tempo over the crowd of gawky preteens. If the number of students standing by speakers or sitting on the stage is any indication, none of them care if they lose their hearing or they're well already on their way to doing so. I pan across the cafeteria, watching the mass of students ebb and flow from the kitchen to the stage covered in Halloween decorations and back, notice that the way Isis leans against the folded lunch tables is a reflection of me. The black hoodie she's pulled around herself puzzles me till I realize she's standing directly beneath the vent. If I've pegged administration correctly, that thing's probably dispensing cold air like an open fire hydrant gushing water during a summer jamboree; granted, we don't do jamborees here in the Valley cause we Hispanics prefer *quinceañeras* that announce to the world that the 15-year-old girl next door is open for business and besides, water's too scarce to simply let it run on the street of baked asphalt and *caliche*. She's pulled the hood over her head against the school dress code and zipped the sweater up, melting in with the shadows, barely visible when the strobe lights wash over her in greens and reds.

Isis notices my attitude on my face, in my folded arms and hanging brow, and begins to walk over to me. It takes a while. She struggles to navigate through the chaos of this makeshift rave; like a kayak being pushed around by the rapids of a river, she's pushed around by the more popular, and therefore more powerful, currents. She's not short in comparison to her classmates, but she hunches, never looking up from beneath her hood, flinching back and forth to keep their arms or bodies from touching her. She refuses to relent and finally slumps against the wall, adjacent to me.

“What’s wrong, Isis?” I glance at her from the corner of my eye. “I thought everyone in the Anime Club liked this sort of thing.”

She snickers. “I’m not good with crowds, sir. I just don’t like being with a lot of people, you know?”

“You’re not the only one.” I permit myself a grin. “When I was in high school they would do something like this in the gym for perfect attendance and stuff and I’d always be at the top of the bleachers, as far away as I could be. Truth is, I didn’t really like my classmates.”

“So you were a loner?” She tries to look at me, but it’s hard when the hood doesn’t swivel with her head. She pulls it off.

“No Anime Club when I was growing up.” I thought of my Christian upbringing, the reason behind my father’s conclusion that I shouldn’t participate in UIL, the University Interscholastic League, or other academic interests. “Besides, I didn’t really fit with the other nerds.”

“You were a nerd?” She’s smirking, barely getting the words out as she giggles and snorts.

“Isis, I got a degree in math, I have more than a passing knowledge of anime, comics and I have a clinically-diagnosed addiction to Star Wars that my family is unaware of. Asking if I’m a nerd is like asking if a flood’s wet.”

She laughs at the small joke that most don’t. “You don’t look it.”

“I’m a teacher now; I have to pass for human. Traded the Converse for the dress shoes, the jeans for the khaki pants. You’ll do something similar when you get a job after graduating from college.” I tug at my tie, pulling it off and wrap it around my left knuckles, the slackened pressure around my neck a welcome sensation. “You just wait and see.”

She loses her smile, swallows hard. I listen to the music while she waits to answer. “Sir, you honestly think anyone here is going to college?”

“I think that it’s possible for whoever is willing to work hard enough for it. At least that’s what I was taught.” I think back to the general trend of behavior, the lack of returned homework assignments. I sigh, turn to look at her. “It depends on how bad you want it, on what you’re willing to do to get it.”

She looks out at the crowd, adrift in thoughts, memories. She clears her throat before speaking. “Sir? What if you mess up your life, if it’s just too late? My brother got his girlfriend pregnant, had to drop out of high school. You think he’s gonna be able to go to college?”

I’m not strong enough to tell her the truth, that the decision to go through one set of doors in this life is to close a million others, so I nod my head and lie. Here, under the flurry of

flashing beams of flecked lights, beside the throng of middle school students, thralls to the throb of PG-13 club music, I can't tell her that I don't believe in second chances, that I don't believe in tomorrow. I can't tell her that if all you do is draw and doodle in the margins or write plain lines of standard angst-ridden teenage poetry – I can't tell her that that isn't enough to succeed in this life, achieve your dreams.

If it was, I wouldn't be here teaching.

My first year teaching is also my first in grad school; I like to say that I'm math teacher non-extraordinaire by day, aspiring writer by night. Despite the fact that I had majored in mathematics, towards the end I realized that I enjoyed my creative writing classes more than modern algebra and arithmetic theory and so I enrolled to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing. Because I don't want to risk not performing at my job, I'm only taking one class right now – Form and Theory of Creative Non Fiction.

Tonight finds me whittling away at the school-issued laptop, going over my classmates' notes and nicking away at the rough draft they critiqued yesterday, a piece I'd entitled "Cutting Grass". I struggle to illustrate the relationship between my father and me since I still live at home; what reinforces the idea of biting the master's hand is that the piece revolves around the time I nearly severed his thumb with a lawnmower.

My room's a mess. Six-packs of apple soda lie next to my shelf; the lower shelves contain teetering stacks of DVDs while the rest flow over with pairs of shoes. Clothes that are supposed to be in the hamper remain instead at the foot of the oscillating fan. Power cords for the laptop, external hard drive, and CD burner crisscross the floor, making the footing

treacherous. The TV's on and I'm watching *Batman Begins* for the seventh time; at this point, the movie is nothing more than background noise. The same goes for the rap playlist composed of Jay-Z, B.o.B., Eminem, Kanye West, and various guest artists playing off the laptop. Pillows and sheets aren't arranged on my bed, twisted together instead, resembling nothing. Unwashed dishes remain where they were last left; atop a chair, a table, the floor. Various issues of *GamePro*, *GameInformer*, and *EGM* decorate the floor.

Not much has changed since high school.

No one bothers me, even though I'm still living with my family, leaving me alone with the opinions of my newfound writing colleagues. Not everyone liked my first effort, despite the amount of polish I had layered over each sentence, phrase and word. Some of them felt I wasn't original in my portrayal of my father as the stereotypical Hispanic holding a leaf blower. Did they miss the part where this was a nonfiction class? I can't change the truth – my Hispanic father mows lawns for a living and for a short while, so did I. So what if it's a common Latino stereotype? Haven't people figured out that stereotypes come from somewhere?

My cell phone goes off as I'm pondering these questions, wondering what, if anything, I should change. I don't recognize the number, but needing a break, I answer it and ask who's calling.

The voice emerging from the receiver cracks, trembles in pitch, the words barely coming through. "Um, is this Joaquin Romero?"

"Yes, this is Joaquin. Who is this?" I set the stack of my critiqued manuscripts aside, rub the sleep out of my eyes.

“It’s me, sir. You know, from school.”

What? “The nonfiction class? How did you get my number?”

“No, sir. From school. The Anime Club.”

Isis. I stop breathing, try to recall if I had left my cell lying where students could access it and come up blank. How she knew my full name is easy; I haven’t made an effort to hide it. But my number? Did she overhear me when I gave it to my mentoring teacher – her teacher – so we could work on lesson plans during the weekend or when I gave it to the secretaries after I forgot to turn in my employee information card and she was in the office? I pull my cell phone from my ear and stare at it; faintly, I can still hear her calling for me: Sir?

Sir?

While most of the student population of Raymondville is nothing to brag about, the faculty’s the complete opposite. My co-workers shelter me, harbor me, the rookie in his first year out at sea. The secretaries in the main office cover for me whenever I miss a deadline. The assistant principal and my mentor check on me, encouraging me not to quit mid-year like my predecessor. It’s Estela, the counselor, who helps and watches over me the most and it’s because she does that that I choose to tell her about Isis’s phone call. Sometimes I think the truth is that Estela counsels me more than she does the students.

Her office is a small room snuggled in the back of the administrative building. Today a woman in her forties sits outside, a web of wrinkles radiating over her face; red-shot veins fractal outward from her Hispanic eyes. A whorl of hair, worried and worn, scars her face, accentuating

the frown warping her lips; a *chongo* pulls the rest of her frayed hair into a disheveled bouquet behind her head. Hands clutch one another, feet tuck underneath her; her hunched back makes her as small as possible. Next to her sits a girl, fifteen or sixteen, tops. She perks up at the sight of me, pulls her lime green sweater tighter around her thin form; legs in jeans cross and stretch out before her, finishing in scuffed Converse sneakers. Before I step into Estela's office, the girl's green eyes catch mine and trigger a memory of a plaid skirt and flashing braces.

"Please tell me that I've been fired," I say after Estela waves me in and I close the door. I'm uncertain if parent and daughter had a prior appointment.

She leans from behind her glass-paned desk and smiles in that particular way when she's about to deliver bad news, sort of like the time she informed me that the one student that was actually passing was going to transfer to Lyford; behind her, a calendar of November hangs off the wall. "What's wrong, Mr. Romero? Another student jumped out of the window?"

I scratch off the wood finish of the chair, frown when too much wood crams under my fingernail. "A student called me last night. One of the girls from the Anime Club."

Estela pushes herself back in her seat, adjusting herself to the news. The smile's gone, her eyes unwavering as she stares at me. "Did you talk with her?"

"No. Once I realized it was Isis, I hung up. Figured it was best if I said nothing to her and something to you."

She releases the breath she's been holding, rattles the pen in her hand back and forth. "I know Isis. Any idea how she got your number?"

“Not a clue.” I keep still despite sinking down the seat a bit, inhaling slowly so not to shift much. I imagine a neutral blank is the best appearance I can assume in a moment like this.

She pulls a Post-It note and scribbles on it. “I’ll talk to her, tell her if she calls again that we’ll file a restraining order.” She sets the note to a side and leans forward again, clasps her hands together. “Speaking of which, Romero: did you notice the woman and girl outside?”

“Yeah. The girl looked familiar, but I’m not too sure from where.” I push myself back up in my chair, relieved that my reason for being here was over. “Why do you ask?”

“They spoke with me this morning; right now, we’re just waiting for the police chief to show up.” She interlaces her fingers, settles in her chair.

I arch an eyebrow. “Why are you telling me this, Estela?”

“It’s Craig.” Estela inverts her smile. “The girl’s pressing charges of sexual molestation against him, claiming he touched her while she was a student here.”

I pause, trying to process the gravity of the information. “You sure you should be telling me this? I mean, I know that Isis calling me is kinda in the same vein of topics, but –”

“The girl used to be part of the Anime Club; even if Isis hadn’t called you, your students are still going to have questions, so I want you to be prepared. And since she claims to have met you, I’d consider this a warning to be careful.”

“That’s why I’m here, Estela.”

“And you made the right choice. Make sure no one has an excuse to accuse you of anything, Romero.” Estela frowns, tapping her fingers on the keyboard. “Buy a ring. Pretend to be married; it might help.”

She wishes me luck as I leave her office. As I pass the mother and daughter that are still waiting on my way out, the teenager grins again, somewhat sadly, braces just peeking through pursed lips; synapses fire in my head and I remember.

It’s Anna, the girl who thought I’d make a cute boyfriend.

Craig’s arrested the day after I speak with Estela, held at the Willacy County Detention Center. Because of my association with him, because the students already knew me from our sessions at lunch, the Anime Club officially becomes my responsibility; I had already been helping out for a while, allowing the Club to meet in my room after school under Craig’s direction, occasionally making suggestions or guiding them into new activities. The hands-on approach was more than what the kids were used to; they had been content to just hang out and Craig had been content to let them. The activities have ranged from attempting to learn Japanese to drawing our own mangas; for some of the lazier nerds, this was an unwelcome change. However, inspired by kendo, I came up with one activity they all liked.

We started by spending an afternoon sawing off pieces of PVC about five to six feet; then, we sawed pieces of floater tube that were about a foot and a half shorter. Once we were done doing that, we shoved the piece of PVC through the tubing, with the extra feet of PVC serving as a handle. Several of the students topped off the tubing with hot glue in order to keep the PVC within the tubing and reduce the risk of cutting someone with the tip of PVC. The rest

of us wrapped the foot and half or so of PVC left at one end in duct tape, effectively making it the hilt of our kendo stick. Craig had simply watched us, made suggestions from time to time. By the time we were done, though, we resembled hobo-Jedi with our neon blue, pink and yellow Styrofoam swords.

The best part came when we'd spar after school. We'd create a ring with the desks and allow two people to duel each other. Glasses had to be taken off and both had to stop once I intervened; I used in particular a blue paddle whose length I was comfortable with to bring the practice duel to an end whenever necessary. Limbs struck were rendered immobile and once three strikes had been landed, the match was over. For all their ineptitude in overall athletics, the kids involved were actually very good. The ring forced them to stop backpedaling, and make a stand, feet planted and arms parrying to defend. Everyone had their favorite weapons lay-out. David preferred to use a one handed sword in the right hand and a dagger in the left whereas Kathy always chose a two-handed blue. Isis rarely joined, preferring instead to curl up in a desk and practice drawing manga.

Today she chooses to change that. Considering that it's only been three days since I told Estela about Isis's phone call, I doubt it's a coincidence.

Since no one answered me earlier when I asked why they didn't want to spar, I go ahead and break my rule against participating; considering that our little afterschool exercise program is most likely illegal (or at the very least, inappropriately dangerous), I hadn't thought it prudent to actually get involved. I can tell, though, that Isis is upset; knuckles push against her skin from where she grips the kendo stick and feet are spread apart, grounding her, grounding her anger and giving it power. Disheveled hair, barely parted in the middle, falls across her face more than

usual. She makes the first move, swinging from her right to cut my left arm. I parry it over my head and to my right, allowing me to side-step, giving me more room to maneuver; I've underestimated the turmoil within her. I barely block the next blow that would have cleaved me from shoulder to ribcage had her weapon actually been real. I sidestep to her left, slacks inhibiting the movement of my legs, and tighten my grasp on my kendo stick, the duct tape gluing itself to my hands, preparing myself for her advance.

“Isis.” I speak calmly, trying to calculate how to resolve this issue discreetly. “What’s wrong?”

Her only answer’s to charge.

I cycle the makeshift, padded sword from left to right, up and down as I block her flurry of strikes; despite her anger, her power, she’s still untrained, still prone to falling into a predictable routine. I parry a slash that would have gutted me and strike back in turn, telegraphed arcs meant to force her to retreat and therefore give myself room. Isis quickly regains her momentum and drives her weapon forward, aiming for my center. I bat the thrust to my right and swing upward, knocking the padded stick out of her hand and catching it in my left.

The match is over.

I turn to face Isis and the other members, kendo sticks in each hand. I smile, try to lighten the mood. “What’s wrong, Isis? Did *Naruto* get canceled?”

Isis looks around, tucking her hair behind her ears; I guess it finally hits her that she’s the center of attention for once. She’s breathing heavy and wipes her eyes before the tears fall.

“You didn’t have to tell her.”

Paddle in hand, I motion for her to take a seat and do so myself atop the desk so that they can't see how nervous this is making me. I focus on keeping my voice from cracking, so I whisper. "You really want to do this here? In front of everyone?"

"They know. I told them." Her tone's defiant, the power she wielded in her hand moments ago now gathering itself in her voice. She refuses to sit down, instead leaning against the wall, eyes tearing and nose sniffing. "All I did was call you and you ratted me out to the counselor. I wanted to trust you and you betrayed me."

I look around; everyone else refuses to look me in the eye. "It's not appropriate to call a teacher, Isis. You know that."

"Mr. Craig would let us." Isis pushes herself off the wall, and folds her arms, making herself smaller and forcing herself to finish. "But you're just fooling yourself if you think you're better than him."

Quiet fills the room as Isis's words reinforce the subdued attitude characterizing the students today; most look away as I watch them to gauge their reactions or simply stare back.

I tap my padded sword against the floor. "So who told you about Mr. Craig?"

"My sister and Anna are friends. And she's told everyone."

Of course. What teenager has the sense to keep shit like that to themselves, right? My chest feels like it's collapsing into itself, my ribcage cracking and compressing from the gravity of Isis's accusation, a black hole that threatens to consume every aspect of my life. I haven't passed the event horizon, though, so I speak while words can still be heard. "Hm. Well, Isis, everyone, let me ask you this: have I hurt ever you?"

No one answers, only shaking their head in silence.

“Have I ever taken advantage of you? Of any of you?”

Again, they only shake their head; some of those that at first refused to look at me finally do so.

“Have I ever gone out of my way to deliberately make your life miserable?”

A few actually answer no.

I set the padded sword aside and finish. “You guys are my responsibility – a responsibility I do not take lightly nor one I abuse. What’s it going to take to understand that?”

They know better than to push the subject and I leave them to do as they used to before we made this game, to simply hang out. Five o’clock rolls by, and parents come in twos and threes to pick up their children. Meanwhile the other students and I clear the mess of empty bags of chips and aluminum cans left behind, putting the desks and materials back.

“A good day, Mr. Romero?” Estela strides in, hands in the pockets of her pant suit. She beams at the leaving parents.

“Good enough. Jose didn’t jump out of my window today, so I’m happy. What brings you around this way?”

She motions to follow her outside my room, out of earshot from my students, her voice hoarse with strain. “It’s Craig. He’s dead.”

“What?”

“He had a heart attack this morning.” She folds her arms. “Coroner says it was a combination of stress and obesity.”

I arch an eyebrow, lick my lips and keep my hands in my pockets. “Getting accused of molesting a kid will do that to you. On the other hand, so will getting caught.”

Estela nods her head, understands that I don’t want her counsel this time. “Just thought you should know, Romero.”

Isis plods out my classroom, cell phone in hand and an older teenager by her side. “Mr. Romero, I’m going home with her. My mom said it was ok.”

I know who this bit of jail bait is, openly checking me out; I swallow hard and speak. “Lemme see the phone; I need to check with your mom.”

“*Y tu, Anna?*” Estela speaks to the girls while I confirm with Isis’s mother. “How do you know Mr. Romero?”

Anna holds out her hand to shake mine; I frown at the sight of it, but take it anyway after returning Isis’s phone.

Anna answers. “Of course we know each other, Mrs. Ramon.” I feel the girl’s bones and tendons squeezing mine as she holds on, see her braces as she beams from ear to ear. “We’re getting married.”

I turn wide-eyed to Estela and yank my hand back; she only shakes her head and tells the girls to leave. We watch silently as they leave, the older one laughing while both pairs of Converse sneakers scuff the tiles, leaving their mark; the sunlight swallows them whole when they exit the glass doors. Estela pats me on the shoulder, squeezes, and walks away without a

word. We both know what's going to happen. Between Craig's arrest and death, between Anna's fixation and reckless nature, we both know I need to find a job somewhere else.

It's the final hours of the last day of school and most of the kids are gone; the hundred or so that remain are waiting by the cafeteria since there's a number of buses running late. My first year here is over and since I've signed a contract with the Harlingen school district it will also be my last. I'm nearly done packing. Every second or third desk holds worn, slightly wrinkled cardboard boxes which in turn hold the items of mine that I'll be taking with me. In terms of teaching manipulatives, there's hardly any; the few I had access to belong to the school and will remain within these rooms and these halls. The posters have been rolled up, held together by rubber bands, leaving the walls bare save for the graffiti some of my students have managed to scratch out with their pens; for some of my students, for too many of them, these bits of lines will be all the world will have to remember them by besides a budding criminal record. The waning sun, just about to dip below the houses and trees across the street, beams fervently through the window my student had leapt through several months earlier. His middle name is Angel.

Padded swords that have been gathered in a bag lean against the wall, remind me of the hours the Anime Club and I had spent assembling them. The duct tape on the floor still marks the line between my desk and theirs that they weren't supposed to cross. It's scuffed, grimy and sticky from the countless times they've stepped on it and worn through outright in some sections.

“Hey, Mr. Romero.”

I hadn't heard Isis come in. I wipe at my eyes and clear my throat before turning to face her. "Hey, Isis. Shouldn't you be in the cafeteria waiting for the bus?"

She shrugs and pouts her lips, stops in front of my desk. "I just wanted to stop by, sir. Heard you weren't going to be here next year."

"Harlingen's my home town." I get out of my desk and walk over to my filing cabinets, pretending that I need some worksheets from my file cabinets. "And you'll be in eighth grade anyway. Staying here wouldn't have made a difference, right?"

She doesn't move closer to me, instead sitting atop a nearby desk. "What about the Anime Club?"

I nod and continue fiddling around; these are all worksheets intended for the recycling bin. "All good things come to an end, Isis. You're gonna find it's a part of growing up."

She bobs her head in understanding, swinging her legs like a child on a swing. The sound of her fingernails tapping against the desk makes up for the lack of conversation between us. I'm about to remind her to go back to the cafeteria when she speaks again. "You never asked me why I called you."

I'm still ruffling through the papers within when something plastic with a thin edge digs into my fingertips; it's her laminated drawing. Sighing, I hide it inside a manila folder and stash it in my satchel bag. It's the end of school, I tell myself. She's never going to see you again. What happened to Craig won't happen to you. At the very least, she deserves that I treat her with respect. So I do. I ask.

Her eyes glisten and tears fall from over her cheeks. “I called you, sir, because” – she stops to look at me, red-shot eyes accusing in their intensity, boring through my eye, blowing out the back of my skull – “because I was fourteen that day. Sir” – she grinds her teeth now, words hissing through clenched jaws – “I was fourteen and not a virgin.”

I freeze. Clichéd, I know, but true. What the hell am I supposed to do or say anyway? It’s ok? Don’t worry about it? It’s part of growing up? Hey, baby girl, it’s no problem, we all fuck up somewhere, somehow, sometimes literally? What useless patronizing Band-Aid platitude that means shit in the real world am I supposed to use here to fix the hemorrhaging wound in the hand she’s holding out to me? Am I supposed to put my arms around her even though she’s going to interpret the gesture all wrong, which is going to then screw her up even further? Or maybe I am supposed to take the other route and begin casting stones at her, telling her that she’s a whore who might as well get used to filling out welfare forms, Medicaid applications and spreading her legs.

This poor girl has slipped through the cracks, tries to reach out to me. I’ve responded by turning my back on her.

I mumble something vague, inoffensive, and ineffective, struggling to get the words out past the knot writhing in my throat and tell her to get back to cafeteria before she gets left behind; a little late for that. She bobs her head, understanding I’m not going to do more, staring at me again with those russet eyes of hers. She crosses her arms, hugging, holding herself – in the end, I guess that’s everyone she has. She leaves when I say nothing and it’s when I’m alone, out of view and out of sight that I slip into a student desk, rest my forehead on it and cross my hands over my head.

A year later, I go back to see my former students walk the aisle at the eighth grade graduation ceremony. I look for Isis, fail to find her. When I have lunch with Estela and other ex-coworkers at Lupita's Restaurant, I do my best to appear affable, nonchalant as I ask why Isis wasn't there.

She's pregnant.

I shrug it off, shake my head as I dig into my plate of cheese enchiladas with the same gusto that Craig did when we ate there so long ago. The cooks here still use too much cinnamon in their *mole*, the salsa still has too much tomato in it. The pepper constituting the chile relleno's larger though. As the spice burns into my tongue, builds up in the back of my throat, I vaguely pay attention to the conversation revolving around me, thinking about the first time I had set foot on the school grounds as a teacher. They told me at the sexual harassment seminar to maintain a professional distance from my students. Told me that I'm their instructor, not their confidant, their educator, not their friend. Told me that it doesn't matter if students bring their personal lives in the classroom – there's a clear demarcation between teacher and student. Cause otherwise, at best I'll find myself where Craig did, having a heart attack in a local prison or at worst – well, a piece of shit human being. So I did do the right thing, keeping Isis at distance, keeping myself safe at her expense. Right?

Right?

CHAPTER II

ONE RING TO BIND THEM

It's the last day of school and the students are gone. Desks lie scattered across my empty room in groups of three or four. Checker boards and pieces occupy some of them; one group of desks has a game of Connect4 instead. Crumpled sheets of paper wobble as the air from the vents in the ceiling cascades over them, finally fall and float to the floor. Groups of poker chips stand stacked haphazardly atop the single large table set against the back wall, a new hand waiting to be dealt from the shuffled deck of cards. The whiteboard has been cleaned of all my students' farewell messages, the markers have been put away. Filing cabinets are locked, posters put away in the closet. The blinds are pulled up and the afternoon light passes through the smudge-covered window to shower over my desk. The desk's clear of clutter, save for my bag with the laptop in it.

I hate sitting at my desk.

Instead I'm at the single large table, turning over my ring in my left hand; I'm not dexterous enough to make it tumble end over end on my knuckles like the pros do with poker chips on 3 AM television. I can't take my eyes off it. It's not doing anything special, not sparkling or shining like actual jewelry. It's really nothing more than a fancy washer that fits on my thumb. But I just can't stop thinking that Craig was right – there's a side to teaching – a side to teachers – that no one talks about, acknowledges. I wonder how much of it has to do with the

fact that I'm single, how much of it has to do with my age. And now, after two years of teaching, I can't seem to dispel the memories resonating from this ring, can't stop thinking about actions and motivations that brought this piece of nondescript metal in my life. But, hey – *a todo se acostumbra uno*, right?

My brother and I were navigating through Valle Vista Mall in our hometown of Harlingen on a Saturday, a hive of merchandise and services filled with families and their friends spending their day spending money on grease, salt, G.I. Joe collectibles and the latest album released by the latest hip-hop icon. Most of the people meandering about were couples, men and women bloated past their prime. Their elementary-aged children pulled them along like greyhounds straining at the leash, eager to break free and reach the former high school quarterback demoing radio-controlled helicopters in order to increase his sales. Small packs of preteens and teens swaggered from the food court to the ends of the mall and back; they didn't actually go into Sears or JCPenny's and they didn't actually eat. The girls flaunted their freshly shaven legs with fringed cut-off jeans and the occasional push-up bra beneath spaghetti strapped shirts. The boys paraded how low they could wear their pants without tripping, belts loosely buckled around their butts, the rings and earring studs that their parents had bought for them adding to the glare of their braces as they smiled and scowled at each other.

I had cut down my beard to a stubble, donned some cheap corner-bought shades and a simple black cap. The grey hooded sweater succeeded in not calling attention to me, simple jeans no different from the dozens of others in the place and the Converse had been dirtied enough to appear well-worn. The debacle in Raymondville reinforced my preference for

anonymity, reminded me that being ignored, being hidden in the shadows of the masses has its advantages. Keeping my hands in my pockets made me a small target, the poker face a sufficient mask to keep others from engaging with me; I never got along with people my age anyway. I wasn't here for the usual nerd reasons; *Halo 3* was still several months from release, the fourth volume of *X-Force* that I had ordered two weeks ago still hadn't arrived.

I was looking for a ring.

“You sure you want to do this, man?” My brother towered over me, his presence augmented by his physique and underlined by the veins crisscrossing his biceps and arms. Though jockish in appearance, his sideburns and black horn-rimmed glasses belied a calculating obsession with detail; a useful talent, considering he had practically memorized his textbooks while studying to become a nurse. “It's only been three months, right?”

We stopped in front of one of the many cheap jewelry stands planted between the major clothing retailers. Watches, bracelets, and necklaces worked together like gold and silver crop circles, the rings forming neat cabbage patch rows of polished metal and mineral against a pallid peach background. The glass panes separating product from consumer had been smudged by fingertips dipped in butter from too much popcorn. Cracks and chips in the wood finish revealed the truth of its cheaply pressed plywood construction; I figured the owner either preferred to trust in mall security or more likely, the insurance backing his merchandise. None interested me, none provoked the same reaction she had. She had been smiling at me when I first saw her, a slight movement that had stretched her lips thin, revealing unusually straight teeth for someone her age. Her straight hair had been parted in the middle, left side tucked behind her ear and shoulder-length brown locks hiding the right side of her face. Several bottles of eyeliner had

accentuated her amber eyes, bringing out her pale skin, almost rendering her into a rarity in the Valley – a white Caucasian girl. She reminded me of my best friend in high school, a girl named Jenny Martin to whom I had never admitted that I had a crush on her.

Given that the similarities, I feared the probable outcome.

It occurred to me that it was entirely possible that Craig chose the heart attack over prison rape – which is immediately followed by the realization that that’s a decision I never want to have to make. “Yeah, I’m sure, bro. I need to do this.”

It has been just over a year since I met Anna and now the second that I’ve worked as a seventh grade mathematics teacher. I’ve been at Gutierrez Middle School in Harlingen, twenty miles south of Raymondville and in the two months since I’ve often caught myself thinking of the people there. It’s been nice, though, being back in my hometown. The library was three times larger than the one at Myra Green, the windows don’t have bars over them and the Cameron County Tax Office was across the street instead of the Willacy County Detention Center. The white cement-blocked walls of my new classroom were broken by rainbows of poster platitudes and dappled abstract equations, invisible laminated placards if my students’ behavior and grades were any indication. Four dust-covered computers and a file cabinet lined the wall adjacent to the door, on the opposite side of the cluttered desk. The students of my last class, eighth and ninth period, were working in groups of three or four, organizing and decorating survey data that they’ve collected the week before. The questions that I approved range from “How many TV’s are in your home?” to “How many times a day do you text?” and it

has taken time to distill the results into the manageable numbers found in mean, median, mode and range.

My students rustled about, wrist-deep in containers, and the sound of markers rapping against the plastic filled the room, forming a backdrop to the conversations taking place. I meandered among them, studying the calculations that they've haphazardly chained together, nudging them in the right direction whenever necessary and otherwise maintaining the peace, keeping them focused. A fly rested momentarily on my ear, sending ripples of chills over my skin; I swatted it away and realized that someone was watching me from across the room – Mireya. She wasn't wearing the usual amount of eyeliner, easing the transition from skin tone to eye color. The ends of her black and grey striped sweater were wrapped around her knuckles, her thumb poking through the hole she had cut into the fabric, fingers clenched around her pencil as she smiled at me, apparently satisfied that I caught her gawking. Like most of her articles of clothing, this one has been through some wear and tear, small holes scatter-plotted across the fabric. I wasn't sure why she dressed this way. Maybe she was poor. Maybe she just wanted to play the part of the misunderstood, downtrodden, angst-ridden teenager; either way, I simply didn't know. Normal height for her age, but anorexic thin, a part of me feared this was the result of early drug use rather than the popular eating disorder since she didn't fall into the rich, cheerleading demographic that willingly starved themselves for public approval.

Quite simply, she was too intelligent to care what other people thought about her – a surge of independent creativity in a sea of mediocrity.

I made my way over to her group. Scraps of construction paper littered the floor; I tapped on the nearest student's desk and pointed at the trash, made it clear I expected him to

clean it up. The poster board Mireya's group has been working on was abnormally white in comparison to the other groups'. Maybe I was wrong to trust Mireya with keeping her group on track so that I could focus on her classmates. She continued smiling, almost as if she was happy to see me but not sure why.

“Is there a reason we're not working, Mireya?” I glanced at her group members.

“Girls?”

The shortest one answered. “We're working, sir. Look, we got the answers.” She pulled out crumpled sheets of paper, granite lines fuzzy and smeared.

I tried to decipher them. “Ok, ok. Do we know what these numbers mean?” I peeked over my shoulder, ensuring that the others were still working.

The other one answered. “Yeah. This one over here's the mean, this one's –”

I handed their work back, slipped my hands back into my pockets, and tried to appear affable. “Ok, cool. But, that's what the numbers *are*. I'm asking what do they *mean*.”

The question puzzled them so I attempted again, gesturing randomly in the air with my right hand. “In other words, girls, these numbers that you've calculated, that you've found – what do they tell you about the data you collected? Remember, words mean something. Like when I say 'dog', what am I talking about?”

Mireya answered. “That's easy. We're talking about a dog.”

“Ok, ok. Lemme ask another question.” I took a step back, pretending to hold a choice in each hand. “When I say 'dog', are we talking about the word or the animal?”

The short one giggled. “The animal, duh.”

A glance at Mireya, eyes glazed over in thought and absently chewing on her sweater, confirmed what I hoped for: patterns were forming in her synaptic pathways. “Do you understand, Mireya?”

She looked up, startled from her intellectual reverie. “You’re saying numbers are the same way. Seventeen isn’t just a number. It’s actually – uh, it’s-“

I gave her a hand. “It’s representing.”

Mireya bounced in her seat as the circuit completed in her head. “Yeah! Seventeen, it’s representing something, it’s saying that – that- well, it’s saying something. Don’t know what, but it is.”

“Good job, Mireya.” I turned to the other girls of her group. “Good job. Keep working on it, ok? This is something I want to see on your presentation.”

Hands returned to pockets and I returned to my routine, only for Mireya to stop me. “Wait, sir. Can I ask you a question?”

I looked at the clock and shrugged in agreement; there were nine minutes left and it occurred to me that after tutoring students for an hour, I still had dishes to wash and a paper to rewrite for my grad class. “Fire away, Mireya.”

She glanced nervously at her group members. “Promise me you won’t get mad.”

“Promise.” I held up my hand, fingers crossed and made a show of uncrossing them. “I’m not lying this time.”

“Ok.” Her smile somehow widened. “If a guy and a girl do it underwater, can she still get knocked up?”

The room quieted and again I found myself wondering if having a child was like having a dog that eventually learned to talk, clean his/her ass and walk upright; the inner idealist buried in the core of my psyche protested this sentiment until I remembered that a dog will love you and still shit on the carpet. I shook my head free of my thoughts, ground my teeth to hide the scowl twitching to escape across my face because I knew she was digging for a reaction. Even so, I growled enough to convey the ire and irritation within. “Mireya, you know better than to ask me that. We’ve talked about this; it’s inappropriate. First off, this isn’t Health 101; this is a math class and there’s no reason for asking that in this room. Secondly,” I paused to give my throat a rest, and gestured with my arms outwards, then inwards, tendons popping, “this is the sort of thing you ask a female teacher - *not me.*”

My frown escaped just a bit, just enough to let her know I was disappointed without overdoing it. I spent the last remaining minutes redirecting the other students that had stopped to listen, reiterating that the focus was math and dug through my records to find the number to Mireya’s parents.

“How much did the bling cost you?” my youngest brother asked.

The “bling” in question has been forged from steel and polished to a mirrored sheen. A unique set of incisions marked this ring apart from the rest. These weren’t engravings on the outer or inner surface; instead, they were cuts that went from one side to another, alternately

originating from inner and outer surface. I found it at a small jewelry stand in front of Victoria's Secret.

"Not much. Thirty-three dollars." As we approached Journeys, a shoe store aimed at teens and young adults, Blink 182 blared from the speakers within, made it hard for me to hear. It was also thirty-three dollars I didn't have. "Cheap enough to buy, expensive enough to look legit."

"What are you going to do when they find out it's a lie?"

"Won't happen." I slipped the ring on my thumb for moment, matching the steel clock and black leather wristband that comprised my watch. "They still believe I'm Irish and that I got my scar defending you from a rabid German Shepherd." A familiar face stood out in the distance by the Hot Topic clothing store; I nodded my head and my brother followed me into the Journeys.

"Since when do you look at shoes?" he asked, holding up a pair of Diesel sneakers, incandescent lights reflecting off the suede finish.

"Still don't." I glanced at some buckled biker boots, zippers on the inner sides. "Just noticed a few of my students out by Hot Topic."

"That bothers you?"

"Remember that student I was telling you about? The girl with all the disturbing questions? That's her over there with her friends, the one in the middle."

"Wow, she's skin and bones, dude. What do they feed those kids at the cafeteria?"

“Same stuff they used to feed us – hydrogenated crap.” I looked up at the security mirror, a convex surface affixed to the ceiling, to see if Mireya and her friends were still at Gothic-emo-outlet. “But that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“So she has a crush on you. Big deal.”

“Funny thing about that – courts, lawyers, fathers armed with shotguns, *Dateline: To Catch a Predator* and, y’know, the general public tend to make a big deal about this sort of thing. And by ‘big deal’, I mean a witch hunt that makes Salem look like a game of hide-and-go-seek.”

“Tell me, Joaquin – you ever get tired of the paranoia?” He took off his shoes and tried the suede Diesels; he was the only one that I let call me that. “I mean, yeah, I know you get it from Dad, but come on – isn’t your attitude a little much?”

“Dude, by the time a shit-storm like that would blow over, no school district would be willing to hire me. I’d have to start all over again.”

My brother shook his head and glared at me from behind his glasses. “Dude, you don’t even like your job. Why you crying over losing something you don’t even want?”

“Hey, what do you want me to say?” I pulled the ring off my finger, unused to its presence and turned it over in the other hand. “My social life is nonexistent, Dad’s always making me feel bad about grad school. Things just aren’t the same anymore, you know. This job’s the only thing I got working for me and the last thing I want to do is lose it just because some girl got all twitter pated in class.”

I ensured that Mireya and her posse weren't paying attention, motioned for my brother to follow and we slipped unnoticed back into the crowd.

It is early October and I've been standing at parade rest in the middle of the hallway, nodding at the students of my eighth and ninth period class as they drag themselves inside my classroom. The exit doors were behind me, white walls on both sides. Most students milled about, stalling to the last possible moment before a teacher or security guard prodded them along.

"Mr. Romero." Mireya strolled over from her locker, each stride a deliberation in my direction, till she stops right in front of me. I recoiled at her proximity, took a step back out of habit and made sure that I was still in full view of the surveillance camera. "Do you know how I spent my weekend?"

I arched an eyebrow, thought back to our previous conversation on pool sex. "Considering what your mother and I discussed, I imagine that it consisted mostly of a long ranting lecture with a side of grounding."

She cocked her head to a side, slipping one leg behind another. "I knew you were going to say something sarcastic."

I furrowed my brow, tried to envelope my eyes in shadows. "So then why do you bother asking?"

Mireya crossed her arms and stood her ground, fearless in the face – in the façade – of my authority. “You do realize that when you talk like that, you come across as a mean person, right? A mean teacher?”

“I know.” I frowned and nodded. “And?”

She scoffed, shook her head. “It doesn’t bother you that I think you’re a jerk?”

“I can live with that.” I thought back to Craig’s demise. “There are worse alternatives.”

“So why do you even bother teaching?” She laughed to herself, uncrossing her arms and oscillated a pencil in her hand. “I mean, look at how you’re treating me. It’s obvious you hate your job. You hate me.”

“I teach because I can’t sing or dance.” I paused, regretting the sarcastic response; unfortunately, I couldn’t back down now. “Satisfied?”

“No, I mean, really, why are you here?” She took a step forward. “Why bother telling me to keep drawing, telling everyone they can go to college if it’s just an act for the first day of school?”

“You know my policy on personal questions, Mireya.” I sidestepped around her to check on my class. Most were seated, but a few were still out and about, taking advantage of the last few minutes to talk with their friends. Satisfied they weren’t killing each other, I returned my attention to Mireya. “Keep them to yourself.”

“So admit the truth, then. Admit that you hate your job.”

I grabbed my head and cracked my neck, the three, four snaps echoing in my head. “Ok, Mireya; you’re right. I do hate my job.” It was my turn to smile, like Heath Ledger’s Joker. “But I love making you all miserable *even more*.” I turned to leave her in the hallway.

“Or maybe the truth is that you’re protesting too much.” Her words brought me to a halt, allowing her to walk past me, leering. “Except I’m the lady in this story, right?”

Not sure what surprised me more: her audacity or the fact she knew Shakespeare.

My brother and I continued towards the northern end of the mall, masked by the herds of young parents and their toddlers, budding couples and protracted friendships. Strollers of every hue rolled across the carrot-colored marble tiles, a background noise to the cacophony of dozens of un-synchronized conversations, occasionally punctuated by the tapping of the canes and walkers of the older patrons. Tired of the noise, we stopped by Waldenbooks, my favorite store in the mall. The magazines were racked to our right, just past the product scanners, the merchandise on sale to our left. The books on the wall represented the most popular genres, collections that reached twenty feet above the floor. The lesser fare filled the shelves lined throughout the store – manga, graphic novels, sport literature. The ones detailing sexual positions were left atop, out of reach but not out of sight.

I made my way to the science fiction wall while my brother gravitated to the magazines. I had read a Lucas-sanctioned *Star Wars* tale by Matthew Stover and was hoping to find another. Unlike other similarly authorized bits of fan fiction, he had brought something new to the galaxy of far, far away; for him, there was no dark side of the Force, only the dark side within us. In other words, it wasn’t the dark side of the Force that corrupted, but we who corrupted the Force,

something that I found more compelling, more realistic than the original source. Within my faith, it was what we called our sinful nature, the part of us that wanted to sin: And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil, John 3:19.

I have begun to really understand the implications of that verse.

I found another *Star Wars* book by Stover when my brother returned with an issue of *Muscular Development*, its glossy cover completely covered by a man who wasn't sufficiently covered by his Speedo. I looked up at my brother and asked why.

"What, man? I don't get to work out as much as I want to, so I gotta look for ways to stay fit. I mean, have you seen the size of this guy?"

I couldn't help myself. "You talking about his muscles or do you have something else in mind?"

His initial response was to punch me in the shoulder. "Come on, dude, you know it's not like that. What writing's to you, weight lifting's to me. It's that simple."

"Maybe. Then again, the fact that you have a man-crush on Arnold Schwarzenegger casts your relationship with your girlfriend in an incredibly dubious light." I nodded my head to the side and smirked, placed my hand on the knotted ball of muscle that was his shoulder. "It's ok, Gabriel. Come out. No one's going to hurt you."

His fingers closed on my wrist, stressed the bones within and pulled my hand off his shoulder before releasing it. "The man's a bodybuilding legend. All I have is admiration for the man. Nothing less, nothing more."

I massaged my wrist and punched him in return, smiled. “I can’t help it. That magazine just makes it way too easy.”

He shook his head and smiled in return at our recurring joke. “Found what you were looking for?”

I held the book up, skimmed the summary on the back cover and maintained my smile when I caught the hint of another tale of darkness within.

I had Mireya’s mother on speed dial for nearly three months, but there hasn’t been a need to call in the last three days; Mireya’s been unusually reserved. I had other things on my mind, so I let it go and faked a smile at my departing coworkers. I felt my composure falling apart as the final bell split my skull, exacerbating the migraine churning within. I wiped the beading sweat from my eyes and drove my fingers into my neck; despite the stress breaking against my skull, somehow I needed to find the patience for tutoring, the last part of my day. Few students chose to stay behind. Most bolted at the bell, faster than your average greyhound, eager to catch their friends before riding the bus home. Mireya wasn’t one of them, staying behind at her desk.

My students and I waited for others to arrive, bantered sarcastically about who was dating who till it was time to dim the lights. Tutoring has always been a slow affair, beginning with a problem we dissect through Q&A. Why did the person who worked on this problem add? Why did they multiply here? On what part of the problem did they base their decision? Was their answer correct? Because of the level of critical thinking involved, it took time for this technique to work. After all, these students were here for a reason. We finished and I asked a student to flick the lights back on. I assigned them partners and problems based on equivalent skill and

intelligence. I stopped at each junction of desks, knelt down so that I'd be at their level, and opened with guiding questions: Why did you do this? Why did you do that? I reminded them that if they couldn't justify their answer, then their answer was meaningless – only crazy people didn't have reasons.

It was one of the few times I felt I could actually teach.

The truth of the matter was that even in my second year, I was still learning, still pushing through the brambles, struggling to understand my role as a teacher. Motivational speakers told me I needed to, well, motivate my students; that outcome seemed unlikely since glass-half-empty guys like me rarely inspire others. The only thing on my students' minds was what they're going to do once the bell rings; only the ones that cared, or those with parents that cared enough to force their sons or daughters to do so, remained behind. Mireya was the only one who didn't belong, opting to volunteer and help peer-tutor her classmates. She wasn't doing that today though; instead she sat at a desk by the board, sketching a fantasy comic of wolves that she had been working on for some time now. Because my first responsibility was to the students who actually needed the help, I let her be; if my previous inquiries were any indication, the odds were good that she'd insist nothing was wrong anyway. I continued questioning my students, insisting they justify their answers and show the work they claimed they did in their heads. After a few minutes, confident they knew enough to continue on their own, I began my routine: cleaning up, making a list of parents to call, jotting down who has detention the next day, gathering the originals to make copies later, and other minor duties. A wad of paper by Mireya's desk reminded me that I had a higher priority.

“You’ve been quiet all week, Mireya.” I knew I shouldn’t encourage her; the questions, the comments she makes in class were inappropriate enough as they were and I didn’t want to imagine what she would say if she felt comfortable talking to me. Nevertheless, I pushed the issue; her new pattern of quiet behavior puzzled and intrigued me. “You sure everything’s ok?”

Auburn eyes flickered off to the sides before she answered. “Why didn’t you tell us you were married?”

I paused, wondering why she thought I was married. “Because I didn’t think it was any of your business.” I picked up a marker to write the objectives for the next day on the board. “Who told you?”

“Mrs. Holladay.” She sat up, collapsed against the back of her chair. “So what’s her name?”

“Her name’s Jen. She, uh, works as a nurse at the Renaissance Hospital in Edinburg.” I hadn’t seen nor heard from Jenny since my high school graduation. It was my brother who was studying to be a nurse. Ever since I began my graduate studies in creative writing, however, I had learned to tell the truth, but tell it slant. “So I talked with your mom the other day - again. Did she tell you about it?”

She clicked her tongue against her teeth before answering. “Have you ever thought that maybe I’m just trying to make conversation with you?” She paused, brought her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, hugging herself, retreating into herself. “That I’m trying to not just be a kid?”

She had asked if I had ever gotten a girlfriend pregnant. “Enough time for that later on, Mireya. You should enjoy being a kid while you can – which means choosing age-appropriate topics for conversation.”

She nodded her head. “Is it alright if I ask one last question, Mr. Romero?”

I slumped against the whiteboard, snapped my neck. I looked at her and arched an eyebrow. “Only if it’s about math, Mireya. Ok?”

“It is, sir. It is.” Her eyes darted from side to side while she tucked her hair behind her right ear, revealing unpierced lobes. I could tell she was trying to figure something, realized that repeating herself was her way of stalling. She finally laid her hands on the desks, palm down and stared at me, eyes locked, unwavering and spoke:

“So if you’re married, how come you never wear a ring?”

I tossed the eraser aside, bit my lip and shook my head before I returned my attention to the other students, focused on *patiently* reminding them for the fifteenth time that day that a negative multiplied by a negative was always positive. The afterschool director informed us over the intercom that students were dismissed for the day, and as per contractual obligation, I escorted them to their respective exits. The walk back on scuffed tiles reflected the florescent lights above, was pleasantly uninterrupted, a sublime refrain from the constant din that filled my days; the lockers on both sides stood at attention, sentinels of silence.

I gathered my things and stopped by Mrs. Holladay’s room on the way out. “So – when were you going to tell me that I married my best friend from high school?”

Mrs. Holladay was a forty year old woman, give or take, with frayed shoulder length hair, skin the color of coffee muddled with two tablespoons of cream. She laughed loudly. “Please tell me your best friend was a girl.”

“Of course, of course. Um, her name was Jen. She made high school bearable.” I adjusted my bag’s shoulder strap and rested against the green metal door frame. “I’m just wondering why you decided to say I’m married.”

“The girls were talking all *cochina* about you and I overheard them. Mireya, in fact, was wondering who your first looked like.” Her cluttered desk, made up of stacks of paper, pens, pencils and photos of her adopted niece, hid most of her body. “She was kinda hoping that your first sort of looked like her. How did you find out?”

“Well she was acting quieter than usual – quieter than ever – and when I asked what was bothering her, she asked why I had never mentioned it.” I tap my shoe against the floor, stare at the little flecks of black rubber left marking my presence, realizing that some things never change. “I’m getting tired of going through this.”

“Oh, hang in there, Mr. Romero. It’s normal for girls to have a crush on their teacher.”

“I guess so. Hell, they’ll probably forget about me when some twenty-year-old pedophile smiles at them, right?”

I made up my mind to go buy a ring anyway, rationalized that it was practical to do so; I didn’t want to out Holladay as a liar and I had already gone along with the fiction. Besides, I didn’t want to end up like Craig back in Raymondville.

We left Waldenbooks, I with my new *Star Wars* book and he with his magazine, and mingled with crowds within the mall. The mob was thicker now, harder to move through but easier to be lost in. I never liked going to the mall. Back in high school, my brothers had to bribe me to because they liked the idea of hanging out here; I was the sole brother that drove at the time, so they depended on me. I just didn't want to see people I didn't get along with on days that I didn't have to. As we walked through the crowds, it occurred to me that in a manner things still haven't changed. After having spent all day long in a classroom filled with children for a week, I wanted to be alone. Alone in my room, Eminem, Kanye West, B.o.B. and Mike Shinoda drowning out the world. Six years after high school, I still didn't want to be here for the same reasons.

My brother's words broke my thought processes. "So Dad's been wanting me to ask you how you're doing at work since you never talk about it."

I nearly stopped walking, but merely slowed. "He can't ask me himself?"

"If he has to ask, then he feels that he's begging to be involved in your life. He wants you to share your life with him."

I barely heard him. "Of course he wants me to share. It's what he chose for me."

"He had to choose for you." He pushed me gently so that I'd look at him. "You didn't know what you wanted so he did something about it. You'd still be playing videogames if it weren't for him."

We walked in silence for several heartbeats before I answered: I know. Thankfully, he left me to my thoughts as we continued passing through the stores. In many ways, he was the

older brother, not me. Thing was, how was I supposed to tell him about this part of my life? That a teenage girl in Raymondville may have been responsible for a teacher's incarceration and death? That one of my students liked me and I couldn't say anything to administration because of a compelling Shakespearean argument and the benefit of the doubt? And my father? What father would want to hear that the choice he made for his son wasn't working out? What kind of person would I be if I threw it in his face? Shouts, excited and animated, entered my attention, set my thoughts to be chewed on another time.

“Hey, is that Mr. Romero?”

“Who?”

“It's Mr. Romero!”

“Call him Joaquin! Call him Joaquin!”

“He's not married! No ring! No ring!”

“Joaquin – it's me! It's me, Mireya!”

Damn it.

I nodded my head towards the exit when they started shouting my name and my brother followed my lead. Mireya and her friends danced around me, shrieking like I was the lead singer for Linkin Park. Even though my brother's stride was longer than mine, I quickened my pace, weaving in and out between the stands of sunglasses, concessions, and cheap electronic toys, aimed for the exit where the burning noon sun glared like the clichéd-freaking light at the end of the tunnel. I ignored the stares following us, the whispered comments wondering why these adolescent girls were following two bearded men by the food court and the now defunct arcade,

praying to God that no one would assume the worst. The glass panes and metal frame were warm to my touch, the heat transferring through and contradicting the cool air contained within, like the fires of a hell yet to come; I pushed through and left my students behind, Craig's memory bubbling to the surface, spurring me on.

This was why I didn't tire of the paranoia.

I keep the ring in hand as go about my room, putting the poker chips away in their case, the Connect4 game and the various checkerboards back in their respective boxes, the throwing the sheets of paper in the trashcan. I slip my bag over my head when I'm done and walk out my room for the last time. The strap digs into my shoulder, the weight of the laptop driving it further into the muscle and bone. The lights have been turned off. The hallways are a darkened sepulcher, the catacombs of empty student lockers just faintly visible in the light pouring through the glass doors by my room. Since the lights are off, odds are the alarm's already been set to go off if the doors are opened, so I head deeper into the empty mausoleum; the front entrance is now the only exit. The janitorial cart stands unattended, like it had slid to a stop by the faculty bathroom. Light begins to grow just as the darkness seems absolute, pouring through the glass pyramid situated on the campus roof. I take advantage of the light to toss my ring in the air, coin-style. The stainless steel catches the brief light as it twirls end over end before it falls back into my palm. Darkness envelopes me again as I move farther from the light. As I pass through the hallway closest to the office, I know that Mireya's face is posted on the wall next to me. She was my last choice for Student of the Month, a choice I couldn't have made earlier in the year;

she would have misinterpreted it. In the absolution of the darkness, in the silence of an empty mausoleum, the only thing I can feel is the cold steel in my palm.

I finally round past the office, come out of the darkness. Outside it is as bright as it is dark inside and I stop to appreciate the view. Sunlight ripples across the sky, coloring the white canvas clouds in brushstrokes of alpine pink. Palm trees sway against the eastern blue backdrop, guard the empty parking lot. The wind blows in gently for the northwest, the subtle promise of a storm front. There's no one to watch or question me, so I sit on the curb. The cement's rough, firm. I feel the exhaustion settle in my bones, crush the air out of my lungs and leave my muscles to simply hang by their ligaments. It's not just the last day. It's the past two years, the relationships between the female students of my class and me.

It's fighting the darkness within.

I lean forward till I'm in a sprinting position, feet pinched by the creased leather of my shoes, the cement rough, porous to my fingertips. I push myself up, knees straining from the struggle, inhaling as I stand. I'm still holding the ring in my hand, awkwardly turning it over between my forefinger and thumb. I turn back to look at the school, at the darkness within the glass doors and realize that there's no coming back from that. It's a part of who I am now, as much mine as my name is. There's no sundering from my mind the relationship embodied by this ring, no rending from my memories the tie forged between myself and her; the ring might as well have 'Mireya' engraved on it.

I slip the ring on my thumb. It's a snug fit.

CHAPTER III

PULLING MY PUNCHES

Heather Cepeda, Trevor Florence, Alayne Watson and their twenty-one classmates sit in my 8th and 9th period class, the first Pre-AP class I've had in my three years as a teacher. It's the first week of school. I'm not sure what to make of these students; besides their label as Pre-AP, they also comprise my largest class to date. The first chapter of the book covers line graphs, variables and expressions, equations and solutions, precursors to the algebra they will face next year when the same concepts will fall under the same heading and the connections between them drawn. These subjects, though, were theoretically covered last year since as sixth grade Pre-AP they would have used the seventh grade book that I know so well; operating, then, under the assumption that this is nothing more than a review for them, I assign them the different sections, instructing them to summarize the information therein and encouraging them to be as creative as possible. Three buckets of brand new markers crown the top of my cart where it stands in the middle of the room, groups of three or four desks forming rings around it. Each group of desks has a large three by four presentation pad on it, the group of students tag-teaming it as they cover it in what is hopefully correct information and self-expression; I figure this activity can double as a review and as a sort of ice-breaker that will engage my students with past mathematical concepts.

Heather sits atop the desk, springing up and down like a short coil, while her legs swing back and forth like a sped-up pendulum beneath her. A patch of burned skin marks the back of

her right hand, stretched tight as she grips the desk for support. She's a short but curvy girl; the muscles in her legs straining against the fabric of her Capri pants suggest she's something of an athlete. Her smile fills her face as she chuckles and snorts at something Alayne whispers in her ear, adding to the wide parabolic curve of the faint scar extending from the corner of her lips. She fires out a comeback, the sound of her voice like a trumpet in a jazz band – loud and demanding attention, the antithesis to Alayne's murmured nothings. She notes a mistake on the pad detailing their concept of positive/negative integers and absolute value, prompting her to hop off the desk, snatch the marker from Trevor and berate him as she corrects it. Alayne protests Heather's attempts, arguing that the pad won't be as presentable but Heather waves her off, dismissing her complaints. Alayne falls back in her chair but immediately leans forward, fervently explaining how they can incorporate the mistake into the overall visual design. Strands of shimmering platinum blonde hair fall across the pad, adding to the splashes and contours of red, blue, purple, and green. She folds her leg beneath her, sitting on it and leaning on her forearms as she colors and draws to fit the mistake Trevor made. Her skin's paler than the walls and floor, tones of pink rendering her pearlescent amidst the usual grains of sand and dirt. Cowboy boots knock repeatedly against the tile floor, another set of noise dripping into the background. She shoves the rolled up sleeves of her shirt further up her arm, a checker-colored pattern that hangs un-tucked despite dress code regulations over the turquoise studded belt buckle. Cobalt eyes match her jeans, cool Arctic eyes that again differentiate her from the others. Bracelets and beads rattle as her stick of a wrist moves back and forth as she borders the edge in bands of yellow, orange and black. Trevor's the only other one in class with eyes to match Alayne's. His bouquet of blond hair is a different shade than Alayne's. Thick, knotted locks of gold fall over his eyes, give him the excuse to continually shake his head, granting him

the attention of the other girls. He slouches back in his desk, the low-slung Abercrombie khaki shorts, frayed to the point of threads, hanging over knobby knees rubbed raw. His striped Polo shirt's only tucked in above the braided belt holding the shorts on his skinny frame. The beaded necklace and bracelet complete the surfer's look and persona he attempts to maintain. Both girls try to involve him again in the project on their pad, but he simply shakes his head, yellow slabs of gelled hair shaking slightly. He recoils and grimaces in pain when Heather slaps his shoulder for not participating. I guess that the scabs, bandages, cuts and scrapes peppering Trevor's right arm and face cover the extent of his torso.

Figuring I should get to know these students or at the least inquire about the nature of Trevor's injuries, I make my way to their table. "Ladies. Gentleman. How are we coming along?"

Alayne pivots her head my way, whipping blonde threads across her face; she pulls them out of her mouth before speaking. "This is fun, Mr. Romero. They never let us do stuff like this last year."

I nod my head slowly, look out at the rest of the class. "You familiar with this material? Because if you don't understand something, you need to ask me."

Heather giggles. "No, sir, it's alright. We got this."

"Ok." I shrug and turn to Trevor. "And how about you? You get the number of the truck that ran over you?"

Laughter explodes from both girls as well as the students closest by. Chuckles and chortles follow as word of my comment spreads. I arch an eyebrow and yell over them to quiet

down before turning back to the girls and Trevor; his face blushes a beet-red, the blood rushing to his face pressuring his pus-filled pimples to stand out more than before. I sigh and speak.

“What was that about?”

Trevor keeps laughing, barely manages to get the words out. “It’s funny, sir, cause I did get hit with a truck.”

Seriously? “How the heck did you get hit with a truck?”

Alayne shrieks and pipes up, clapping her hands against the desk in excitement. “Sir, sir, sir! I know how it happened!” The girl continues to slap both her hands against the desk till I step over and place both palms over hers and tell her to stop; she giggles in response before answering. “But it’s funny, sir! Trevor was on the highway with his four-wheeler!”

I turn back to Trevor. “You do realize that four-wheelers are meant, at best, to be used on county back roads, right?”

“I know, sir. I just wanted to see how fast I could go.” His smirk’s wide enough for me to see the caps in his teeth. “I got clipped by a semi, rolled over the side of the highway into the ditch. It wasn’t that bad.”

I wonder how much blood he lost before the EMS arrived on the scene. “How long were you in the hospital?”

Heather answers for him. “He wasn’t, sir, cause you know the tall grass that’s always on the side of the road? Well, it really cushioned his fall when he was thrown from the four-wheeler.” Teeth glisten as she smiles, pushing cheeks up into her eyes; those twinkle also as she

turns to look at him and shakes her head, ponytail bobbling behind her head. “He’s so stupid, Mr. Romero.”

Before walking away, I tell her that she shouldn’t say things like that, that we’re supposed to be polite. I think back to the end of my second year of teaching, when administration compelled me to begin my last summer with a week-long, eight to three workshop in order to receive my certification for Pre-AP instruction; apparently that’s all you need to prepare to instruct the supposedly gifted and talented. The lecturer was a thin stick of a woman, married to the local meteorologist that appeared on Action 4 News. Kinesthetic learning was the key, she stressed, saying that GT students usually did best when they were allowed to discover information on their own, with their peers and in a manner that allowed them movement, creativity and self expression. According to her and the other teachers I spoke with that had taught Pre-AP before, students of this socio-economic class and caliber were often in need of a challenge – brighter, more inquisitive than the rest, instinctively aware of social mores and taboos. All they really needed was a focus for their wandering minds, a chance to find and express themselves. I’ve decided to follow their advice since I’m the novice. I glance back at Heather’s manic twitching and chattering, Alayne’s country cheerleader perky guise and Trevor’s *Jackass* scars, calculate the probability that this is merely an inkling of what’s to come.

So much for being Pre-AP.

It’s mid-October, which means nothing in South Texas since winter and fall regularly fail to show up. Seven weeks have passed since my Pre-AP students and I met. I lean against the wall outside my door as they walk or saunter inside, rubbing the back of my neck before

snapping my head to both sides, loosening the vertebrae; I know what is about to happen. The bell rings, heralding the inevitable start of class. I push myself off the wall, step into the room, and exhale at the sight of my students: half of them are out of their seats, grouping in twos and threes around their friends, laughing and trading gossip. Alexis Ann Garza's one of the few that's working on the daily question they're supposed to think about once they get in class; today's reads: "When a negative is multiplied by a negative, why does it result in a positive?", a question that came up the day before in tutoring that she attended. She's a small girl, even shorter than Heather. Big, brown eyes, brown like chocolate wafers, glance at her off-task classmates and back at the board, copying the question down; they're tinged slightly red today. She begins chewing on her pen when she finishes, large overbite teeth glistening in saliva, supporting her head on her hand while sniffing all the while. An overheard joke breaks her concentration and she perks up, smiling, lips nearly pulling back to the extent of her jaw. She sneezes again, face flushing red, eyes tearing. I send her to the nurse; Alexis Ann shows up regularly to tutoring anyway, so I'm not concerned if she doesn't finish the journal or if she doesn't grasp the concept of monomials that is today's lesson. I'm grateful for her presence in my Pre-AP classroom, though, since she's the only student I've known in three years that's internally motivated, that wants to learn for the sake of learning. A pity students like her are a rarity. A greater pity that she struggles to grasp some of the concepts that Heather and Alayne pick up with ease.

I wait till she closes the door behind her; I'd rather she not see or hear what I'm about to do. I inhale, gathering my strength, and project my voice to the point that I can hear the echo ricocheting off the walls. "Ladies and gentlemen! Enough!" I wait for the reverberations to take effect and continue, projecting my voice to a lesser degree. "You are all aware of what my

expectations are: when you walk in this classroom, grab your stuff, sit down and get started on your journal!”

Heather, Alayne and the rest finally break from each other and make their way to their desks, pulling their notebooks from bags and backpacks and binders. We’ve already lost three minutes and I consider the next seven that I give them to be just as lost when I end the journaling session for discussion. The majority are quiet, refusing to answer. I prod a few and each answers the same: don’t know.

I rap my knuckles against my desk. “How about you, Heather? You have an answer?” I’m hoping to be surprised.

“No.” She stretches the word like a child’s nursery rhyme. “I didn’t even write anything.”

I run both sets of fingers through my short tufts of hair and grip my head, hoping to squeeze the stress of recurring frustration out of my skull. “Heather, you got to at least try to imagine why a negative times a negative is positive. I mean, isn’t that a little weird? Don’t you want to know why that is the case?”

“No,” she says, short and curt since she’s giggling again; for some reason, Alayne finds this amusing as well but smothers the laughter bubbling within. Heather glances at her and finishes her thought, still giggling. “I don’t care, sir.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I mean, if you say that that’s the way integers work, then that’s the way they work. I don’t care why they do and I doubt anyone here does. We just want to get the answer and get this over with.” Her tone suggests that this should be obvious.

“What if I put this question on a test, ladies and gentlemen? Would it matter then?”

Alayne scoffs at my suggestion. “No, because all we’d have to do is get the other questions right. And even then, our grades are high enough that we can fail and still pass.”

I nod my head, gritting my teeth, and glare at them. “Alrighty then. If you don’t need explanations, if you don’t need to know why the steps work, then open your books up to page twenty-eight. Read through it, take notes if you like and work on problems one through forty; I’ll even let you check the odd numbers in the back. But I don’t want to hear anyone complaining that they don’t understand – cause, after all, you don’t need to, right?”

For once they’re quiet.

I stare them down till they comply and pull out their books, leafing through them till they find the pages in question. Satisfied that they’ve obeyed, I go back to my desk, tap a few keys on my laptop to start checking them off for attendance. My cell vibrates in my pocket, in my hand when I grab it. It’s a number I don’t recognize, so I decline it since I’m not supposed to be taking calls anyway during class. The sound of pages turning, glossed surfaces rubbing against each other, heightens the silence. I try to hurry as I scroll down the list of students; past experiences have taught me that I have at most fifteen minutes before they break rank and start acting up again. Heather and Alayne will start by looking up, trading glances and stifling giggles. Afterwards, Trevor will – wait, Trevor’s not here. I point and click to bring up the school email, skimming through my inbox to see if there were any pertinent details concerning

his absence; previewing each email, however, taxes my laptop's resources, slowing my progress. I wonder if his absence has anything to do with the PTA meeting tonight since his mom's the Vice President but frankly I don't care – at least for today he won't be my problem. The last email finally loads.

Oh. He's in ISS – In School Suspension.

It's my turn to stifle a laugh. I finish taking attendance and stroll up and down the rows of my students, making sure that they're on task. I don't feel my weight with each step, though, I don't feel the exhaustion threading through the tendons and muscles and bones. Maybe Trevor's absence is a portent for how today will turn out. The unknown number dials my cell again. A number of students look up from their work as I stare at the number again, unsure if I know it from somewhere. I arch an eyebrow as I meet their stares, compelling them to return to their work and slip my phone, unanswered, back in my pocket. I keep ambling through the rows, stepping over backpacks and handbags, smiling as I shake my head and continue walking when Alayne and Heather look at me to ask a question.

Sometimes I enjoy teaching for all the wrong reasons.

Twenty minutes pass and they're still quiet. It helps that today's subject is a simple derivation of basic concepts they picked up last year; simplifying monomials is just a matter of multiplying or dividing coefficients and adding or subtracting the exponents of like terms. Why these techniques work when it comes to simplifying monomials was something I had hoped to explore with these students; understanding the origin and underlying mechanics of an algorithm makes it easier to use. The door opens and Alexis Ann walks through, sniffing. It's different though. She's been crying.

“What’s wrong, Alexis Ann? You alright?” I whisper and stop her by the door. I don’t want to ruin the unprecedented silence.

“I’m okay.” She frowns, gritting her jaw shut to keep her lip from trembling and wipes the tears running down her face; I can hear the cough drop knocking against her teeth as she swallows hard. “It’s just my mom, sir.”

I take the yellow copy of the nurse’s referral from her hand and put it in the drawer with previous copies. “Why are you angry at your mom?”

“She got mad at me when I called and asked her to pick me up.” She shakes her head, refuses to look at me. “Said she was too busy working.”

I grab the tissue box and hand it to her. “What does she do?”

She blows her nose and holds the tissue towards me; I sigh and grab the wastebasket so she can toss it in there. “She’s an assistant principal. She’s always busy.”

“So tough it out.” The number calls again. I ignore it again. “You’re holding your own in a Pre-AP class, working harder than everyone else to just pass, so holding out for a few more hours shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

She just shrugs her shoulders, so I hold out my arm, indicating that she should take her seat and continue with the work. Five minutes later I intercept a note from Heather en route to Alayne. Heather’s scribbles are in purple, Alayne’s in green. It’s the usual litany of superficial shit: *man, how fucking boring Romero is, did you see what that bitch is wearing, OMG that motherfucking cheater frenched her even though he was still with you, no it can’t be true it’s just a fucking lie, can you believe that Romero’s talking with claire, i no, dat bstrd! yeah he never*

talks with us like that, why is trevor in iss, oh they caught him pissing in the football field while the girls were running on the track.

So much for working quietly all this time.

I drive my index finger repeatedly on Heather's book, digging my nail into the pages, indicating she needs to get on task. Her only response is to laugh; after seven weeks, the punch line's still lost on me. I shake my head as a call comes in again and walk away, the phone seizing in my hand. I slip out, confused: I never had a cell phone till I had graduated from the university since friends were scarce like water during the annual *canicula* and I only had one now because my parents wanted for my brother to be able to reach me in case of an emergency. I rarely even turn the ringer on.

I can barely make out the female voice coming out the other end, deciphering from the sobbing and hiccupping and stuttering what's she's trying to say. "Oh my God, you picked up. I-Is this Joaquin?"

"Yes, this is. Um, who- "

"It's about J-Juan. He - he got your number and told me to call you if anything happened."

This is the first I've heard of him in four years.

I slump against the wall as my legs begin to buckle. Throat constricts shut, knotting in my neck. "And how do you know my brother?" I cough, hacking on phlegm as I try to swallow enough saliva to speak; I finally manage to spit out a question. "Is he ok?"

I hear her sniffles over the phone, hear her clearing her throat. “I’m his girlfriend. That’s how I know him. And I don’t know if he’s ok.” The line goes silent save for the sound of her breathing. “The police just said that he was in an accident and the doctors haven’t told me shit.”

I can’t swallow, can’t breathe, can’t even really hear her voice. Odd how quiet the hallway seems. Blood pulses in my head, pounding against my skull, slamming into the nooks and crannies of my brain. I let my arm and cell fall against my leg, too weak to bear the weight of the message coming through. My voice finally finds me; I think that on some level, though, I’m not really answering, not really telling her that everything’s gonna be ok, that I’ll be there as soon as possible. The sound of my students talking and joking with each other, off task, books and assignments and calculators forgotten, the sound and sight of Alayne’s boots rapping against the floor as she rushes from Heather’s seat and slams into hers finally registers on my mind, waterfaling over me.

She shrieks when she realizes that my glare has settled on her, decides to go on the offensive. “That’s not fair, sir! How come you get to use your cell phone but we can’t?”

Heather shouts at me from the front of the room. “She’s right, Mr. Romero! You can’t get after us if you’re not going to follow the rules!”

I clasp the cell phone shut in my hand, tendons pulling at my bones, plastic and circuitry straining under the pressure. I’m really beginning to dislike this class.

It’s bright outside the glass exit doors of my school and I can see the flag in the park flapping to the south. It’s a brisk November afternoon composed of a naked sky, the sun shining

like an incandescent bulb and a nippy northern wind (the first of the year and a little early for the Valley) perfect for the run I like to take after work. Not today, though; even if I had the time, my brother finally woke up yesterday. So my afternoon begins by watching Heather's mother, Mrs. Cepeda, plod toward my classroom, a woman about forty pounds overweight. Each footfall sends waves through her calves, exposed by the pair of Capri pants she's wearing. Mrs. Cepeda wears her shirt un-tucked, a navy blue canvas accentuated only by the Wal-Mart logo and the stitching underneath it that reads 'Business Center'. Whatever strands of black hair aren't pulled into the ponytail arc in their own separate directions. A purse made of vinyl and buckles hangs under her left armpit, the leather dried and plated into cracks with sharp edges. Her shoes seem to be made of a brown leathery material, held together by straps; as she gets closer, I realize it's just her calloused feet and *chanclas*. Her cheeks are a palette of mottled brown, just a shade darker than the prevalent tone of her skin, like the spots on a panther that from a distance can't be seen.

I smile and motion her inside but it's a mere formality; I – sincerely, genuinely, from the bottom of my shallow soul – loathe talking with parents. After three years in the classroom, it's still an aspect of my profession that I haven't resigned myself to; if possible, I won't speak with parents and if not, I'll make vague generalizations without any mention of specific behavior. Most of the time, parent conferences are nothing more than bureaucratic procedure and red tape. Parents nod their heads like complacent sheep, hearing for the second, third, or fourth year straight that the child won't do the work, that their child doesn't turn anything in, that their child refuses to behave; some of them even have the audacity to cry during the meeting at their helplessness in dealing with their child's behavior. Nothing changes after meeting with them; sometimes the behavior even gets worse since the delinquent knows that their parent won't do

anything to stop them. But sometimes you have to meet with them. Sometimes it's because parents ask to. But more often than not it's because I get desperate. Because sometimes there's specific behavior that I just can't handle anymore:

Heather's incessant talking's driving me insane.

Mrs. Cepeda does her best to fit into one of the student desks that I've set for the two of us while I slip in mine. I've brought only one thing to this meeting: the spiral notebook where students who serve detention sign in and write down the reason for their momentary incarceration. Heather's currently holding the record: eleven in three months; Trevor's a close second with nine and Alayne rounds out the medals with eight. I go ahead and begin.

"Mrs. Cepeda, I just want to thank you for taking time to come by. We all have a busy schedule, but this is something we need to talk about." I begin leafing through the notebook to reach the last page where I've noted the total number of detentions.

"Well, Mr. Romero, there is one thing I'd like to ask you: how long have you been teaching?"

I clasp my hands together and shrug a shoulder. "You'll have to forgive me, ma'am, but I don't see how that matters. Ignoring my age, or the number of years I've been teaching, the fact remains that your daughter's behavior is of concern to me." I continue peeling through the notebook.

"Sir, I ask because I think that you're too young to be a good enough teacher that knows what he's doing and frankly, the only reason I'm here is to simply tell you to stop harassing me."

I stop mid-leaf, the page fluttering till it falls under its own weight and look up; eyes glare at her from behind the bushy eyebrows that have dropped defensively. Lips twitch as I struggle to find the words for a possibility I hadn't considered.

“According to my daughter, you have a problem with the entire class, Mr. Romero. She's not the only one misbehaving. And from what I understand, you have a little boy in that class, Trevor something, and his mom's the vice president of the PTA and I don't see her here. And I know she hasn't been here because I called and asked her, so I have to ask myself why you are willing to persecute me to get me in here and not them.”

I draw a long breath, the cooled air scouring my throat. Hold the moment, I tell myself; imagine the cold air gathering, swirling and churning, breaching like a flash flood through the folds in my brain, dousing the rage flickering, smoldering, threatening to raze my self-composure. I exhale, smoothing my features to a façade of calm while she continues.

“So please stop calling me, sir. Once your class is under control and my daughter's still acting up, then I will deal with it. But till then, she is your problem.”

Lady, I've neither the patience nor the time to deal with this shit. I've only called twice; the second time was to schedule this damn conference. I try to include you in the solution, try to be diplomatic with your daughter's behavior, and this is how you treat me? Like I'm the problem? I close the notebook, fold hands against each other and push down, snapping the knuckles and leaving the fingers perpendicular to my palms. I exhale and focus; I'm going to keep this civil – I can do this.

“Mrs. Cepeda, regardless, the state of affairs in my classroom, I must say again – the fact remains that your daughter is misbehaving. Whether or not I meet with the other parents is none

of your business. The only business you should be concerned with is your daughter and her behavior. Now I have done what I can within the classroom to rectify your daughter's behavior. Now it's up to you. Because if your daughter doesn't change, the only choice I have left is to write her up and get her out of my classroom."

If this conference is the precursor of a pattern, she will be the last parent I ever choose to meet.

I rise from my seat, toss the notebook to another desk and take advantage of my temporary height to deliver my last lines. "So rest assured, Mrs. Cepeda; I will no longer," I pause to smile – politely, of course – and arc my eyebrow, "harass you. Thank you for coming and have a nice day."

She corkscrews back and forth out of her chair, rising, surpassing my height, but I'm not about to back down. Nothing's said; we're both adult enough to know that there's nothing left to communicate. Our glaring eyes remain fixed between us, neither blinking, our wills channeling through them like invisible forces that have reached stalemate. Overly dramatic, I know, most likely the result of watching the last lightsaber duel in *Ep.III: Revenge of the Sith*. But this is my school, my room, my students. Backing down is not an option.

She leaves without a word when the realization settles in. My smile disappears, leaving a blank face in its wake. I gather my things. Today's the first time I'll speak with my brother in four years; I hope that conversation will be better than this one.

The McAllen Medical Center is right off the expressway snaking west, a huge complex of white buildings and packed parking lots. Restaurants and hotels surround it, palm trees popping up sporadically like weeds that refuse to die. Inside it's sterile white, the occasional grays allowing the doctors, nurses and orderlies to punctuate the fluorescent-lit hallways and dim rooms with their blue, maroon and sea-green scrubs. The receptionist at the desk gives me a double take as I approach, stutters for a moment when she gives me my brother's room, three doors down after taking a left, on the right. I knock the open door before stepping in.

"Quinn?" His raspy voice saps my strength; he never sounded like that before.

"Hey, Juan. Alright if I come in?"

The seconds till his answer seem like an eternity. Scratches and scrapes fleck the left side of his face, accentuate the cast swallowing his left arm and the one swelling over his right leg. The neck brace pushes against his chins; he's gained about sixty pounds since I last saw him. "Yeah, man. Sit down."

I settle into the chair beside, his face barely lit by the lamp. "So what's the diagnosis?"

"The what?" He can't even turn his head to face me.

"What the doctor said. What did the doctor say?"

He scratches himself with his good hand. "I'll spend a few months on my ass, a few more in traction. He said the breaks were clean, said I got off easy considering what happened."

He continues with his story, including the beginning which I already knew. He always had a habit of speeding, loved blitzing through urban centers and residential areas till the trees and homes and restaurants became a blur of brick and stone and green. My father had wanted to

be fair with who got to drive the car between my brothers and me but avoid a fight at the same time, so he only kept one of our names on the insurance policy and each year it had been someone else's turn; if Gabriel or I had ever snitched on Juan when it was his turn, Dad removing his name from the policy would have been the least of his worries. But I guess being a brother meant more than being a son. Unfortunately, that sometimes had meant that on the way home I'd wake to the sound of sirens and flashing lights; somehow, though, he'd always talk his way out of a ticket. That charm ended, I suppose, when he left and got himself a Kawasaki Ninja 650R; we began receiving tickets and then warrants in the months following for his arrest in the mail from La Feria, Edcouch, Elsa, San Benito, Alamo, Weslaco, McAllen, Donna, Roma, Brownsville, Edinburg (even Corpus Christi once) about two weeks afterwards. That said, he knew he was a wanted fugitive so when he noticed that a patrol vehicle was tailing him, he took off, triggering a police chase. I guess he imagined that because he was one a motorcycle, the wheels of speed and maneuverability would allow him to escape pursuit. And he would've had he not then driven full speed into an unmarked police vehicle that was caught in traffic, subsequently launching his body over said police vehicle, breaking his arm as he cracked the windshield and dented the hood.

So instead of having to tell my parents that their prodigal son is dead, apparently I'm going to have to tell them that he's probably going to jail.

It's the seventeenth day of December, the last hour before noon, the last few minutes before Christmas vacation officially begins at Gutierrez Middle School. Unlike my colleagues, who are either in front or at the bus stop itching, waiting for the few remaining students to leave,

I'm at the Sports Complex of Harlingen, a park by a man-made lake, surrounded by a track of peach gravel; occasionally my fellow staff members use the park for field trips when we can't afford to use buses. According to my principal, there are students here that aren't supposed to be. The December drizzle is cold as I step out of my truck, an oddity considering that winter weather in the Valley is a rarity, sometimes even on Christmas morning. The drops of cold water sting my face, counters the numbness seeping into my skin and spreading through my beard. My Converse sneakers grind asphalt and pebbles with each step. The bathrooms to my right are tagged by graffiti to be the property of The Westside Locos; the odor of stale urine, acrid and sharp, is barely dampened by the cold. Most of the students, running and jostling against each other, are barely reaching the playground. My first assessment is that most are girls. The second is that they're all from my Pre-AP class; after spending the entirety of this semester getting after them, I can spot Heather, Alayne and Trevor from a distance in bad weather within a crowd of their peers. I ponder momentarily what Heather's mother would say now of her behavior. The trio spots me coming and gather at a picnic bench, the other students emerging from the swings, slides and merry-go-rounds. If my principal had known who had run off, she probably wouldn't have sent me. Even so, because this was still a school day, we were still liable for the girls' well-being and so I'd been asked to follow them, supervise till their parents picked them up.

And people wonder why I say that I'm nothing more than a glorified and overpaid babysitter.

"Ladies. Trevor." I stop a few feet from where the girls are sitting and keep my hands tucked into the pockets of my vinyl jacket as I make my way to the playground. Alexis Ann's the only one still standing, coughing and wheezing by the oak tree. "Your principal wants to

know why you ran off school premises to a place that you presumably outgrew several years ago.”

Heather pipes up. “What’s the big deal? School was over.”

Alexis Ann’s coughing worries me. I gesture at Heather to pause on the explanation and focus on Alexis Ann, noticing the yellow grass in her hair. Her cheeks are too red to be from the cold. There are scrapes on her forearm. “What happened to you?”

“I fell down,” she answers between wheezes. “Tripped while running.” Each breath seems a struggle, the tendons in her neck stretching her skin as she doubles over gasping.

“You have asthma?” When she nods affirmative, I step towards the picnic table. “Your inhaler in your bag?” Alayne hands me Alexis Ann’s backpack. I rummage through it and toss the inhaler to the poor girl. I shake my head; despite having finally achieved an A in my class, Alexis Ann can still be naïve. At least she’s quieter than the rest. “Better?”

“Yeah.” She wipes the tears falling from her irritated eyes and takes another shot from her inhaler. “Thanks.”

“Good. Now start explaining why you’re all here.” I take a step back. “Last time I checked, you’re supposed to wait in the front of the school, not take off unsupervised.” I turn, eyebrows arched, to face Heather, Alayne and Trevor, shifting my weight to my left leg. “And no, I don’t want your explanation, Heather.” There’s no grass in either girl’s hair and Alayne’s skin’s as pale as usual. I file the details away and point to Alexis Ann. “Her I trust.”

“What did I do?” Heather’s smile, incredulous I imagine, nearly hides her crescent scar. Usually it’s nothing more than a faint, tan line dipping from the corner of her lips on the left side of her face; the cold renders it a faint henna tattoo resembling an integral laid flat.

Alayne joins in on the conversation. “We’re not lying to you, Mr. Romero – not this time anyway.” She’s imitating the sarcasm that is my usual attitude.

“Alexis Ann hasn’t given me a reason not to trust her, ladies, so I’m still willing to – at least for now.” Ever since I met with her mother, Heather has improved on her game. The week afterwards, she dragged a piece of lead across my floor, leaving behind a mess the custodian had to clean, finding out only when another student ratted on her afterwards. Watching her manically masticate her gum reminds me of when she decided my laptop needed to be decorated with her gum and spit; that was two weeks ago. At least when she was chewing gum there was a reprieve from the constant, incessant talking, the irritating equivalent of a mosquito buzzing around your ear, nipping the skin without staying put long enough to be killed. While most apples don’t fall far from the tree, this one’s still connected. “You all have given me plenty of reasons.”

I listen distractedly while Alexis Ann explains that they were going to wait at the park till it was time to go to a party at some boy’s house, one of the members of the soccer team I coached; two police vehicles are parked nearby in such a way so that the drivers can speak comfortably. I wonder, worry what they’d make of a man in his twenties speaking with a group of adolescent girls in the park; if they think anything at all, hopefully it’ll be drugs. The drizzle ceases, the cold relents. After some prodding, it becomes clear that not everyone had called their parents for permission. They swap cell phones and argue with their parents while I call my

principal and brief her on the situation. Despite my innermost prayers, I'm not relieved from my duty to these students; my principal insists she'll be here in a minute. I slip my hands back into my pockets, crossing them as much as the jacket lets me to keep warm and lean against the oak. Spotting the goal posts off across the pond reminds me of when my brothers, my father and I would come and play soccer here, passing and juggling the ball the way my father taught us as children. That sort of thing lost its meaning once Juan left.

Heather walks towards me once the others are done with her iPhone, her shoes cracking and crushing the acorns against the dirt and roots alerting me to her presence. Alayne and Trevor aren't far behind. "So why aren't you yelling at us, sir?"

I refuse to look at them. "I can start if you like."

Alayne beams, whitened teeth gleaming somehow under the overcast skies. "You won't do it," she whispers.

I know her well enough to know she's daring me, deliberately goading my sense of authority; I wonder if her mother told her to do that. "No, I won't. We're not in class, I'm not teaching and it's Christmas. I just want to leave in peace." There's an empty Budweiser can nearby, slightly dented. I kick it, flicking it closer to the trash can. "Besides, Heather, I'm pretty sure your mother would prefer if you wouldn't speak with me, so drop it, ok?"

"Do you drink, Mr. Romero?" This one comes from Trevor.

"No." Doesn't mean there aren't days you and the rest of your class don't make me want to.

Heather picks up the slack. “Come on, Mr. Romero, don’t lie. It’s not like the principal’s here.”

“I’m serious, Heather. I don’t drink.”

“Why not, sir?” Alayne’s expression, replete with arched eyebrows, slack jaw and gaping coffee eyes flecked with yellow, enforce her question. “I thought that’s what everyone did when they got out of high school.”

“It’s a religious thing.” I watch my breath fade into nothing. Asphalt crunches beneath tires as my principal shows up in her Escalade. “Something my father taught me.”

“So what are you? Christian or Catholic?” Heather’s tapping her foot rapidly, practically bouncing off the seat.

I arch an eyebrow, confused by her question. “You do realize that Catholics are Christians, right?”

Alayne jumps in. “I thought that only Catholics drink.”

I shake my head at their naivety. “That’s not necessarily true, ladies; the truth is that sometimes saints come in all shades of sin.”

Trevor stares at me unwaveringly. “You still haven’t answered the question, Mr. Romero.” He smiles to annoy me with the fact that I can’t avoid their inquiry.

“What does it matter to you?”

Heather shrugs her shoulders, pouts her lips. “Just wondering. You don’t talk about it.”

I glance at the other girls gathering round the principal, watch as she talks with them and what seems to be one of the mothers that has shown up. “It’s not something I advertise, Heather.”

“Why not?”

“Because there’s no point in doing that.” Some of the girls leave with the mother. The remaining return to the table while my principal takes a call some distance from all of us. “Faith should just speak for itself.”

They don’t continue the conversation and I don’t push it. The girls whisper amongst themselves, trading glances at both the principal and myself while Trevor fiddles with his camera phone. The mothers, older brothers and sisters show up in their vehicles, one, two at a time. Most of the parents seem indifferent that they’re picking up their daughter at the park watched by two police officers and a teacher instead of the front of the school. Heather’s mother finally shows up, spits a glower at me before taking off. At least she didn’t speak with the officers and whisper in their ears.

The seventeenth day of December, now a brisk evening, finds me pulling into the parking lot of La Estrella Apartments, several blocks west of UTPA. Each building is a hive of white doors set in a U-shaped, grey-bricked arrangement. Rust corners corrupt the small barbeque pits that sit outside some of the doors. Oil stains permeate the parking lot, splotching the pattern made by the yellow designation lines. Juan’s apartment’s in the seventh building. He opens on the fifth knock.

“You came.”

“Surprised?” I know I am; I knew “El Flaco” had gained weight, but the hospital gown and sheets had disguised the extent of his expansion. Shirtless folds of fat hang over the elastic lining of his shorts, the earth’s gravity pulling on them like the moon pulls the tides. Tattoos of Chinese characters garnish his shoulders, enhancing La Muerte, Aztec warriors and the elaborate cross dipping beneath the cast; piercings glisten off both ears, fake jewelry studs. The neck brace is gone. I sigh, force the lopsided grin familiar to my family to counter the awkward realization seeping through my being: Juan is everything our father had raised us not to be. “It’s the beard, right?”

“Nah, bro. Just didn’t expect you to show up.” He hobbles aside to let me in. “And the beard looks good. Different, anyway.”

The apartment’s small, a twelve by ten living room in front of a kitchen half its size; stairs to my left presumably lead to the bedroom. The entertainment center holds a GameCube, an Xbox 360 and a thirty-two inch flat screen as well as a small library of DVD’s. The couch is an L-shaped piece of lint covered furniture, faded black in color. He continues when I sit down. “You know, with all we went through, I never said thank you for coming by. When I was in the hospital and all that shit.”

I know what he means. “So we didn’t get along growing up. You’re still my brother, man.” I glance at the photos of him on his motorcycle to avoid his eyes. “I mean, what kind of asshole I’d be if I didn’t visit, right?” Even so, my mom had practically begged me to visit him after I lied to her that I had caught up with Juan in a video game store. We chose to keep his return from my father, though; I told her that Juan had made me promise not to tell him anything.

He scoffs, eases himself on the other side of the couch, mindful of the cast still on his leg, grabs his motorcycle helmet and proceeds to polish it with a rag with his good hand. “So what does that say about Gabriel? I mean, fine – Mom can’t because Dad and I don’t get along. But Gabriel? What’s his problem?” He leers at me. “And since when did you start swearing? Aren’t you afraid of not being a good little Christian?”

“Let’s just say I’ve reassessed the meaning of the word.” Whereas I amended my internal definition, he apparently decided the easier solution was to simply eliminate it from his vocabulary. I end the silence spreading between us. “And, uh, as for Gabriel, he’s busy with the nursing program, man. You know that.”

“Bullshit. You, me, we don’t even like each other that much. Me for being me and you for being Dad’s little snitch. But you’re here.” He shakes his head gingerly, mindful of his neck injury; I’m almost sure that he’s about to cry. “Gabriel could’ve made the time if he wanted to.”

I never shared the bond that Juan and Gabriel have – had. Growing up, I was content to just read a book, nestled on the couch with a fan to keep me cool, sweat drops on the page occasionally breaking the immersion of the text. Truth is, I had found my brothers annoying. Had hated the constant chiming of their laughter and banter, had despised their ideas of fun, such as trekking to the overgrown grasses and overarching knots of mesquite trees behind our house, poking the remains of empty bottles and cans left behind by illegals traveling north through the brush. I’d wanted nothing to do with either of them whereas Juan had actually played the part of the big brother, standing up for Gabriel in elementary school when I would argue, conveniently, that he should stand up for himself; that was one aspect of my birthright that I had been foolish enough to let go of.

Truth is, I don't know what I'm doing here. Don't know if I'm reaching out to him in order to atone for not being a brother or just doing as my mother asked. I don't know if it's simply because Gabriel won't. Lately, I don't know much of anything anymore. So I tap my fingers on the arm of the couch and continue with what I do: "Gabriel feels you betrayed him. The way he figures it, if the rest of us stayed, you should have too. No matter how bad things got."

"Easy for him to say. He wants the life Dad's forcing on you."

I clench my fingers into a fist, popping, cracking the knuckles; impossible to argue that point. Counter-productive if I tried. I nip my lower lip and avoid the issue. "I'm not going to argue with you, Juan. I know why you left. I don't think it was the right decision, but I can't say that I don't understand."

He stares at me, steady and unmeasured. "Fair enough, bro."

I exhale and my intestines unravel just a bit. "How's the girlfriend?"

"Preggers." He finally puts the helmet aside, scratches the hair behind his ear and glances at me. "Yeah, I had the same look on my face."

I'm still figuring the possibilities, all the ramifications. "You serious? You're gonna be a dad?" The conclusions are all the same: the dynamics have shifted past the event horizon, past the point of no return.

Things aren't gonna go back to the way they were.

"Yuppers. Found out four months ago." Juan massages his neck; I know he wants to snap it like he used to. "Fucked up, right?"

“Pretty sure she’s the one effed up, not you.” I wonder if the sarcasm is enough before pointing out what we both would rather ignore. “So – you gonna tell Dad?”

“Ok, first off, you said on the phone that you haven’t even told him that you know where I’m at, right? Secondly, aren’t you the one that always told me never to ask a question you know the answer to?”

Maybe I did because I was hoping for a different one. “You’re wondering if the heart attack would kill him before he finished squeezing your neck. And then if he’d still have enough strength to beat my ass for not telling him where you are.”

“It’s like we always used to say, man: there are easier ways to commit suicide.” He smirks that lopsided grin I know so well, the one that made the girls my age in high school prefer him over me despite the fact he was my younger brother. He grabs a controller and tosses me the other one. “Enough of this shit, man. You still play Halo?”

I grasp the controller, fingers automatically finding and folding into familiarity. I smile and shake my head; of course, Juan would find a way to play one-handed. “It’s kind of a necessity nowadays.”

He maneuvers through the co-op screens, choosing a level named *Covenant* from the *Halo 3* campaign, the longest of the game, rich in targets and variety and sets the difficulty to Legendary. “What do you mean?”

I think of the weekends I spend playing the game on Easy, sniping alien infantry or gutting their parasite-infected bodies, semi-comatose in my unlit room, still in my working

clothes, trying to de-stress after a day of dealing with Heather, Alayne and Trevor. “Let’s just say there are days when I really, really need to shoot somebody.”

We’re back from Christmas vacation. It’s 3:30, ten minutes to go before school’s out. My Pre-AP students have disorganized; few continue working on their homework assignment while most put their binders up on the shelf or talk with their friends. First week back from Christmas, my expectations are less than usual from them; students acclimate quickly to a certain lifestyle at home and I’ve learned that students need time to get used to being back to the structure of a school environment. I walk back to my desk in the front by the only window and ease myself into my new black leather chair. I had never bought myself anything in my previous years as a teacher, always figuring I should make do with what the school provided. It doesn’t matter to me that the drawers in my desk didn’t close properly or that my closet couldn’t be locked or that my computer can only run Windows 1998; I don’t see the benefits in bothering administration with those kind of petty complaints. And for the two years that I’ve been teaching, it didn’t matter that my desk chair was so small, so hard that it was preferable to stand than to sit in it—at least it didn’t, till three months into this semester with these students. So I bought myself this chair; for as cheap as it was, all I had to do was screw in the stand where the rollers are to the actual chair itself, a design element I greatly appreciated. The plush seat and back cushion and comfort my muscles and bones. The back pushes just enough against my shoulder blades and is just tall enough that I can lay my head back and let that top bulge of padding support my neck; there’s a faint ache from constantly snapping it.

I sit back and breathe. My fingertips tap against the threaded seams at the end of the arm rest, piano keys playing in my head of what I remember of Raul Di Blasio's *Corazon de Nino*. Juan learned to play this piece several years ago, about the time he was my students' age. He never wrote down the music he came up with but I could always hear the difference. He'd always apply a hip-hop mentality to the piano, repeating chords with slight deviations to set an overall beat to the freestyle, randomly changing to a different chord and then returning back to create a constantly shifting rhythm. There was no beauty or harmony when he freestyled on the piano – the beats reverberated with rage and defiance, the resentment he felt for all the hours my dad forced him to practice. But when he played pieces like this one – *Corazon de Nino* – he played with such clarity and grace, fingers deftly moving from one key to another, synchronized to the notes he read from the page.

I think those were the few times he was at peace.

“Hey, sir.” I tilt my head forward at the sound of Heather's voice, leave Juan and his piano in the back of my mind. She's sitting on my desk, feet crossed, hands folded on her lap. She has her hair in pigtails today.

“Please remove yourself from my desk, Heather; I shouldn't have to tell you that that is inappropriate.” I glanced at the clock. Five minutes. “You have a question.”

“Nah. How was your Christmas, sir?” She stares at me unwavering.

The fact that this kid's talking to me is proof that God doesn't like me. “Fair enough. I take it you're asking cause you want me to ask you how yours went?”

“Well, since you’re asking” – she can barely get the words out her giggling chest, managing to stretch them out – “my Christmas was awesome. Especially after the fight.”

Why the hell are you telling me this? I arch an eyebrow, swivel in my chair away from the computer to face her and sigh. “So there was a fight over Christmas? How was it?”

“You should’ve seen it, sir. She really kicked her butt. Wiped the floor with her.” She turns to the desks by the bookshelf where Trevor and Alayne are talking and calls them over.

“Hey, you remember the fight right before Christmas?”

Trevor slumps against the wall while Alayne answers. “Oh yeah. Too bad we had to cut it short.”

I slacken my eyebrows, knead my fingers into the folds of skin and ask because I’m supposed to and there are witnesses that would testify otherwise if I don’t. “You were fighting, Alayne?”

“I wasn’t the one with grass in my hair, Mr. Romero.” She scoffs and smirks, long tresses of blonde hair shimmering under the fluorescent lights. “Besides, sir, you were the one there; you knew we were ok.”

What? “What are you talking about, Alayne?”

“Sir, we had them fight that day we were getting out for Christmas, when we were at the park. Remember? That’s why Alexis Ann had grass in her hair.” Mistaking the look of alarm spreading over my face for confusion, she waves at Trevor. “He has it on his phone. Want to see?”

Trevor perks up at the sound of his name and hands me his cell, an iPhone with a smudged, scratched and cracked faceplate. The camera frame shakes and dips as the pixilated video plays, detailing two figures at either end of the screen. Trevor's finger breaks into the scene briefly before someone removes it. I hear Alayne's voice, mixed with static, still recognizable as she yells at them: go, hurry, the teachers are coming! After counting down to three, the two figures rush at each other; Alexis Ann's tanned skin and hair the color of polished mahogany identify her while the other girl remains incognito. Alexis Ann swings left, then right, the video skipping when the frame rate can't keep up with her movement; neither strike lands since the other girl simply tackles her to the grass. Alayne eggs the girl on, encouraging her: yeah, kick her ass! The girl pins Alexis Ann's right arm beneath her knee and proceeds to ground-and-pound, every other punch setting down against Alexis Ann's face. Ground and girls blur as the pixels average the color difference that continues to change as the barrage continues. Heather shouts at them to stop, noting that my truck is fast approaching. Heaving, panting fills the background, the video cutting short as they sprint to the playground, Trevor's voice instructing them to get their story straight.

For some reason they're surprised when I take Trevor's cell phone to the office.

It's the week after Trevor's cell phone has been turned in. Besides sitting down with administration to report the events of the day before Christmas break, I've done my best to stay out of the matter. While my regular-ed students have just began their TAKS regimen, I continue dragging my Pre-AP class through the book; we're currently sifting through polynomial operations, the addition, subtraction, multiplication and division of binomials and trinomials.

Part of our difficulty lies in the fundamentals; when I attempted to get them to study and analyze the commutative properties of addition and multiplication, the associative properties of addition and multiplication, the distributive property, the additive identity, the additive inverse, the multiplicative identity and the multiplicative inverse, to sample the connections between these terms, they gave it no more than a glance, remembering it long enough to pass the test that was the prior chapter. Now, when they actually need to understand the implications of these laws of mathematics and their applications, most of them are stumbling and unfamiliar with the feeling of frustration most prefer to choose the zero for their grade.

I should've focused on the vocabulary.

Their desks face the whiteboard, face my back as I transcribe a mathematical expression on the board and begin simplifying it. Before each step, I ask them what needs to be done – do I first distribute this monomial left of the trinomial within parentheses or do I subtract the binomial to the right of it first? Alexis Ann answers most frequently, but not always correct. Others occasionally answer, but only after I wait them out; they keep hoping that I'll answer for them. We settle on an answer, sometimes only after I've instructed them to go back to their sparse notes or the books they've left in their lockers since they can't seem to grasp the concept that they're merely applying the order of operations to polynomials, and then I narrate what is taking place in the expression, stepping from left to right. All my professors taught this way, leaving us afterward to practice on our own. It's how I learned, it's how a lot of us learned. There were tutoring centers, but I never used their services; forcing my brain to wrap itself around an alien concept or skill by myself pushed me to really understand it.

Not what the pedagogy says I should do with Pre-AP students, but what it says I should do with them hasn't worked the way it said it would, so I'm doing what has worked with me.

"Sir!" Alayne interrupts me mid-simplified expression, stretching out the word into a pout. "This is boring! Why can't we work in groups?"

I don't stop writing, the glare from the light bulbs gleaming the board blank at certain angles as I step from left to right. "Because when we did go over this in groups, you all did nothing but talk. I even had to move you all back to rows."

Heather this time. "We won't talk this time, Mr. Romero! Promise!"

"I said no, ladies." I lean backwards to see the clock; eight minutes left.

Heather presses forward with her auditory onslaught. "Come on, sir! You're no fun!"

I slam the cap on the marker and spin to face her. "Shut it, Heather! I said no and that's it!"

Alayne speaks up to defend her friend. "Calm down, Mr. Romero. You're getting all butt-sore over nothing. Just like you did over Trevor's cell phone."

Bitch. "Outside, young lady! You're not going to talk to me like that!" I feel my throat tearing with each decibel my voice raises, the migraine swelling in my head as my frustration peaks.

She swaggers by, staring me down, muttering. "I just did so I don't see why you're yelling. No point now, is there?" Trevor nods his head as she passes by, lightly thumping his chest in approval.

She gets the better of me. “Just you wait, Alayne. Wait till I talk to your mom.” I struggle to breathe and get the words out, each breath fanning the rage within, bringing it to climax, raising it to critical mass.

She drops her voice to a taunt. “I don’t care. Go ahead and call her; I dare you.” Alayne slams the door behind, a thunderclap to the rumble-storm of my voice.

Five minutes to go.

I hook my left thumb on my belt, rest on my left leg; there’s no point in moving forward with this lesson, no point in finishing this problem. I clear my throat, mutter that they should go ahead and put away their things, that the bell will be ringing shortly. Desks scrape the floor as several of them, Heather and Trevor included, practically burst out of their chairs, simultaneously wrenching them from their initial position. I lean back against the white board, the expression incomplete, and try to breathe, try to calm myself down. My father would have never tolerated this sort of behavior. He was always the Authority, absolute and unyielding. Never wrong. Always right. *Si te digo que la cabra’s negra, es porque tengo los pelos en la mano*, he’d always say; I once considered walking up to him with tufts of white fur from a goat covered in black and white fur just to see what he would say, but I figured that living long enough to lose my virginity was more pleasurable than throwing that in his face. Any suggestions even implying the contrary were immediate tell-tale signs of rebellion, insubordination, and arrogance, a folly Juan and I committed time and time again; our youngest brother, Gabriel, knew better and learned from the examples Dad made of us.

A cry of pain yanks me from my reverie, jolts me with the certainty that someone’s hurt. I march over to the source: Alexis Ann. She bites her lower lip, upper lip twitching as she

struggles not to cry; there's a piece of .7mm lead stemming from her right palm, between the index and middle finger. I ask her for her hand and look at it closely. Right at the point of insertion, the skin's grey where I can see the bit of lead passing through the first layer of skin. I write her a pass to the nurse and send her on her way before turning to the people next to her: Heather and Trevor.

I cross my arms to keep the wrath coursing through my veins from shaking my arms too much. Even so, my ire puts a growl in my voice. "Ok. Who's going to tell me what happened?"

For once, Heather's ever present giggle is gone. "It was an accident, sir. I was just trying to poke her with Trevor's pencil and she was using her hands to stop me. It was a game."

Trevor throws in his two cents. "She's telling the truth, Mr. Romero. It wasn't on purpose."

I glance at the clock: two minutes left. "Stow it. I'll deal with both of you after the bell." I march outside; Alayne's sitting off by the dual glass doors despite the fact that she should be standing by my door. The last thing I need is for administration to hear my voice echoing in some other hallway that they happen to be in, so I point back to my classroom, telling her to go inside. She leers at me as she swaggers inside, breaks out into laughter when Heather and Trevor, giggling once again, mock how I reacted to what happened between them and Alexis Ann. I wait for the bell to ring, wait for everyone else to leave the room.

They sit there, clustered at the two rows of desks, teeth glinting as they grin incessantly; Alexis Ann's bag is left behind. I glare at them the way my father used to glare at me and Juan. Still they continue talking, giggling amongst themselves. I gather my breath to yell again and the

room echoes with my frustration; it captures their attention just long enough for Heather to glance at me and smirk.

“You think this is funny, young lady?” I fold my arms across my chest and step forward. “The way you disrupt and interrupt my class with all your talking? You think it’s funny to see me get all worked up just because you can’t shut it, you can’t be quiet? Huh? What, Trevor, it’s just hilarious that you never turn in a single paper?” My arms drop to my sides, wave wildly as point and accuse. “You think Mommy’s always going to be there to bail you out from trouble? And you, Alayne! You never pay attention in class, you never take notes, never take the time to read the material – but, oh, the minute you don’t get it, the minute you can’t figure it out that’s when you whine and nag and complain that you don’t get it. But I gotta put up with that, I gotta put up with all that crap, all that garbage, right?” Spittle flies from my lips, my hands ball, contract, bond into fists.

None of them is smiling now, but I recognize the emotion gripping their face, erasing it to blank mask of defiance. Alayne speaks for them, arching an eyebrow like I have done so many times before. “Isn’t that what you’re paid to do?”

I take two steps towards her before something pulls me back, muscles pulling each other in opposite directions, tendons and ligaments stretching contradictorily, leaving me twitching mid stride, leaving me to simply pace and turn *como un león enjaulado*.

I got to hit her.

I can’t hit her.

I shouldn’t hit her.

I won't hit her.

Got to hit – something.

Red catches the corner of my eye, focuses my attention on the University of the Incarnate Word's bumper sticker on the side corner of my filing cabinet. I march over, root my feet in the bitterness, in the frustration of teaching this Pre-AP class. It's not just kinetic energy travelling from my feet, through my spine as I twist my torso into the punch and cascading through my arm as my elbows straightens and my fist connects; it's rage, indignation at the audacity of their disrespect, despair in the helplessness to change these students.

It's what my father felt when he struck Juan.

The top drawer pops out, as if the filing cabinet had just hiccupped on the sudden infusion of energy; my knuckles are indented on the top right corner that faces me from the front. The middle joint of my index finger's cut and seeping blood as the entire hand shakes from the impact. I look up, meet the eyes of Heather, Alayne, and Trevor. Their glibness, their defiance is gone, nervousness and uncertainty left in the wake of their departure. I mutter for them to leave and fall into the supporting comfort of my chair.

I'm alone and the room's finally silent.

“So what happened, bro? Did they fire you?”

I'm in Juan's apartment again, only this time we're playing the Horde Mode from *Gears of War 2*. A pizza box lies open on the floor, half of the contents consumed. Colored plastic cups stand by our feet on the carpet, fizzing. Mounds of boneless chicken wings dripping in

honey BBQ sauce lie beside us on the couch, ignored because our thumbs and fingers are too busy twitching and darting over the surface and buttons of our respective Xbox 360 controllers. He's beating me on the kill score; his cast's long gone, his fingers once again as dexterous on the controller as they were on the piano. He's grown a goatee now, maintaining a clean and smooth shave on the rest of his face. Our favorite band, Linkin Park, rocks out over the speakers he's rented from *Conn's*, lyrics of rage and despair keeping tempo with the violence of our game.

It's no surprise to me that as toddlers we were mistaken for twins.

"Nah, they didn't fire me. I got reprimanded though; Heather's and Alayne's mom both came in to complain to the principal." I decide to take a few bullet holes for the chance to chainsaw an enemy drone. "The good thing's that administration decided to have my back this time around. Don't know if they'll do it a second time, though."

"So those bitches shat all over you just because you punched a filing cabinet?" He switches to the flamethrower and cooks a drone that roadie-ran a corner straight into him.

"It wasn't just that. They claimed that I had been verbally abusing their kids throughout the year." I use the D-pad to select the ink grenades and lob one down the hallway of our map.

"You were cussing them out?"

I pause the game to think about it. "No. But I'd say stuff like – well, one time the girl Alayne asked me what I'd do if they would ever behave, so I said that I would kill myself so that way I could die happy but that if I woke up to the sound of their voice, then that would mean that I had gone to the wrong place."

He un-pauses the game. “And that’s what they call verbal abuse?” He waits till I nod in agreement, my mouth savoring the succulent mix of honey BBQ and ranch sauce. “Shit, they should’ve met Dad.”

“Hey, at least the boy’s mother didn’t say anything.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t considering what you told me. What was she again?”

“VP of the PTA. And well, the thing is that she couldn’t say anything cause by the time the other moms met with administration, Trevor had gotten arrested on campus for having weed in his locker so it was like she didn’t have a leg to stand on. Who knows what would’ve happened if she had actually said something.” I wipe my fingers on a napkin just in time to switch to the sniper rifle, pull up the scope and headshot a Boomer lumbering down the hallway. “So, hey, when’s your court date?”

“Already went, man. Turns out all I’m getting is like parole since hitting that police car was my first offense.” He roadie-runs and grabs the fallen chain-gun from the Boomer’s corpse and rushes back.

I cap a drone approaching behind him. “Dude, you sure? I mean, the last thing I want to find out is that you getting extra time for not showing up for jail.”

He slams against the wall for cover, peeking out just enough to unleash a storm of lead at the approaching Locust troops. “Nah, I’m sure, man. Just gotta make my payments, do my community service, meet with my parole officer and I’m good.”

I smirk at him. “I guess it helped that Dad kept you out of trouble all those years, right?”

He smiles and flicks me off. “Fuck you, Joaquin.”

We immerse ourselves back into the game but a part of me remembers why I haven't told my dad that Juan isn't in San Antonio like he believes. I nearly did, though. A week after I punched the filing cabinet, I found my dad sitting in his truck; the lawnmowers were still on the trailer and the ramp was still locked in position. The passenger window was open, allowing the smell of grass, leaves, and dirt that had accumulated on the floor, on the cloth-covered seats, on the dashboard and below the mats to waft through. He was just sitting there, hands on his lap, palms up. Legs were splayed apart. His head hung there, limp, tear drops rolling one after another off his cheeks, dripping off his chin. His lips scared me. They quivered, literally twitched. I knew my father; he was fighting for control, fighting to maintain the self-composure that defined him, fighting to keep the sobs bubbling from his mouth. I lowered my satchel, laid it on the cement. He didn't react when I opened the door and sat by him, the musk of his grass stronger than ever. I didn't know what to do or say at that point; comforting my father was only slightly rarer than being comforted by him. "I miss my boy," he said. The sobs gushed out of him as he doubled over.

When I saw him like that, it reminded me of a passage of Scripture: O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!

But I know better than to tell him that Juan's in a city close to our home; Absalom tried to kill his father before he died and the rage, bitterness and resentment I find in the verses concerning Absalom are the very traits I see festering in my brother. Juan left because he couldn't forgive my dad, and while that choked the life of my father in regret and heartbreak, it's a preferable alternative to knowing that your son still hates you so much he won't drive forty miles to see you.

Juan stops the music and the game when his girlfriend comes down the stairs with my newborn nephew. Jeremiah's like any other baby, his pink little face topped with smooth, smooth black hair and comfortably smothered by swaddling blankets. I wonder if he's going to be like his father when he grows up –

Another Pre-AP student that failed to live up to his potential.

CHAPTER IV

CUPID MISSED

It's the Friday evening before Valentine's and I'm making my way through the cafeteria to the entrance doors, ready and eager to go running. A number of students working at the lunch tables greet me as I walk past them. Hearts of iridescent yellow and pink butcher paper celebrating the holiday cover the usually bare window panes that make the northern wall of the cafeteria. A DJ station is set up at the stage. It surprises me to find Claire Renee here, coloring in some words. Like most teachers, I have my favorite, and like most teachers, I'll deny it to any who ask. I worry that sometimes she does not understand the material in class since she's always hunched over her desk, hair completely covering her face, too shy to speak up about what she might not comprehend. She maintains a steady C in my class and whenever she has time to herself, she never speaks to anyone, opting instead to read or work on her comic strip, small panels of stick figures crushed by the word balloons that overflow with dialogue.

She's more of a writer than an artist.

"Hey, Claire Rene. Odd finding you here."

She twitches a shrug, her head moving closer to her shoulder than the other way around.

"They asked me to. Said they needed help." It's hard to understand her mumbling through her braces.

"For what it's worth, it's nice to see you participating in something like this." I adjust my bag and turn to leave. "Have a good time at the dance, alright?"

She shakes her head almost imperceptibly, streams of shimmering coffee-brown hair barely rippling back and forth. “Not going, sir. You?”

I catch her eyes glancing at me from behind her cascading bangs. “Yeah, I got asked.”

For once, her eyes lock on mine. “Girls? Can ask guys to the dance?”

I wonder what she’s referring to, then realize my gaffe. “No, not what I meant, Claire Rene. The office asked me to help chaperone. That’s the only reason why I’ll be here during the dance.”

She ponders my words for a moment before returning her attention to the decorations on the table. “I run also. My mom makes me.”

It shows; she’s one of the few students without the usual folds of baby fat. “Oh? How many miles?”

She holds up two fingers and grins slightly. “I’ll be here too. Alone.”

I know vaguely what – who – she’s referring to. Instead of crushing like her female classmates on the up and coming jock or the aspiring wanna-be gangster who thinks that shaving the ends of his eyebrows makes him a bad ass, Claire Rene had set her eyes on Alonso Reyes, a boy somewhat like herself. She was in choir, he in band. He excelled in my class, giving him time to read the same mangas she did. And of course, just as shy.

I feel bad for her and decide that a few kind words won’t hurt. “Be patient, Claire Rene. He’ll come around.”

She doesn’t say anything, merely nodding her head as I make my exit. I hope my words don’t sound as hollow to her as they do to me. Words like that tend to mean nothing coming from someone who is once again, for the twenty fifth year on Valentine’s Day, alone.

No one in my family really understands why I run. My dad thinks I'm trying to look good for the ladies, my mom thinks I'm trying to lose weight and my brother thinks that I run because I'm not disciplined enough to lift weights like him. The staccato of my sneakers slapping against the asphalt as I begin my run and pull out of the school parking lot is a reason. The sun beating down on my head, boiling the beads of sweat bubbling up from my skin is another. I run to gasp for breath that won't arrive, to know what it's like to not have it, till I'm dry-heaving as I try to fill my lungs with air. To re-acquaint myself with the pain of the shin splints splintering the bone with the shock of each impact, each stride coming faster and faster till muscles cramp in protest, till I have to stop or collapse in exhaustion.

It's not the pain; I'm not emo or a cutter. It's just that when I run, the experience overwhelms my senses, my mind and for a few minutes each day, I can forget.

It doesn't always work. As I finish my third mile, I'm still possessed by her memory. It's been seven years since we last saw each other. We had tried to stay in touch through AOL Instant Messenger since I couldn't afford a cell phone but that petered out quickly. She had been busy enjoying senior year, I had been busy working with my father three days out of the week and struggling academically for the first time in my life. By December, we were no longer in each other's lives. I picked up running shortly after that. It gave me something to do, something to focus on besides the enormity of my failure to act. Even so, I tried to replace her with various girlfriends between then and now, but each was short-lived, aborted before the relationship could coincide with Valentine's; I guess at some point it just became the tradition of my life to alone on this day.

It's funny; I've literally been running away from Jenny Martin.

I glance at my watch; another twenty seven minutes and twenty two seconds of my life gone. I hobble to the nearest bench and sit. The man-made lake shimmers before me, the water and reflected light rippling together. I'm close enough to the shore to see the algae undulating below the surface. My memories of Jenny are like this lake; pretty on the surface, disgusting below. On the surface, yeah, it's great to remember some of the best moments of my life. But the truth is that I'd rather not. While the fact that I'm presently twenty five and single is usually just a bitter pill to swallow, it becomes an extremely irritable suppository when I consider that I had a chance to be with her. I could've stood up to my father or gone behind his back the way my brothers eventually did. Instead of eating lunch alone in my car that first year of college, I could've made a point to call from a payphone and leave a message. I could've gone to see the plays she was involved in or make plans to spend time with her on the weekends by the other city lake, the one across the public library.

I should've at least –.

“The beard looks good, Joaquin.”

I look at her and have trouble believing it: she still has the same glasses.

In sixth grade, I sat in the middle of my row, bored with the math problems I was working out even though the rest of my classmates struggled with them. They knew better than to try and copy off of me though; it had taken the better half of a year, but they finally caught on that I was deliberately working out the problems wrong. I had to turn in the correct work afterwards to keep my grade from being affected, but it was fun watching their bewildered faces when they got their worksheets back and realized that our grades didn't match. Because of this, I

usually spent lunch secluded in the library, scrounging the shelves to see if my favorite *Animorphs* book had been returned.

Today I hid for another reason: it was Valentine's. Most of my classmates were excited about the holiday, about the Candy-grams that they had sent and the Candy-grams that they were hoping to receive, convinced that this year Valentine's would be for real, that it wouldn't be the little kid stuff we were used to back at Jane W. Long Elementary. I knew better than to put any stock in it. My dad had already made it clear that this particular Valentine's would mean exactly what the previous ones had meant: nothing. You go to school to learn, he loved so say, not to be holding a little girl's hand, so *pa que vas a comprar lo que no necesitas con dinero que no tienes para dárselo a una persona que no te he permitido dárselo?* That's why while my classmates spent twenty minutes slathering their hair with gel and making sure to douse themselves in a haze of deodorant, I simply followed my routine and stayed in the library; at least this way, I didn't to have to listen to Michael Subia brag about getting Candy-grams from Gracie Trevino, Jessica Moreno, and Amanda Quintana. Call me a budding sociopath, but if I lit a match around the flammable-fumed bodies of my classmates, would the resultant inferno smell like a blood-curling barbeque or Old Spice?

Unfortunately, lunch (and my hypothetical situation) had to end and I had to mingle with the general population on my way to math class. Despite the holiday, despite the fact that the football and cheerleader hopefuls of my class would have never admitted it, they were still somewhat wary, traveling like a coalition of fragile cheetahs keeping an eye on the local pride of lions that were the popular seventh and eighth graders. I didn't care, having learned long ago that when the big dog walks, little dogs step aside; it may have taken longer to slip through the library back doors, slink past the office and back through the cafeteria, exit out to the portables to

where the band hall was and then back up the stairs to math class, but it was preferable to reprising my role as the human Ping-Pong ball of Memorial Middle School. Besides, my path had fewer classmates on it, meaning that an added benefit today was that I had less reminders of what I was missing out on.

Not as easy now that I was in class. Not as easy now that I was done with my work and I had nothing to draw my attention away from the hearts and cards cluttering my classmates' desks or the lollipops most of them were rolling around in their mouths. As interesting as *Animorphs #13* was, I couldn't help but notice the way Gracie Trevino, aware that Dustin Villarreal hadn't stopped staring at her from across the room, suckled the candy cane that came with her Candy-gram, or the way Eloy Cano rubbed the tip of his sneaker against Megan Gonzales's ankle from where he sat behind her, the way she bit her lip in response. I wished it was for me that Gracie was licking the candy cane, wished it was me Megan was thinking about. I wished someone would think of me.

I hadn't thought that God would answer so quickly, that the eighth grade student poking in through the door would be delivering a Candy-gram for me. I looked around; apparently, my classmates were as surprised as I am. Some of the guys seemed to be angry, wondering what girl would have chosen me over them, while the girls seemed shocked, possibly even happy that someone would've been so nice to me. But I bit my tongue once I read the message so they wouldn't see my disappointment, focused on keeping my face slack despite gagging on the disillusionment bubbling in the back of my throat. I should've known better, should've realized that her kindness would compel her to do this, that her lack of foresight wouldn't have considered how embarrassing this message would've been. The tell wasn't what was written, but how.

It was in my mother's handwriting.

My personal life didn't improve much in the following years. My brothers used to joke that the first car I'd ever get would be a minivan. Granted, Juan meant it as an insult, but there was truth to it. Whether it was the result of being raised as a Christian or my father's focus on family (since he grew up without one), I had always wanted a meaningful relationship, a family of my own. My favorite Scripture growing up was Proverbs 5:18-19 – Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all time; and be thou ravished always with her love. I imagined it to be the perfect culmination of love and sex, blessed by God. Of course, the great irony was that in high school I remained as socially inept as I was in sixth grade. For all the energy I spent wondering if my current crush was the One, I never spoke to whoever was currently holding the title. Natalie Philips in fifth grade had been the first, a white freckled girl with golden blonde hair. She remained The One till I went to Teacher's Academy in Mercedes and met Kathleen Catindig, a Philippine girl who was a combination of beauty and intelligence that I hadn't encountered up to that point and only talked to me because we were both in the Science Team for UIL. Claudia Herrera took the title from her the following year when I returned to Memorial Middle School; we had initially bonded over the *Tekken Tag Tournament* arcade while on a field trip to Peter Piper Pizza but I never spoke to her again. Once my family and I visited the First Baptist Church of Combes and I found out that my ninth grade U.S. History classmate, Lacy Breshear, was a member, I promptly transferred the designation to her. She, in turn, lost it to the greatest of them.

I met her in Ms. Hauff's tenth grade English class. She sat on the other side of the class, wearing a black sweater and a voluminous dress made out of quilt patterns, black horn-rimmed

glasses occasionally tilting my way. It was easy to notice when she did that; she'd tug at her shoulder-length blonde hair every seven minutes or so. Unlike the others, she actually befriended me. After three weeks of talking whenever we had a chance, she even asked me to spend lunch with her in Ms. Hauff's classroom.

The door was ajar and the room was unlit when I walked in. Ms. Hauff sat at her desk, papers strewn before her, and glanced at Jenny and smiled when she noticed me walking in. I nodded tentatively at her and walked over to where Jenny sat alone, reading.

"What are you reading?" It wasn't Star Wars, so I wasn't really interested.

"Oh, it's some of the translated works of Pablo Neruda." She crossed her legs, her Converse sneakers grazing my shin. "Hey, I wanted to ask you something. Have you noticed that your voice dropped about eight octaves from last year?"

I stopped pulling out the school laptop that had been checked out to me. "What's an octave?"

"It's like a measurement of sound or something."

"Hmm. I wouldn't know –"

"Obviously."

"Not my fault. My brother's the musician and my other brother's into sports."

Jenny smiled ever so slightly and closed her book. "And who are you?"

I looked up from my laptop. "My dad would say confused."

This elicited a chuckle from her. “And what makes him say that?”

“He ” – I paused to shrug and tilt my head to the left – “doesn’t understand why I like math and scientific – stuff.”

She tapped her fingers along the spine of her book. “Doesn’t your dad like really expect you to go to college? Wouldn’t he be happy that you’re into all that?”

“Science and math don’t really mesh well with a fundamental faith derived from a literal interpretation of the Bible. He calls it serving two masters.” If she hadn’t been in my AP classes, I would have worried that she wouldn’t understand what I said.

“So science and math count as one?”

“One of the few things we agree on. Way I figure it, math is the language of science.”

“So you don’t believe in all that? I thought you did.”

“No, I do. I believe that Christ died for my sins, the Earth was created in six days, God obliterated the world with a flood, a jackass spoke to Balaam, a blind man tore down a temple around his enemies and that once the sun stood still in the sky. But the way I figure it, if we’re not supposed to question the Bible, then there’s not a lot to talk about.” I wondered if the use of ‘jackass’ was enough to offset my encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible.

“So why don’t you say anything whenever we start talking about stuff in class?”

I wanted to say that it’s because I have my own opinion and I don’t really give a damn what other people think, but I had learned enough from previous interactions with my classmates

that she didn't need to hear that. "I'm the nerd of our AP classes, Jen. No one cares about what I got to say."

She made no attempt to argue with my conclusion. "That include your dad?"

I laughed at the paradox, that she could tell what mattered to me, what I cared about, but resented that he had entered our conversation. "Pretty much. He doesn't even like my questions whenever we study the Bible. He calls them *preguntas causales*."

"What are – what did your dad call them?"

"*Preguntas causales*? Oh, I never really figured that one out; something gets lost in the translation. I just figured that he really wanted me to stop asking questions."

"You and your dad don't really get along, do you?"

"We get along fine. I mean, he loves me. I know that, I've seen what he's sacrificed, for our family. I just don't think he likes me."

"Well, I don't always agree with my mom either. We've had some pretty bad fights."

I squinted my eyes, slowly shook my head. "Yeah, my brothers and I don't really fight with my dad, per se. It's more like being endlessly, endlessly – endlessly – lectured over some minor offense we're not exactly sure we committed."

"He sounds tough."

"He's a good man. I mean, it's not his fault. He had a really tough childhood."

"So because his was tough yours should be also?"

“Jenny, my childhood wasn’t that tough. I haven’t had to steal from the neighbor’s field of corn to make tortillas so I can eat or get backhanded by my mother’s latest boytoy. When I turned twelve, I didn’t have to drop out because I had to work for a living. I’ve had it easy compared to him. ”

“That doesn’t change the fact that he’s a drill sergeant, Joaquin. You told me last week that you don’t do soccer or UIL because he won’t let you participate, that all you do is school and church, and that he doesn’t even pay you when you work for him! For crying out loud, you’re sixteen and you’re still not allowed to date. I mean, isn’t there someone you’d like to date?”

I stopped fiddling with my laptop to actually look at her. Like always, she hardly used any makeup. The curve of her hair mirrored the smooth contours of her face. Rosy pink lips pursed slightly into a smile that dimpled her Irish crème skin. The horn rimmed glasses rested on her speck of a nose, a pair of nostrils built like a gently curved isosceles triangle. She stared at me, unwavering, unblinking, eyelashes heavy with eyeliner, just enough to emphasize her brown irises.

I should’ve just told her.

I look at her: she still has the same glasses. “Jenny Martin. It really you?”

She sits next to me, ignoring, I imagine, the stench of the sweat emanating from every pore on my body and soaking my shirt. “I’m not a hallucination induced by exhaustion or a heatstroke if that’s what you mean. But if I was, would I be a fantasy or a nightmare?”

She always was able to make me laugh, put me at ease. “You’ve always been a dream come true, why I always appreciated knowing you.” I pause to catch my breath. “So what are you doing here?”

“Visiting my mother. After I went to the University of North Texas and decided to stay there, she’s been complaining that I don’t see her enough. As for here, specifically, well, I used to come here senior year. When, y’know, you were gone.” She clears her throat to gloss over the time we drifted apart. “So how often do you run?”

“Two, three times a week. If I don’t space it out, I get really bad shin-splints.”

She runs her eyes over me from top to bottom, a gentle grin tugging at the corners of her lips. “It’s done you good. You’re not as soft was you used to be.”

“I prefer sensitive.”

She giggles, bending over as it takes over her, shaking her body. “Thank you for that - I miss this, Quinn.”

I swallow what little spit’s in my mouth as I sense she’s patronizing me. “It wasn’t that witty a remark, Jen.”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “And there’s the negativity. No, I was trying to say that I missed you – not your remarks, or your self-deprecating jokes, but you.”

I was always slow on the uptake. I apologize and we make plans to meet Friday for dinner. My breath escapes my lips like a prayer I had never hoped to have answered as I watch her leave in her Ford Escort, the tires crunching the loose asphalt beneath. The sun, nearly drowning in the horizon, is a gentle glow now. The wind kisses my skin, an exquisite experience

sweetened by the sweat glistening on me. I smile and head back to the parking lot before making my way home.

Unlike my classmates who were allowed to enjoy being seniors, my dad had insisted that I finish high school in three years. So I finished the eleventh grade sitting in the gym with the actual seniors, listening to some girl across from me wax on about how close she felt to all of us since we were graduating together – never mind that none of them had ever met me before.

My parents sat in the stands of Boggus Stadium, lost somewhere in the fields of people camped to view the graduates. I wore a white shirt and black tie with black slacks beneath the graduation robe that billowed nicely in the breeze but puffed up like a fat suit when I sat down. This was the first time I had set foot in our home stadium; even if I was inclined to spend money I didn't have to be with people I didn't like to watch teams I couldn't join to play sports I didn't enjoy, my father wouldn't have allowed me to go. Belonging to a fundamental Baptist faith and doctrine meant I didn't belong to anything else. According to my father, UIL would've made an atheist of me while high school soccer would have introduced me to dirty jokes and beer in water bottles. Hanging out with my friends afterschool would've led to smoking and possibly sex outside of marriage.

I finally picked my family out in the crowd midway through the superintendent's speech. My dad, as I had guessed, was standing, video camera in his hand and panning over me and the rest of my graduating class. Sunlight glinted off his gold bracelet, watch and the two rings topped with diamonds; I looked at the gold watch he had given me just hours before and wished he had let me see Jenny instead. She had wanted to introduce me to her mother.

“*Y pa que quiere eso?*” my father asked between mouthfuls of rice and the side of baked chicken. “Why does she want you to meet her mother?”

I used the fork to push the rice around my plate; as always, talking with my father took away my appetite. “We’re good friends, Dad. I’ve known Jenny since tenth grade and her mom wants to know who she’s hanging out with.” I figured the argument he used with me and my brothers to meet our friends had a chance of working with him to my favor – for once.

“*La has conocido por un año?* You see her a few minutes a day for a year and that’s being a good friend?”

“By now it’s been nearly two years and we have a lot of classes together. She’s a good person, Dad.”

He paused to wipe his mouth. Not a good sign. “Is she a Christian?”

“She goes to Christian Fellowship out by the airport. The big one.”

I should’ve lied. He pushed his chair away from the table and stared at me. “That isn’t a Baptist church.”

“Non-denominational. That’s what she said.” Honesty had become my worst policy.

“That’s a liberal church *llena de Cristianos carnales*. So-called believers who couldn’t quote you John 3:16 if their lives depended on it. That’s the kind of girl you want to go out with?”

“Dad, we’re just friends. We’re not even talking about going out or anything, we’re talking about her mom wanting to know who her daughter is spending her time with!”

He jabbed his index finger in my chest, his immaculate long fingernail digging through my shirt and into the skin of my chest. “*Primeramente, güerco mocoso, tú no me vas hablar así.* Even if you ever become half the man you think you are, I will still be your father and you will not raise your voice at me. Secondly, *si esa mujer*, if Jenny’s mother wants to meet you, *es porque tu* little friend Jenny wants to be in a serious relationship with you. Or are you too naïve to see that?”

I didn’t trust myself to say anything right, so I simply stared at my plate and kept my hands on my lap.

“It’s a good thing you’re graduating then. You’d only get yourself in trouble with the Lord – and with me – if you kept seeing that girl. Be patient, *mijo*. There’ll be time for dating later.”

The applause thundering around me shook me from my brooding. The salutatorian and valedictorian both gave their speeches, essays I’m sure they spent hours working on that no one would remember. I spent the time trying to find Jenny in the crowd. Once or twice I thought I spotted her; despite her being a blonde in a predominantly Hispanic gathering, I just couldn’t make a positive identification.

The ceremony finally ended, my certificate in hand pending verification of my grades. The seniors around me cheered, cried joyfully in celebration. I kept my face blank and non-committed while my family was still a distance away; this was as close as I could get to expressing what I felt. I could see why they celebrated. It wasn’t the state exams they had passed, the scores they had achieved on the SAT’s or even the colleges they had been accepted to. They were celebrating the relationships that had formed among them, the bonds that fastened

them together tighter than brothers and sisters, even the love that had blossomed between some of them.

Since I had none of those things, I had nothing to celebrate.

Even so, I smiled when my family showed up with their cameras. While this day may not have mattered to me, I knew the significance it held for my father: it was the first obstacle to overcome on my way to college. In some ways, this was even more important to the aunts and uncles that showed from my mother's side of the family; for my cousins, this was the pinnacle of academic success rather than the stepping stone it represented to my father. I kept quiet through most of it, grinning and smiling and thanking them for coming to see me. It was while I was taking the last of the photos with my Gulf War veteran uncle and his wife that I noticed Jenny hiding behind a tree.

My father placed his hand on my shoulder. "So, Joaquin. You ready to go? We got Pizza Hut, remember?"

I made my decision. "I'll meet you at the car, Dad. Just want to say good-bye to some friends if it's alright."

I watched him go with my mother and brothers, waited till they were several yards away to go to Jenny. "Thanks for waiting."

"He doesn't want you to meet my mom, does he?"

"Yeah. He doesn't." I swallowed hard. "Sorry."

“It’s ok, Joaquin. It’s not a big deal.” She folded her arms against her chest and shrugged, staring at her shoes the entire time. “You look pretty cool without the cap and the robe open like that. It’s billowing like a cape.”

I smiled and looked away to keep from blushing. “So I’m a superhero now?”

“Albeit a short and thin one and without powers, but a superhero nonetheless. At least to me you are.”

I loosened the tie I had kept snug for the photos. “Does that make you the damsel in distress?”

“Well, that’s where the metaphor breaks down because I can clearly kick your ass any day of the week,” she said, pausing to tilt her head from side to side, pretending to ponder the question. “But, yeah, for you, I could be the damsel in distress.”

I chuckled. “I’m going to miss talking with you, Jenny.” My smile disappeared as the ramification of my graduation finally settled in my head. “I’m going to miss you.”

She tiptoed to hug me and I did best to memorize the feel of her body against mine: her thin winding arms around my neck, the tips of her dainty fingers just grazing my ears. I ran the touch of my hands against the small of her back in a recursive pattern through my head so I wouldn’t forget, focused on the raised indentation of her bra just under the blouse. I treasured the sensation of the warm air she breathed against my skin from where her head was tucked against my neck, the bolts of electricity that jumped between our knees as they bumped while we hugged. I would’ve given the gold watch on my wrist, the scholarship I had received to the

University of Texas – Pan American, and my brand new car to have stayed there in that moment. To pull her in close and fumble through an awkward kiss with too much saliva.

Instead I pulled back, told her I had to go. I saw the disappointment in her eyes, in the frown spreading across her face as I held her hand and squeezed goodbye. I thought I'd never see her again.

The Harlingen night scene isn't much of one and what there is populated by either the young or the older. Starting at seven o'clock Fridays, teens dominate the movies and the mall, the places of choice to be on weekends. Older people, couples middle-aged and up fill the restaurants on Harrison and Tyler and US 77; sometimes they're alone since it's their bi-monthly date night and sometimes their children join them. People my age, in their twenties, usually find themselves in the few clubs or bars here if they can't find the gas to go to McAllen or Edinburg, where it's popular to be.

Of course, I've never been popular.

I met Jen at Chili's. I had no interest in dancing or watching a movie. God had given me a second chance with her and intended to take full advantage. I wasn't going to let any shackles or obstacles keep me away this time. I was ready now. I may still be living at home, may still be under the thumb of my father, but my savings were nearly complete and soon I would be able to move out. I'd start by asking her to join me at the Valentine's Dance taking place Saturday. After that we'd start talking again like we used to and soon we'd be a couple.

Soon.

We settled in our booth, ordered our drinks and our food. “So tell me, Quinn. What have you been up to?”

“Well, believe it or not, I’m a teacher.”

She lit up the way I always imagined, hoped, fantasized that she would have if I would have had the courage to ask her out years ago. “Oh my God. That’s awesome!”

I darkened in return, allowed the pause to settle and cement between us for shattering it with the truth. “No, not really. The truth is that I kinda suck at teaching, Jen. And it’s funny cause I should’ve seen this coming. I mean, present company excluded, I didn’t like kids when I was one, right? And now, I’m supposed to be a teacher, spending seven, eight hours locked in a room with them? It’s been four years and I’m no better at it than the day I started. Every year my TAKS scores are the lowest compared to my coworkers. There’s students I can’t get along with, parents who make my life miserable. I thought that by now I’d be good at it and I’m not.”

Ranting kept me from telling her the darker truths.

She smiled to alleviate the mood and to thank the waiter as he brings our drinks. “You haven’t talked to anyone about this, have you?”

“Friends like you are in short supply, Jen. My brothers are busy with their own lives; John’s married and has a boy – yes, I’m an uncle – and Gabriel’s a nurse and engaged. And my dad – well, y’know that story.”

She laughed, played with the straw’s wrapping. “No, I remember. That hasn’t changed?”

“I like to say that the relationship between my dad and me, unlike wine, hasn’t aged well.”

“So it’s more like milk?”

“Yeah. We’ve spoiled, curdled and now stink like really bad cheese.”

“Y’know, Quinn, your job can’t be that bad if you’re still able to laugh like this.”

I lied and grinned. “I know. I just like to complain – it’s part of my charm.” Forks scraping against plates, snippets of a dozen conversations around us, ice falling against glasses as waiters and waitresses refill empty glasses filled the air between us as we paused to eat some of the food before us. “So what’s new with you?”

She nodded her head, pursed her lips and swallowed, bangs of blonde hair framing her face like a negative quadratic equation. “Career-wise, nothing like you. Finished a degree in graphic design, still working my way up through an advertising agency. The really new thing is that I just got out of a five year relationship.”

Oh, thank You, Jesus and all glory to Your name. “Wow. What happened?”

“Well, you have to understand what was going on for five years. We met, hit it off, and started hanging out. Eventually Daniel and I were having dinner, then lunch on a regular basis till one day it was also breakfast.”

“What’s so special about breakfast?”

She tilted her head to the right, tucking her hair behind her left ear so it wouldn’t fall over her glasses. “Quinn, I’m trying to say that he stayed overnight. I was trying to avoid saying that

I finally put out, bumped uglies, knocked boots, did the horizontal tango – or, in a word, fucked. I know, I know, not something you approve – ”

“It’s ok, Jen, it’s ok. For starters, we’re friends and you don’t have to explain yourself to me. And secondly,” I paused to sit up in my chair, breathed deeply to give the idea that I’ve matured, “love isn’t something you should apologize for.”

She stopped eating, ran her fork back and forth on the plate. “Does that mean you’re not a virgin?” Her voice was low, not quite a whisper.

I looked down at my plate of chicken strips dipped in barbeque sauce; I wasn’t strong enough to meet her eyes and tell her the inconvenient truth. “No, I still am.” I grinned to ease the embarrassment. “I guess you can say I haven’t been lucky in that department.”

“Come on, Quinn. There must have been someone. I mean, you’re handsome enough to have gotten there.”

“Thanks, but things really never worked out. They kinda petered out before we got to that point. Besides, between school, working with my dad and then working as a teacher, I never really had time for one.” In hindsight, I suspected that both my exes had realized that I had been using them to get over Jen and it was why they chose to end their respective relationships with me.

She didn’t blink, didn’t smile as she answered. “You could’ve made time if you wanted to. If you had really cared about them.”

It occurred to me that she wasn't talking about them, so I gave the only excuse I could. "What can I say? I was younger, stupider. Didn't have the guts to reach out and take what I wanted."

She shrugged her shoulders and resumed eating. "Maybe you didn't really want them. Either way, a little late to be wondering about it, right?"

I couldn't help but conclude that she was talking about us, subtly explaining that she had moved on. I could have been wrong, so I didn't press the issue. "So what happened to Daniel? Things just didn't work out?"

She bobbed her head from side to side, trying to swallow her food as fast as possible. "You can say that. The problem was that we always had breakfast at my place."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought that with time he would change. When we started having 'breakfast', we had been dating for six out the eight months we had known each other."

"I'm still not following, Jen. What did you want him to change?"

"He still lived with his parents, Quinn! I mean, I could understand why while we were in college, but a year after we had graduated, he was still there! And I thought that he'd finally grow up and make plans to get our own place, but instead he started talking about me moving in with him and his parents because it was cheaper! I mean, how was I supposed to take a guy like him seriously, right?"

Her words ricocheted in my head like a bullet bouncing around, killing me, terminating any hopes of I had of fixing what I had broken years ago. Years of listening to my father belittle

me and my impractical aspirations kept my grin plastered to my face, a mask I wore many times to hide behind, a mask I wore now to keep her from knowing the impact her words had on me. I chose then and there not to tell her about the creative writing degree; I had been hoping to impress with it, but it just seemed pathetic. The dinner went on, seemingly unchanged. The mood was still carefree, not any different from any of the other patrons dining with us. We reminisced over friends we hadn't seen in years, laughed over the stupidities of others we had seen in high school. The small talk continued between us, the banter as lively as before.

The check came and Jenny told me she was so glad that we had been able to catch up as I pay for both of us. I returned the sentiment and walked her out. Tonight was different from that afternoon when we first said goodbye. The cool night air replaced the sweltering heat of that evening. I was wearing a hoodie instead of a graduation gown and the few pesky hairs on my chin had blossomed into a lush beard that I kept trimmed. She wore a dress and slippers now instead of jeans and Converse sneakers.

Unfortunately, the breeze was the same and so was the hug goodbye.

The dance is tame compared to the one I saw in Raymondville. The lights are dim, the music loud. Chips, cake and drinks line several tables along the northern wall. The students stand or sit around in groups, talking, laughing, flirting at the cafeteria tables. For the most part, girls are the ones that drag each other to the dance floor and attempt to synchronize their movement. Occasionally, a boy attempts to impress by doing a routine of his own, but it's more of a comedy routine meant to amuse the opposite sex than a display of physical acumen. Claire Renee surprises me again; for the first time all year, she's smiling, braces glinting, reflecting the

strobe lights flashing above. The joy welling within her is practically tangible, transforming her from the timid girl she's been to the young woman in a rose-petal colored blouse and midnight skirt, just a dash of makeup on her skin and sitting legs crossed at the table. It's easy to see why; Alonso's engaged with her, making conversation, the smile on his face as wide as her own. He notices her empty Coca-Cola can, and leaves to grab another. She turns to talk to a friend, notices me observing.

I asked him, she mouths before her braces burst out again as smiles.

I hold up my thumb in approval and grin in appreciation, turning away. I should be happy for her since she's my favorite student, but – I don't know. Something's off, something I can't identify, leaving me confused, disoriented. I don't want her to think I'm disapproved, so I keep my back to her and join the rest of my coworkers in meandering, chaperoning our charges. An hour and a half later, I check in with the administrator, make sure they know I'm here, and find a column to lean against and rest. Exhaustion takes me over, shutting down my perceptions, suppressing my senses as I recognize why I'm not completely happy for Claire Renee. The music beating and pulsating out of the speakers loses its coherence, dissolves into a drum, a buzz of background noise. The dance becomes a haze of blue and black smudged with the various colored dresses and shirts as my eyes gloss over in thought.

I'm jealous.

I don't remember the dance ending or the headlights shining in my face as parents drive up to pick up their kids. I don't remember driving home or falling into my chair. I don't remember staying there in my clothes for hours, thinking. It's been eight years since I graduated from high school. My TV's where it's always been, against the southern wall, the hamper of

dirty clothes in the southwest corner. The books, DVD's and graphic novels may have changed from year to year, but the shelf they rest on still stands adjacent to the door. Dust cakes the blades and cage of the white fan, having accumulated since the first day I had set it by the window. The table where I type is cluttered with remotes, glass bottles emptied of cream soda, pens, pencils, and a calendar. The walls are still bare, barely lit by the soft glow from the episode of Pushing Daisies playing in the dark. The clock says it's fifteen minutes past midnight; I guess it's officially Sunday now.

Jenny should be reaching Denton right about now. She had left several hours earlier, signing out of the La Quinta Inn by the expressway. I had watched her from Little Judy's Restaurant's parking lot, hoping she'd change her mind and call. Of course she hadn't. She just packed her things in her little Ford Escort and took off. I could've followed, could've tailed her, but I knew when I wasn't wanted. I had already done enough just watching her leave.

I don't know why our paths crossed again. I don't know what the point was. I believed, all this time I believed. That there was a reason for being born the son of a fundamental Christian father when it seemed that nobody else had. That there was a reason my brother left. That there was a reason I couldn't have been with Jenny right after high school. It was the logical conclusion to putting my faith in God, in His will. Now I don't know. All this time I've been waiting for my life to move on, waiting for God to step in and do His thing. It's why I didn't pursue a career of my own choosing, why I put off sex, why I put off chasing Jenny. Because it was the right thing, because better things were to come.

Instead, I'm here.

Still in my parents' home.

Still waiting.

Still alone.

CHAPTER V

WHAT HAPPENED IS A LIE

I finally climax. My orgasm floods through me like a tide swelling over the sand that is my body, the tendons and my abdominal muscles sore from repeatedly straining against her. Sweat drips from my nose. Her shoulder blades jut upwards and stretch the smooth pale skin of her back, her arms trembling just slightly, tense from supporting her weight and mine on her hands as well as on her knees; the thin sheen of sweat coating her gleams in the afternoon light that's penetrating through the lowered blinds. I take a moment to rest my head on her back, release her mocha-colored hair and run my fingers along her ribs, the vertebrae of her spine, skin so thin there's hardly anything between me and her bones. My fingers finish running over her by interlocking with hers, the sound of her sniffing the only one in the room. She had shrieked at first, muffling the sound with her clenched teeth. I had pressed onward, relentless, and eventually she had slowed to rhythmic moans. Now, long drawn breaths pull her flat stomach taut and into her rib cage. Her musk fills my nose, my mouth, tasting like a mix of dirt and sweat and blood and passed gas. I pull out from behind her slender ass and step away from the couch where we had been fucking. The condom's sticky wet as I peel it off to throw it away, semen stretching out as it slips out of the plastic and drips on the carpet.

I fall back on the hotel bed and stare at her. She's about five feet with sticks for arms and neck and legs; she's no athlete, just naturally threadbare. That or she's a druggie. Her bob haircut's matted with sweat, strands curling in the moisture. The black paint on her fingernails

and toenails has been chipped long ago. She glances at me, wipes the snot from her nose and smiles, teeth beaming in the dim room, before walking away, each step timid, neither graceful nor clumsy. There's a slight curve to her calves, her thighs; not a lot of muscle in those legs. She passes by the dresser, grabs a few tissues and wipes away the fluids seeping in between. I lose sight of her when she goes into the bathroom but I can hear her turn the water on to shower. I remain seated on the bed, numbness and exhaustion spreading from my stomach, setting in my limbs and solidifying in my sternum.

I thirst.

She comes back out, dripping, toweling herself off; it hardly jostles her miniature breasts. The towel drops to the floor and she calmly proceeds to pull on her panties and then her jean miniskirt. "You alright?"

I clear my throat and look at the blinds. "Yeah, just, um, tired y'know."

She nods her head, runs her hands through her hair, pressing out another layer of water; she flicks her fingers dry. "We can do this again if you like." She kneels before me, squeezes my knee and smiles. "Believe it or not, I had a good time."

I barely manage to chuckle. "I don't know. I've never done anything quite like this." I look up and grin half-heartedly at her. "Never done anyone quite like you."

"Me neither." Her smile breaks into a fit of giggling as she shakes her damp hair loose so that the bangs can cover the side of her face. She collapses on the bed beside me to put on her Converse sneakers.

I feel the coolness from her body seeping through her clothes. “How are you going to get home? Did you drive here or – what?”

She crosses her legs, rests her head on her hand to gaze at me. “Don’t worry about it, Quinn. You don’t have to give me a ride, alright?” She pats my knee and practically hops to a standing position. “But hey, you have my number, right? Call me, ok?”

She leans over, kisses me on the cheek before pulling her sweater over her spaghetti strapped blouse. She gives me one last look, one last smile before slipping out and closing the door behind her. The click of the metal sliding into place, inserting itself into the hole, saps the last of my strength, the last of my composure. My neck buckles, my head falls. I prop my elbows on my naked knees, grip my head in my hands, wrenching the hair from my skull and wish I had the conviction to snap my neck for real, to snap my neck and end this.

In the end, the only thing I do is cry.

Rows of tables filled the gym for the UIL academic meet, hordes of children hiving around small sets of adults, swarming up on either side and massing along the walls as they formed impromptu games of chess or whatever they were wirelessly networking with their DSLites. The stands were pushed into each other to make room for the crowds, the back wall covered in butcher paper in order to post standings once the competitions had been judged. Stacks of coolers marked each team’s territory, all of them covered in their respective school colors, tables littered with cookie crumbs, ravaged *Snickers* wrappers and empty *Hot Cheetos* bags. The noise made it difficult to think, everyone talking, most of them laughing, chuckling or in some form of mirth. The smell of eggs fried in lard, wrapped in *tortillas de harina* fills the

air, elicited a rumble from my stomach, interrupting the game of Texas Hold ‘Em that I was playing with my UIL students.

I began a poker game with my UIL students and others for two reasons. One, it allowed me to keep an eye on my students since they enjoyed the idea of playing with me and two, I enjoyed playing poker rather than the standard fare of board games like Monopoly (which I never learned) or checkers (which always bored me). The students didn’t really know what to do, raising when they should’ve folded, folding when they could’ve checked. By the time I laid the river down, I had a flush, ace high. I see why one of the remaining girls raised; she had been trying to hide the fact that the flop had given her a pair of queens and a pair of fours and she had been hoping for that one last card that would have given her a full house. The boy hadn’t been too far off, his pair of kings reason enough to be as confident as he was. Nevertheless –

“He should have folded.”

I stopped stacking my newly won chips as her voice, loud in order to be heard and crackling with nervousness, cascaded over me, triggering a wave of goose bumps emerging over my skin, hairs left standing at end in its wake: it’s Mireya.

I swallowed to clear my throat of the dryness that had set in and coughed. “Hey Mireya. How’s high school?”

She leaned against a nearby wall. “It’s ok. They have us on a block schedule, so sometimes I forget where I’m supposed to be.”

I gathered the cards and shuffled them. “You’re too young for Alzheimer’s, kid. You’re probably staying up too late.”

She shrugged her petite shoulders, my hypothesis rolling off her like water slicking off a *poncho*. “You mind if I play, Mr. Romero?”

It was my turn to shrug. “I don’t usually like hosting a table with more than seven players, Mireya-”

The boy next to me blushed and pulled out his seat, offering it to Mireya while, behind a façade of nonchalance, I cursed him and his newborn crush on her. I didn’t blame him, though; as a high school sophomore, it was clear that Mireya had already begun to bud into a beautiful woman, curves filling out her chest. Hair was somewhat shorter than what I remembered, just a tad lighter in tone when it had been comparable to chocolate; however, it was an improvement since it matched her eyes nicely, two pools of honey-brown dotted off with *couveture*. Makeup didn’t layer her face like most of her peers, probably because she had no need to; besides a hint of a pimple on her cheek and another by her chin, her skin was clear. She was near to what I imagined her adult height would be, maybe just under five feet. Slim jeans hung loose from her thin hips, slender legs finishing in a brand-new pair of Converse sneakers. She grinned at the boy, luring a nervous chuckle from him, and slipped into the chair, simultaneously inching herself towards me while scooting closer to the table. I arched an eyebrow and cleared my throat.

“What?” She batted her eyelashes, a smile spreading and gaping across her face, hands in the air in a pantomime of innocence.

Distracted by the tip of her tongue perching on her top incisors, I took a moment to find my voice. I tapped the deck of cards against the table to focus. “Move, Mireya. You know better.”

She scoffed and did so. We played several hands and I did my best to keep the banter to a minimum. After losing four hands in a row, I was called to help judge a round of Duet Acting along with two other teachers that I didn’t know. As I left the students under the supervision of a

co-worker and walked away, I realized that I had never asked Mireya what she was doing at middle school UIL competition.

Another Friday afternoon has found me in my classroom, listening to students recite poetry of their choice. The three girls sit off to the side while the only boy that remembered to show up for practice stood by the naked white wall, stumbling over words he didn't understand. No one had placed at the last meet and only one of the girls had actually done well, scoring four out of five points. The boy currently in front scored the lowest; bad posture, poor choice of poem, lack of enunciation, improper pacing, bland performance. Even so, he was convinced that he had it in him to be a great poet – it never occurred to him that being a poet and reading poetry were two different activities and I didn't have the patience to explain to him the difference. So I sat in my chair, following along his reading with a copy of the poem on my laptop and marked the lines in the poem where he made a mistake, timing his performance. He had a total of six minutes but only used one and a half. Once he finished, I opened the opportunity for the girls to discuss what he did well, what he could've done better, did what I could to guide them with questions without overtly telling them.

We were in the middle of making suggestions for him, coaching him on inflection and pacing, when Mireya strolled through my opened door, arms clasped behind her. She didn't interrupt us, merely waved at me and grinned, sat down quietly and listened to us. I nodded in return and watched her out of the corner of my eye while continuing the discussion.

She finally made her way over and sat in the desk next to me. "Whatcha doing, Mr. Romero?"

I pursed my lips and remembered the question I had forgotten to ask before. “I think a better question is what you are doing here, Mireya. Does administration know you’re on campus?” I circled my hand in the air, told my poetry students to continue the debate without me.

She pulled a slip of paper from her pocket. “I showed them my ID from when I was here, told them I wanted to see some old teachers.” She shrugged her shoulders. “They said it was ok.”

“Fair enough.” I placed my book aside and gestured at my laptop screen. “And to answer your question, we’re trying to help this guy improve his performance. He didn’t do so well last time.”

She leaned forward to get a better look at my screen and placed her hand on my knee. “What if you highlight the words he’s struggling with and print it? That way he knows what to work on.”

The muscles of my thigh tensed at the weight of her touch, the tingling sensation that played out from her fingers and through my jeans; my head snapped at the sight of her hand, locked in on the scene. Heartbeat slowed, breathing disappeared. My face froze in a semblance of calm determination; I didn’t answer because my throat had constricted shut, gone dry when her touch had registered in my brain. Her hand crashed my perceptions, froze my consciousness with a system error. It seemed like an eternity, lost in the mantra: Gonna get fired. This is wrong. Gonna get fired. This is wrong. She’s touching my leg. No one’s touched me like that.

No one.

Mireya noticed what I've stared at for the past two seconds and retracted her hand. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Romero. I didn't mean to do that."

My consciousness rebooted; breathing and heartbeat resumed, neck unlocked. I cleared my throat, caught her eyes, her attention and shook my head; I didn't have to verbalize that what she had done was inappropriate. "I think you better leave, Mireya." I kept my words short and whispered so she couldn't hear my voice crack and break.

She protested, but I remained firm, asking my departing poetry students to make sure that she exited the doors; I stayed in my chair so she couldn't see the adrenaline jittering my hands or the fact her touch had sapped me of my strength to stand. She slammed her hand against the last desk in the row by the door before storming out; she didn't wait for the others. Once they did, I sat back in my chair and considered my options. I could report Mireya to administration, but what was the point? She was no longer a student here, and I knew better than to let her back in, knew I needed to keep her at a distance like I should've done, like I used to. Either way, if necessary I had five witnesses that nothing had transpired and the possibility remained that her hand on my leg hadn't been intentional. I gathered my things and walked past the last desk in the row by the door, noticed a folded piece of paper; I knew that Mireya had left this, figured it to be the pass from administration to be on campus. The frayed surface, the porous tears from where it had been folded and undone countless times, felt soft to my fingertips as I unraveled it. The ink was splotched, blotched and spattered over the wrinkled, college-rule sheet of paper; it wasn't a pass. I collapsed in my chair, rested my head on my hand as it deformed my cheek and read Mireya's paper.

Relapse

remember drinking past the Pain

because It felt so Good,

savored the Fire in my Veins

when i got Drunk on You

been a while – been way too long –

saying Prayers with my pen.

do not care if it's Wrong –

want to Drink your Words again

but you're not here, you're far away

and i don't know what's True.

but i think i'll Dare to say:

i'm still Hungover you.

I read her poem one more time, noted the phone number penned at the bottom, before I folded it away, the paper collapsing into the familiar creases. Even though the wastebasket was

less than three feet away from me, I didn't throw it away. On my way out to the parking lot, I tried to rationalize why her poem was warm in my pocket, said to myself that despite the typical, high school immaturity that was the rhyme, despite the illusion she was under, indicated by her metaphor, that she was ready for adult relationships, she must have put a lot of effort into crafting this poem, into distilling her feelings into words.

I took off the ring that has been on my thumb since the year I met and taught Mireya, the ring I had first used as a talisman to ward her off, only for it to cement her memory in my head, to symbolize the mark she had left on my life. As I slipped it back on, it occurred to me that for once, someone was thinking about me.

I had began writing about my students the second year that I had been teaching, on the advice from a friend of mine who had just graduated from the master's writing program we were both enrolled in. Every two weeks or so, we would meet at a Pizza Hut, a Chili's or some hole in the wall to critique each other's works-in-progress. Despite our age, he had many years of experience on me when it came to writing and it showed in his craft and his critiques; instead of the bland generalizations that constituted the responses of most people, his was line for line and word for word, full of helpful suggestions and practical advice. While we ate, we'd also discuss what was going on in our lives; he was moving in with his fiancé and, as usual, I was ranting and raving about being a teacher. I usually pitched my stories for comedic effect and it was during one of these bouts of oral dysentery that Shone stopped me and said that everything I've just said should be written down. So I did.

I had sat in my room for several weeks, listening to my Linkin Park playlist, recounting everything I had told my friend, only now the shit flowed through my fingers, onto the blank computer page instead of through my mouth. I hadn't thought, I hadn't edited, had only focused on getting the words out of my system. During the second half of that summer, I had taken a course for my grad program at UTPA entitled 'Creative Writing Pedagogy', a class that explored the methods of teaching or incorporating creative writing in the high school classroom. Because the professor had wanted to model "workshopping" to the class and I had wanted feedback from the teachers that were my classmates on what I had written on my students, we did each other a favor and workshopped my piece – then entitled "A Different Kind of Teaching Story" – to the class. The reception the piece received then was unpleasant. Most of my classmates had considered the speaker (i.e. me) at best, really, really creepy, and at worst, a pervert that deserved to be castrated with a rusty knife and then sold to a sexual sadist. Every classmate with this opinion was a teacher; only one of them, Missy, who was also a fellow student in the same writing program as I, saw something worth defending. Between that and the professor's advice that I needed to work on the structure of the piece (it was without form), I had set to rewriting, reworking "CodeName: Students" so that at the very least it would not be used against me in a court of law. I color-coded index cards to designate "scenes", which ones had occurred during my first year of teaching (the past), which ones had occurred during my second year of teaching (the present) and then tacked them on a dry board, moving them around to see what worked best. Another complaint that had been leveled against the piece was that it had too many characters; so I eliminated most of them while others were folded together to form composite characters, allowing me to focus the story line into a more coherent narrative.

This was how I chose to spend my weekend, a week after having read Mireya's *Relapse*. My feet were propped on a stool, the laptop rested on my thighs. Episodes from the second season of *Fringe* played steadily from my TV, the oscillating fan kept me cool. This was supposed to be the recipe for output, for production, the TV filling in the background with just enough interest to anchor my mind from wandering so that my head focused on the writing. It was what worked before, had always worked. But this was the fourth hour I've spent just sitting here, stuck. It wasn't writer's block because I know what that feels like: empty, void, blank. This was different: I was distracted. Not by the sci-fi drama on my tube, not by Linkin Park's "One Step Closer". If anything, the frustration embodied in the band's words was appropriate for the libidinous pressure pulsating in my groin, seething in my head. I squinted my eyes shut, tried to force out the memory of her hand touching my leg from looping continuously through my neural pathways. *Everything she says to me takes me one step closer to the edge*. I forced my eyes open, balled my hands into fists, chewed on my lip, trying to focus on getting work done. *I'm about to break*. Her particular scent was there, the faint traces of deodorant suddenly in my nostrils, as real as the day she had scooted in close to me at poker. *I need a little room to breathe cause I'm one step closer to the edge*. I sat up, leaned forward in my chair, gripped my knees and kneaded the tendon and muscle there, hoping the sensation would break the cycle. Instead it reminded me of when she bumped her thigh against a table, the blush of blood like a Rorschach Blot against her skin; she had been wearing P.E. shorts at the time. *All these thoughts they make no sense, nothing seems to go away*. I glanced at my nightstand where her *Relapse* was tucked beneath my clock radio, within reach from where I slept, the first thing I saw under the light of time when I would wake up, waiting for me to open it again. *Everything she says to me takes me one step closer to the edge and I'm about to break*.

I'm.

About.

To break.

I snapped my neck, the wires from the headphones swinging from side to side, the popping vertebrae ending the song. Maybe her poem was like Pandora's Box, an act that can't be undone. I could've set her poem aside, passed it along to another teacher to return to her. Instead I chose to read it, chose to keep it. The decision to do so had eliminated other possibilities; any possibility available to me now would stem from this one. Even if I threw it away now, her words were branded in my brain, lodged in the crevices of my mind. There was no going back.

Maybe the classmates, the teachers from the summer writing class, were right about me. I grabbed my phone and made a call.

I don't know how long I sit here, the air condition drying my sweat, leaving my skin sticky. My eyes burn from crying, burn to the point I can practically feel them in my skull like the embers of a fire long gone. I stare at the clock, do the math in my head; I've been in this room for a total of four hours. I lean forward to stand. Knees creak and my back pops as stiff vertebrae shift position. Sore muscles cramp with each step, tendons twitching and pulling in complaint. The bathroom's exactly as she left it, lights on, water beading on the mirror from the moisture in the air. I step into the pearl-white shower and turn the faucet. Scalding waters courses through my hair, streams down my face, resurrects feeling in my body. Sensation tingles

through my spine when the heat slips through my crack, drips against my scrotum; I'm exorcising the numbness possessing my body, leaving me weak, exhausted. I slump against the shower wall, smothering my shoulder with the wet plastic and slide down to the grooved floor as my legs crumple beneath me.

I'm having trouble believing what I've done.

My family believes that I'm at the university studying for my final paper since the semester's about to close. My friends and coworkers and students believe that I've taken the day off to spend time with my family, that I've taken a "mental health" day. My professor and classmates believe I'm at work, keeping my students occupied with busywork since the standardized state test is over. Like the members of my church, they all believe that I'm a good Christian, that at the very least I'm a decent person. And they have every reason to. I was born into a Christian home, taught to never lie, never swear. Every Sunday of my life has found me sitting in a pew, a red, worn hymnal in one hand, a cracked, maroon Bible in the other, absorbing the teachings of a literal interpretation of the Bible, the beliefs of a fundamentally conservative faith. While my peers joined the middle school football teams that would later induct them into mainstream high school culture, the church group that I belonged to relegated me to the fringe of adolescent society, a sanctimonious anomaly. I was supposed to graduate at the top of my class, go to college, get married, beget children. I was supposed to work for the sole reason of providing for my family, live for the sole purpose of raising my children in the name of God. Become a deacon in the church after several years of being a responsible adult, after several years of serving diligently as a Sunday School teacher. I shouldn't be here, slumping over myself on the shower floor of a building belonging to a hotel franchise, half hidden in the steam rising from

countless drops of water pitter-pattering against my skin, my legs numbing under the weight of my body, scrotum spent and empty of semen, soul spent and empty of faith.

Eventually the water goes tepid, and I remember that at some point, one way or another, I'm going to have to go through those hotel doors. So I get up, push myself up and stand with the burden of my sin resting completely on my shoulders. The towel on my skin can't rub away her smell and the complimentary mints by the sink can't erase the taste of her lips, her tongue. Steam fogs the mirror, hides my reflection. I consider walking out without considering what I've done, without facing who I've become. But I need to see. Maybe it's just the remnants of my faith. Maybe it's just a sense of responsibility that my father has managed to pass on to me. I turn the sink on, wet my palm to wipe at the mirror, slight folds of water sliding down the reflective surface, distorting what I see. Physically, nothing's changed. I'm still somewhat pale, save for my tanned arms and face, with enough fat on my short body to have love handles. Physically, I'm a john that just paid a woman sleep with him.

But maybe the reason I need to see my reflection is because I know the truth, the truth that even this – physically employing the services of an escort, a prostitute, a whore, a lady of the street – that even this is a lie to obscure the truth playing out in my head, the desire dancing in my heart.

My eyes, so brown they're nearly black, stare back at me. I grip the linoleum-covered edge of the sink so that it cuts into my palms, squeeze my eyes shut and remember shreds of Scripture, whispers from Christ that should've been blaring sirens, warnings that that if mine eye were to be evil, that darkness would fill my body, that I would become what I see. That it wasn't

what came out of me that defiled me, but what was welling within. I force myself to look again, force myself to see:

Defiler defiled.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Daniel Sanchez was born in Harlingen, Texas and is a product of the Harlingen Independent School District for which he currently works for as a 7th grade math teacher. He received his Bachelor of Science with a major in mathematics from The University of Texas-Pan American in 2007. In December 2011, he received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing – Fiction. Daniel Sanchez can be reached at 17356 Rio Rancho Road Harlingen, Texas. His email address is nocturne_aeterna@yahoo.com