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GLORIOUS INDIGNITIES

A Thesis

by

BENITO SALINAS JR.

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DECEMBER 2019

Major Subject: Creative Writing

GLORIOUS INDIGNITIES

A Thesis
by
BENITO SALINAS JR

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December 2019

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ABSTRACT

Salinas Jr., Benito, Glorious Indignities. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), December 2019, 191 pp, 5 references.

The purpose of this creative work is to illustrate the relationship between the identity of the Rio Grande Valley as a whole, corporate control, immigration status, and interpersonal connection. This illustration is achieved through a series of interconnected short stories that culminate in a telling of a real-life event, the prison riot in the Willacy County Correctional Facility. This event has ramification for every character in the novel and for an entire county. This work attempts to simultaneously take a birds-eye view and microscopic examination of the events that lead up to the riot over the course of two and a half weeks. Each section is from a different character's perspective and on the whole paints a picture of a part of America without an identity.

DEDICATION

This thesis would not have been possible without April and Aurora. April, you make the impossible possible, put the unknowable within reach, and make the difficult days pass easily. Aurora, you give simple, wonderful, necessary and undiluted meaning to this great nothing. Thank you both for being. I love you more than I can comprehend.

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Thank you, Dr. Brit Haraway, for your guidance, references to relevant work, and wisdom in approaching this project. Thank you to Dr. Braithwaite and Dr. Rodriguez for your time and willingness to participate as well as offering honest feedback when necessary.

I'm grateful for the informal and anonymous interviews with people who have worked for the Management and Training Corporation. Thank you for your insight. Special thanks as well, to the great work being done by the ACLU to bring conditions in private immigrant detention facilities to light.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Glorious Indignities is a story told in 40 parts. Each part is semi-self-contained short-short story told from a different character's perspective. These short-short stories, though capable of standing on their own, contain characters and events that are mentioned in other stories and the plot of each story is in some way, either small or large, is affected by the events of stories that preceded it. The larger narrative of the work as a whole is about the events leading up to a riot in a private criminal alien requirement (CAR) prison in Raymondville, Texas. The stories take place in Edinburg and Raymondville, with many characters traveling between the two cities for work or family. Many of the events that are directly related to the Willacy County Correctional Center (including its relationship to the economy of Willacy County and the events that transpired during the riot) are factual and were reported on nationally during the weeks and months following the riot. The large majority of the overall narrative happens between February 3rd and February 20th of 2015, with two "epilogues" dated February 27, and March 11th of that year.

Despite the prison riot being the main plot point in the narrative, many of the stories themselves do not necessarily have anything to do with the riot, or at most deal with characters who are only tangentially related to the prison workforce. Many of these stories are interpersonal in nature. Their stories are about people who are dealing with varying levels personal or interpersonal conflict. This creates a dichotomy in narrative between interpersonal (or

intrapersonal) conflicts about relationships and grief, and larger conflicts having to do with the relationship between faceless corporate forces and local institutions of power. Though these varying levels of conflict do not necessarily inform each other (or even act as metaphors for one or the other) they happen alongside each other, as is often the case in our everyday life. We are always being acted upon simultaneously by small forces in our day-to-day lives such as insecurities and interpersonal relationships, and by larger political or economic forces. These forces often have nothing to do with each other but have equal bearing on our behavior. Sometimes our reaction to a political event is affected by something that happened personally, and sometimes our reaction to interpersonal events is informed by larger frustrations with social systems. The stories in this narrative show characters dealing with this fact, with larger and smaller conflicts running parallel to each other but not necessarily interacting with each other.

Historical Background

Between 1992 and 2012, the number of federal convictions for illegal reentry had grown from just 690 to 19,463. In 1999, the Bureau of Prisons began contracting out the operation of criminal alien requirement prisons to private companies. These prisons were created to house immigrants in federal custody for largely nonviolent crimes. After the inmates in these prisons have completed their sentence they are deported to their home countries. 70% of the population in these prisons are there for “re-entry”: returning to the U.S after having been deported previously. The 13 facilities now operating house more than 25,000 immigrants. Despite most BOP operated facilities being relatively free of many issues, private prisons have seen increasing complaints of inadequate medical care, poor quality food, and insufficient maintenance.

A 2014 ACLU report on five of the 13 CAR prisons, all located in Texas, found that prisoners in these facilities are “subject to shocking abuse and mistreatment.” The report found

that BOP policies incentivized extreme cost-cutting measures that resulted in overcrowding and the “indiscriminate use of solitary confinement.” These policies, according to the report, led to an unusually high number of death and riots in relatively low-security inmate facilities.

In 2006, the Willacy County Processing Center was opened and operated by the Management and Training Corporation. The facility had an unusual design. For \$65 million dollars, MTC built what was to later be called “ritmo” short for “Raymondville Guantanamo Bay.’ It consisted of ten tents made of a Kevlar-like material stretched out over steel frames, with each housing 200 men in bunk beds three feet apart. It did not take long before complaints of conditions inside began leaking out to families and some press organizations: maggots in the food, beatings by guards, and severely insufficient medical care. In 2009 a former nurse at the facility testified to congress that the Raymondville facility was severely under-equipped and understaffed.

In 2011 after Obama ended the Bush era policy of detaining all immigrants and re-instated the “catch-and-release” policy for immigrants, the facility was changed to a CAR prison and renamed the Willacy County Correctional Center. The 10 year contract between MTC and the BOP was worth \$532 million dollars over a 10-year period. Willacy County now stood to make \$1.80 per prisoner per day, producing close to \$2 million per year for the county and accounting for 400 jobs. Conditions in the facility did not improve.

On Feb.20 2015, after a decision by the prisoners to strike for better healthcare the prison responded with force, sending officers in full riot gear to tamp down on the protest. Despite being mostly nonviolent, a report by *The Nation*, stated that an officer named Daniel Leyva threw a hornets nest grenade into a tent which sparked a riot. The inmates cut through the kevlar tents and soon took over the prison.

By Feb. 27, all 2,900 inmates had been transferred to other facilities and the prison was closed down. All employees were let go and Willacy County was on the hook for the damaged facility, owing bond-holders close to 70 million dollars.

Theoretical Background

Many of the factors that contributed to conditions in the prison can be attributed to profit motives. These profit motives manifest themselves in all facets of life, from relationships between prisoners and inmates, to relationships between corporations and their workers, and between corporations and the localities that host them.

The theory that I used to understand these relationships and tried to incorporate into the larger narrative comes from George Ritzer. George Ritzer's idea of McDonaldization, which can be thought of as the means by which the bourgeois has made their power over the proletariat extremely rational (to the point of irrationality) and efficient, helps explain the iron cage of bureaucracy that is next to impossible to escape from.

Ritzer's borrows his idea for the iron cage from Max Weber's writings on formal rationality. He believed that the western world produced a specific kind of rationality where the society is organized in such a way that it produces the most optimum outcomes. Society is shaped by rules, regulations and larger social structures. Formal rationality gives the individual institutionalized rules to dictate what they should do, leaving them little choice over the means to their ends. This institutionalization is established through bureaucracy. Weber believed bureaucracy is the most efficient form of handling large numbers of tasks. A society based on formalized rationality emphasizes the quantification of as many things as possible, operations

that are predictable, and in achieving that predictability, the control over people through the replacement of human judgement with rules, regulations, and structures.

Ritzer used Webers ideas to inform what he viewed as the increasingly quantified and ordered manner in which business owners control their workers, and believed that this extreme formal rationality was beginning to bleed over to every institution, such as education, religion, medicine and even sex.

The term McDonaldization comes from the restaurant chain's methods of food creation and distribution that first influenced the entire fast food industry then spread outward from there. McDonald's success, Ritzer says, comes the 4 dimensions that define McDonaldization: Efficiency, Calculability, Predictability and Control.

Efficiency is defined as the most optimum way to get from one state of being to another. For customers, those two states are being hungry and being full. Other industries copied McDonalds efficiency models to get customers into a state of weight-loss, lubricated cars, completed tax-forms, or health. Just as consumers are efficiently processed, workers in those institutions follow steps in a pre-designed process to create the food as fast as possible.

Calculability focuses on the quantitative aspects of the products and services being offered. Ritzer writes that "in McDonaldized systems, quantity has become equivalent to quality; a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good." He goes on to say that this calculation by the consumer does not take into account that in high-profit systems it is the owners, not the consumers, who are getting the best deal.

Predictability has to do with the assurances that products and services will be the same over time and location. A Big Mac in Chicago a year ago will taste identical to a Big Mac in Austin today. This provides great comfort to customers. However, though they are assured that

the burger will not be bad tasting, they know it will not be great either. Workers must also behave in predictable ways in order to produce that predictability for consumers. The success of this model and its spread has led to a culture of people who have come to prefer a world with few surprises.

The final dimension is *control*, which is exerted over customers in the form of lines, limited options, and even uncomfortable seats. Control is exerted in an even more extreme manner for workers, who are trained and expected to do a limited number of tasks in precisely the way they are told to do them.

McDonaldization often leads to, and in fact encourages, dehumanization. Humans are messy and chaotic, and limiting the human spirit results in more predictable, efficient, more easily controlled, and most importantly, profitable outcomes. Weber anticipated and feared a “society of people locked into a series of rational structures, who could move only from one rational system to another - from rationalized educational institutions to rationalized workplaces, from rationalized recreational settings to rationalized homes. Society would become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalized structures; there would be no escape.”

The best way to understand what many of the characters in *Glorious Indignities* are going through is through the lens of McDonaldization. That and, of course, death.

Death and Grief

Death is by nature unpredictable, and is the most permanent escape from the iron cage produced by ultra-rational bureaucratic profit seeking behavior. There are 3 deaths in the narrative and a number of other characters dealing with those deaths or deaths that happened off-page. There's Mariela and Eduardo, who die in a motorcycle accident and there is Guillermo, who is killed in a hit and run. It was important to me that these deaths were relatively instant and

not planned for. I wanted to illustrate how McDonaldization cannot account for the inherent unpredictability of death. Traffic accidents are perhaps the most instant, realistic, and common forms of unpredictable death. These types of death do not warrant further action on the part of the institutions that govern us. A terroristic instant death, or one from a burglary gone wrong requires some sort of response from the system. Traffic deaths, on the other hand, allow the system to continue on as normal. This was important because it allowed me to focus solely on the effects of those deaths on other characters.

Angela, Mariela's older sister, is forced to cope with her sister's death while also working as a cocktail waitress at a strip club. She has picked up smoking again and refuses to pull the plug on the machines keeping her sister alive. She talks to customers she wouldn't normally talk to in an attempt to get the message over to her father. Eduardo's close friend Lorenzo finds himself unable to fully process what has happened, and struggles with having to face his own failures and ultimate mortality. And finally, Esmeralda, whose husband is killed in a hit and run, finds herself feeling relieved and almost free. She has played the traditional role of hispanic wife and mother for so long that her husband's unexpected death gives her a chance to explore herself and what her life could possibly be. Each of these characters deals with the death in their own ways and the processes that govern their work or school lives cannot predict how they will deal with it.

Other characters are trapped by a grief over a death that happened off the page and at an earlier time. Primary among these is Beatriz, who opens and closes the work. Her father died due to a cancer a few years earlier and since then has had trouble overcoming the grief. She is disconnected from her work and relies on other there to get through her daily responsibilities. She goes on autopilot in her marriage and looks to her children for emotional support, in

particular her son Julio. The children don't realize that they are an emotional backbone for their mother, and have trouble processing some of their mother's behavior. Her husband, Aaron, feels himself drifting away from her and looking outside of the marriage for some sort of emotional connection.

Ms. Villarreal, the children's second grade teacher had a stillborn 8 years earlier and, despite being good at her job and recognized for it, is on autopilot at her job. The stillborn daughter would have been in her class during the school year when the narrative takes place and she faces a new found grief. She drinks heavily at night and tunes out of her work. I'm fond of Ms. Villarreal as a character because she manages to go on autopilot in such a way that she is perceived as being very good at her job and loved by her students and her bosses. She is not happy though. Grief presents itself in different ways to different people and the processes described by McDonaldization both cannot predict for this behavior but affect it nonetheless.

As stated earlier, my main goal in this larger narrative was showing how the personal issues that each of us carry and the larger sociopolitical structures that we live in are both independent of each other but at the same time intertwine to affect our emotional states. I hope that by having characters that dealing with both I was able to illustrate this. That being said, I'm curious as to how I could have shown this a little bit more clearly because I'm not sure that I did.

Development

I did not begin this project with a larger narrative in mind. In the first 4 months of writing I wrote 15 flash fiction stories with unrelated characters and narratives. I knew at that time that I wanted all the stories to happen in the Rio Grande Valley within the same period of time, that they needed to be dealing with the effects of McDonaldization of society, and that I wanted a chunk of stories to deal with the Raymondville prison riot. What I wanted initially was the

feeling of rummaging through a box of polaroids of people you don't know. Short, uninterested vignettes were the goal. I wanted this for two reasons: 1) because it allowed the reader to focus on the threads that connected the individuals in story such as their geographical location, the level of formal rationalization that governs their lives, and their connection to hispanic identity, and 2) it reflects the facelessness of the capitalist forces that govern them. I wanted the stories to, in some way, be McDonaldized themselves, efficient, predictable (though ideally not unbearably so), and pointing to a singular force. However, at the end of Thesis 1 I looked over what I'd written and found that I was unsatisfied with the direction the project was going in. I wanted the project to feel like a cohesive whole despite the narratives being unrelated and that was not the feeling I was getting. The project felt like a sloppy collage.

Instead of scrapping what I'd written I took a pause over the summer and let the project sit and bounce around in my mind. In addition to this I also began talking to some of my wife's family and friends who'd worked at the prison during the time of the riot. Though they wished to remain anonymous due to recent announcements that the old Walmart in town was to be converted into a child immigrant detention center and that MTC would again be hiring.

These discussions painted a picture of guards who weren't cruel but instead just functioning within the system that they were stuck in. Raymondville is not known for it's job prospects and working for MTC provided an opportunity for economic advancement that was simply not possible any other way. They understood the larger picture of what they were doing and understood that the system would function whether they were a part of it or not. They also complained about other people who worked at the facility who enjoyed the power they had and took advantage of it often.

In early August I wrote a story about Angela, who has to cope with the decision to pull the plug on her little sister after she is in a motorcycle accident with her boyfriend. Satisfied with that story, I decided to write another story from her sister Mariela's perspective that takes place on the night that the accident happens. In that story Mariela and her boyfriend go on a date to watch a ska band that does Vicente Fernandez covers and on the way back home crash into the median on the highway. Next, I wrote a story from the perspective of a member of the band that they went to go see. Then another story from the perspective of the weed seller that the boyfriend goes to prior to the concert. I continued this process, writing each new story off of a character or plot point mentioned in a previous story. This created the cohesion I was looking for. No longer were these random character stories, they were part of a larger puzzle. It also allowed me to begin thinking about how I would connect these characters to the story of the prison riot.

I then had to go back into the 15 stories I'd already written and change the details and character names to fit within the narrative being formed by the new stories. This was more difficult than I initially thought it would be and involved creating a visual map of all the characters, their relationships to each other, and a timeline of their actions and finding a way to fit those stories within the new emerging plot. It was challenging but ultimately very rewarding and fun figuring this out.

What emerged from this was three large narrative threads. There was the story of Beatriz and Aaron's family. There was the story of Mariela and Eduardo's deaths on the highway and the way that death rippled out and effected a large number of people who knew them. And then there was the prison story. The stories begin to blend together into the climax of the whole story, which takes place on February 20th, 2015.

Literary Influences

It is extremely common for an aspiring writer (especially a male one) to say the following: “I was really influenced by the work of Ernest Hemingway. His use of language was inspiring and his commentary on the death heroic idealism following WW1 was enlightening.” And yet, it is true for me as well, so I won’t say much more about Mr. Hemingway (especially given that the last last 10 years of cultural contemplation has made us all give the overbearing masculinity of Hemingway’s work a sort of exasperated sigh). All that I will say is that my introduction to short-short fiction came from Hemingway’s short “chapters” in his first publication *in our time*. I was struck by just how much those stories were able to pack into a few sentences and at the much larger story they told through the use of individuals, placed in strategic spots, doing specific things, with just the right wording.

Another, more recent influence is the work of Haruki Murakami. Though he is firmly placed in the tradition of magical realism, I was struck by two things. The first is the way he uses language to elevate mundane everyday things to turn into meditations on a character’s state of mind or emotional development. Across his work he often describes, in full details, simple events such as riding a subway or cooking a meal. These descriptions are both hypnotic and informative. He writes primarily in Japanese and so everything I’ve read of his is a translation, but even with that layer of separation from the original work, the word choice still jumps out at me as being evocative and capable of awakening the senses.

The second thing that I admire and hoped to emulate about Murakami’s writing is his description of place. One of his most recent books *1Q84* takes place primarily in Tokyo, Japan. Despite the work being filled with references to western composers, english novelists and French wine, the work still manages to describe Tokyo in granular detail without having to resort to

references to things like sushi, or other stereotypically Japanese cultural items. I wished to do the same in my own writing. *Glorious Indignities* is primarily a story about the Rio Grande Valley and I wanted to authentically show the valley without resorting to cliché'd descriptions of it.

Here are other books that have informed my writing style or thinking:

William Gibson's *Neuromancer*: In some strange, convoluted, subtle way I consider *Glorious Indignities* to be a work of cyberpunk. While it does take place close to five years ago the events that occur in it are definitely influenced by technology and the desires of powerful, faceless corporations. *Neuromancer* is the father of cyberpunk, and though it's settings are futuristic, it merely uses those settings as a means to discuss the effects of corporate control.

Culture Jam by Kalle Lasn: I read it in high school and it was radical to me at the time yet made intuitive sense. It's takes on consumerism and the effects of advertisements on the psyche was something that had been sitting in my mind for a time but I hadn't yet fully formed the thoughts.

The poetry of A.R Ammons, in particular his book *Garbage*: I was amazed at the way he discussed the meaning in all things, even the ugly and disposable. I hope this thesis is able to do this as well. I hope that despite being about the grossly mechanical processes that are beginning to define life in modern society it is able to highlight the beauty in the existence of it's members.

Closing Reflections

It's odd coming to the end of this MFA program. I entered the program not really sure what I was looking for or why exactly I was pursuing a degree in writing. I've always loved writing and thought that maybe it might be a good idea to formalize this passion in the form of a degree. What that formalization provided me I'm not exactly sure. I've made connections with other writers, which is always a positive. I've become a better writer (or at least, I think I have).

I've learned theory that is as eye-opening as it is useless, techniques that are both potent and superfluous, vocabulary that is both specific and unseemly to use in everyday diction.

I do know this, I am a better person for having concluded this program. I am more capable of expressing some truth I hold inside of myself. What that truth is though is a bit slippery. I started this narrative in early 2019 with a sort of mission statement: to look at the growth of the region with a suspicious eye and remain cautious of the forces looking to the Valley for potential profit. I wanted my thesis to ask a blunt question: is it worse for the region to be poor or slightly better off but exploited by forces it has no control over?

I don't know how to feel now, having finished it, that I don't have an answer to that question and that my thesis doesn't offer an answer either. Though perhaps it isn't the role of literature to answer questions but instead to reframe them in such a way that the behavior enacted by its readers is changed or enlightened in some way.

I look forward to continuing to write and finding better ways to ask questions.

CHAPTER II

GLORIOUS INDIGNITIES

Feb. 3, 2015

Beatriz

Breath in. Left foot, right foot. Breath out. Left foot, right foot. Breath in. Left foot, right foot. Breath out. Left foot, right foot. Breath in. Distance: 2.37 miles. Pace: 9 minutes 34 seconds per mile.

It could all be over here Beatriz thought looking down at the train tracks under her Nike's, looking up again at the approaching train about a half mile ahead. There was still some light out but only barely. The train headlight was already on. *It probably wouldn't hurt much, and it would be quick.*

It was a good route, start at the courthouse, down University Dr. until she hit the railroad tracks, then down the track, until she got to Jackson, make a right back to University, and then back up to the Courthouse. She liked this portion of the run best, where the tracks didn't follow the road and instead cut through the land and trees. It felt far away and hidden, but still safe.

The train horn blared as it cut through the roads up ahead. It filled up the air and the sound enveloped her completely. She removed her earbuds to feel it wash over her. *Was it really this simple? Was death just a matter of staying on the same path?*

It was an odd sensation. She wasn't depressed, maybe just bored. Her husband, Aaron, was kind but dense. He didn't make her life difficult though, which was enough as far as her mother was concerned, especially since her father's funeral. Aaron was good with the twins, and he made plenty as a guard at the Raymondville prison. She worked part-time at the University library. She liked it there, though was difficult not to feel like she was just giving herself something to do now that the twins were in elementary school. She'd read from once, sitting among the piles of books behind the library counter, that the literal meaning of life is whatever you're doing that prevents you from killing yourself. She scoffed, read the quote aloud to Samantha, the undergrad working on the other end of the counter who replied "fucking existentialists."

Now here, gazing into the abyss, it didn't so much gaze back into her as it screeched and pummeled. It was an awesome feeling. She reveled in the decision to keep on running straight ahead, to be both afraid and determined to get as close as possible. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, breath. left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, breath. She would jump off the tracks eventually, she had to, but she had to know how long she could take it.

Left foot, right foot, breath.

After her shower she drank a glass of water and settled herself into the couch next to her husband, snoring. The twins were still up but they'd get themselves to sleep in time. M*A*S*H had been added to Netflix and it reminded her of her dad. The melancholy opening to the show's theme song came through the speakers and she was reminded of sitting on the couch with him when she was in high school, wishing they could watch something else or that the show had pivoted away from Vietnam at some point. She could smell the smell of Modelo emanating from

him even from the other side of the couch, and though she hated it then, she wished Aaron drank the same kind of beer now.

She began planning the out the next day in her head.

Left foot, right foot. Breath out.

Feb. 4, 2015

Eduardo

Eduardo seemed unsure in the situation. His feet twisted in place, unable to find a comfortable place in the ground. Above him the grackles flew over in a swarm, flying from tree to tree in the HEB parking lot. Some stopped for rest on the power lines, the lines swinging back and forth under their weight. At this time of the day, just after the sun had set the sound of them was small sharp roar. Eduardo wondered why they all congregated here in the late afternoon, if they had a home they went to when the orange sky turned to night, and if they knew the difference between citizens and non-citizens.

He rested sheepishly against the light post. From a distance he would have looked inebriated, and to some degree he was. But this is usually how he stood, understated, sullen, simultaneously passive and restless. Lorenzo stood next to him, scrolling through his phone leaning on the trunk of his mom's dented and dirty Chevy Impala.

"You're making yourself look suspicious," Lorenzo said to him.

"I'm just standing here."

"Look like you belong"

"How?"

"I don't know. Just quit looking like you're about to buy drugs."

"But we are about to buy drugs."

"Yeah," Lorenzo said, the exasperation dripping from his tone. "Exactly."

They didn't know this dealer, but the friends they got Aderol from bought from him.

"You're sure this guy is ok?" Eduardo asked.

"Yeah, Pablo buys from him all the time."

"Do you even know what he looks like?"

"No, but he said in his text he'd be in a red Mustang."

"You'd think he would drive a more boring car to avoid suspicion."

"Would you calm the fuck down? It's gonna be fine. People do this all the time."

Eduardo said nothing. There in the parking lot, 4 months from graduation, 3 months from prom, and 1 month from spring break, he knew his ability to buy drugs would fuel his ability to experience something real before graduation. How "real" was defined was fuzzy to him, but he knew it was more than grades and playing the part of model DREAMER. He loathed the term, finding it condescending despite understanding that it was meant to drum up sympathy for his cause. His dreams consisted of trying to sneak a joint past the checkpoint in Falfurrias. He dreamt of having sex with Mariela and having to buy her Plan B the next day. He dreamt of getting too drunk at a party and having to spend the night in jail cell. He dreamt of having the freedom to fuck up.

"Hey man I just remembered I needed to pick up some stuff from the store. Here's my share," he said, handing Lorenzo 40 dollars. "I'll be right back."

"Are you kidding me dude?"

"What?"

“Alright fine, whatever.”

Eduardo started toward the entrance, the loose gravel crunching under his red Puma's, trying to decide what he could get that seemed necessary. He wondered around inside for 5 minutes before getting a text: “He's here.”

He made his way to the chip aisle and grabbed three bags of Hot Cheetos. He threw in a Mountain Dew while in line at the cashier, for a grand total of 9 dollars and 73 cents. As he walked out through the sliding doors he was greeted by that same small roar of flocking grackles and flashing blue and red light shining from the other side of the parking lot, near where he and Lorenzo had been standing earlier. He walked in that direction and as he got closer he saw Lorenzo and a husky man in his mid-20s with a Cowboy's hoodie sitting on the gravel with their hands behind their back. Next to Lorenzo's mom's Impala was a red Mustang, and behind them, a black and white Dodge Charger with the words “McAllen PD” written proudly on the side, flashing it's lights like a message to Eduardo. *Get out.* His eyes met Lorenzo's as he turned to walk away, meandering the parking lot, figuring out who he'd be able to call to get a ride. The grackles continued their fluttering roar.

Feb. 5, 2015

Rick

Rick peeked through the curtains on the street-facing window of the house he and his mother shared. The last of the evening sun poured in through the opening in the curtain. A small blue motorcycle he didn't recognize had just parked on the street in front of the house. He felt the phone in his pocket buzz.

The text read "I'm here."

"Alright come to the door. I'll be right there" he replied.

He waited until a familiar face emerged from under the helmet before going back to his room to fetch one of the pre-weighed and packaged sacks of dro in his nightstand.

The uneven wooden floors covered in cracked linoleum cracked as he made his way through the living room and to the door. He cracked it open and to make sure it was Eduardo at the door before opening it fully and letting him in. Eduardo was lanky and Rick guessed he was about 17. He'd first bought from him last week after being introduced through Eduardo's uncle, a man Rick had been selling to for 10 years now.

"What's up Eddy?" he said cordially as he put out his hand to greet him. Selling weed was no different than selling anything else and Rick prided himself on his customer service. He always interacted with his customers as if they were old friends, offering credit when it was necessary, and kept all his regulars up to date on new strains and prices through text message.

"Not much, just school man. I'm fucking stressed" Rick replied.

"Your graduating soon right?"

"Yea man"

"Ay well this shit will help you out."

“What’s it called?”

“Girl Scout Cookies”

“What the fuck?”

“Yea man, check it out, give it a smell.”

He offered up the bag he’d taken from his nightstand. Eduardo took it and inhaled it deeply.

“Holy shit”

“Right? I don’t know what the fuck they mixed together to make it smell like that but it knocked me on my ass last night.”

“Oh shit, yea?”

“Yea man, you’ll get some good sleep with this stuff.”

“Hell yeah. 50 right?” Eduardo asked as he reached into his pocket.

“Yeah man.”

“Awesome.” Eduardo paused a moment before feeling compelled to add “Holy shit dude, this is way less sketchy than the last guy I tried buying from. I almost got fucking arrested yesterday because the dude liked selling from an HEB parking lot.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah dude,”

“Well I’m always here man, hit me up whenever you need something.”

“For sure,”

They pounded fists and Eduardo started back out the door. Rick closed the door and watched him through the window as he walked through the yard filled with mesquite trees and aloe vera plants his mom had planted then excitedly jump into the back of the Charger.

Rick caught a glimpse of himself in the hallway mirror as he made his way back to his room. The gray hairs on his goatee were getting more pronounced. No real wrinkles yet, but it'd only be a few years before the smile lines by his eyes would begin spreading downward. His eyes were bloodshot, and it surprised him that they still did that after a smoke after 20 years doing it every day. He ran his hands through his buzzcut hair and made his way to the kitchen for a snack, pulling a pack of vanilla pudding from the pantry. On the table was a stack of mail and Rick pulled out a chair to sort through it while he ate his snack. It was mostly junk mail and offers from payday lenders. From the pile he set aside the electric bill, the internet bill, and the mortgage.

He began doing the math. The pound of dro he'd picked up from his supplier cost him \$4000, meaning that each eighth he sold would net him a profit of \$18.75. His share of the bills came out to \$1500. His mom's prescriptions for her diabetes, scloderma and high blood pressure came out to \$300 a month. To cover all this he'd need to make 96 sales. He was upset at his brother Marcos for not helping out more, but honestly, he bought enough from him that it was essentially like pitching in 100 dollars a month. If he sold the entire pound he'd have \$600 left over for groceries, gasoline, his personal supply, and a few dates with Amaris. Though he wasn't sure about that last one anymore. The tensions that always bubbled up in his relationships were beginning to form. They'd start innocently enough: the comments that he was pretty smart and could do well in school if he went back, or questions about what he was gonna do once it was legalized. Then, as she'd get more comfortable, the conversations about why he was still living with his mother, if she was really being safe by dating him. And then finally, the unanswered texts, followed shortly by an instagram post of her hanging out with another dude.

Amaris needed more than him, and they both knew that. She was in school for nursing and would eventually outgrow him he figured. They didn't drug test there, so that worked in his favor, but he'd had girls leave him for less. Still, for the moment, she was still on board. She was fun, sexy, and didn't mind spending her evenings with him playing video games and smoking. She could kick his ass at Street Fighter and was great in bed. It was enough for him. He could feel himself getting attached, getting vulnerable enough to talk about his mom's health, and it worried him. She was 3 months from finishing the program. Plenty long enough for him to fall in love. Who knows though, maybe she'd stick around. Maybe she'd help him figure something out.

He began writing her a text when a phone call came him. It was Edgar. That guy definitely needed a smoke.

"Hey man what's up?" he said more enthusiastically than he felt.

He glanced at the mortgage as the voice laid out the order.

"Alright man yeah come by, I'll be here."

73 sales to go.

Mario

Thursday night was cruise night and from the alley behind the Flying Walrus, Mario could hear the sound of souped up engines (or shitty mufflers) blaring down 10th street. He

found the loud revving obnoxious, but admired how consistent the different groups of car and motorcycle hobbyists were in their drives. Every Thursday since he was a kid they'd make their weekly pilgrimage from the highway to Trenton on 10th street, make a left down to 23rd, and then a left all the way back to the highway. Mario wondered how Thursday became cruise night, but then just figured it was the same reason why bars decided it was a good reason to host bands only on Thursdays. Hobbyists, whether musically or mechanically inclined, were numerous enough to get their own night, but not numerous enough for that night to be a Friday or Saturday.

There was mud on the ground by the back entrance to the bar, and as Mario struggled to lift and maneuver the heavy guitar amp off the the back of James' F150 and onto the shallow ramp that led into the bar his shoe slid on a patch of it. Mario lost his footing and, as he tried to regain it, fell backwards into the only puddle of muddy water still left in the alley after the earlier rain.

"Fuck!"

"You alright Mario?" James asked, cigarette still in his mouth.

"Yeah," he grunted, trying to keep to amp from touching the water. James jogged up to him, and took the amp from him, sitting it on the ramp and going back to Mario to offer him a hand. By then, Mario was back on his feet checking out the damage to his pants.

"Is it bad?"

"Nah man, it looks pretty rock n' roll."

James was full of shit and Mario appreciated him for that.

"How much longer till we're on?" he asked.

"After this band finishes their set."

The band was still sound checking. Mario hadn't heard them before but James said they were pretty good. He preferred listening to the bands from the alley, away from the small but still respectably sized crowds. He had a bad habit of judging bands by their gear. Bands tended to seem more talented and professional when the gear looked expensive. Whether it was a sparkly Gretchen drum kit, or a vintage tube guitar amps, there was something about knowing that there was more than eight thousand dollars worth of instruments and amplifiers on stage that seemed to demand an audience's attention more than the cheap second-hand gear Mario and the rest of the band picked up at various pawn shops in Donna and Edinburg.

Mario took it as a point of pride that despite their cheap gear they were always able to keep most of the audience from wondering off to another bar. Mario started to think of the band's crappy gear as an aesthetic, and it made him feel less ashamed of it. Their strength was always in their energy and their taste. Plus, there was a good market for sweaty ska-punk covers of Selena and Vicente Fernandez tunes in the valley. The flyer tonight had their name, *Mas Chingones*, third from the top. There were 5 bands playing tonight, and Mario was glad they weren't at the bottom in tiny font.

"You heard from Art?" Mario asked as he motioned to bum a cigarette from James.

"Yea he texted me earlier."

"Alright cool."

Mario lit the cigarette and handed the lighter back to James. A small motorcycle pulled up and parked next to their truck. The driver was thin with brown skin and hair combed backwards. He looked young, not older than 18. Riding behind him was a girl wearing a helmet. She was petite and Mario checked her out. Though, when she removed her helmet Mario realized she was even younger than the guy she rode in with and he looked away instantly. The couple

that rode in held hands after the guy clipped his helmet to the back of the motorcycle. They started walking towards the back entrance when the guy looked at the gear on the ramp and then back at Mario and James.

“Hey,” said out loud to them. “Are you the guys from *Mas Chingones*?”

Mario didn’t answer at first, surprised to be recognized but not wanting to let on that he was ecstatic.

“Yeah that’s us,” James said before Mario could.

“That’s awesome. You guys are great. I saw you a couple months ago when you played at Yerberia.”

“Ah I remember we sucked that night,” Mario replied.

“What are you talking about? It was great.”

“Well that’s nice of you to say.”

“Hey can I ask you guys something?”

“What’s up?”

“Are they carding tonight?”

“Yea”

“Shit,” the guy said, looking over sorrily at the young girl he came with.

“But here, just sneak in with us when we’re loading in the gear. No one will notice, and you’ll even be able to buy drinks since everyone’s been carded when they walked in,” James offered.

“Holy shit, thanks!”

“No problem.”

The couple walked back to the motorcycle and James offered Mario a cigarette. Mario only smoked when he was around the band and it always felt better in this environment. A few days ago he smoked one with his grandpa it stung his throat. Then again, his grandpa smoked Marlboro Red's, "cowboy killers", with a pride that he was somehow man enough for smoking and surviving them. Mario helped him on his ranch in exchange for a permanent practice space in a tool shed with electricity and semi-functional air conditioning.

The band started their set, and Mario and James sat in the bed of the F150 smoking and listening.

"They are good," Mario said.

"Yeah," James said.

"They sound like 311, though."

"Yeah, but no one raps, so that's good."

They chuckled. It was an insult, but one rooted in a kind of jealousy. Saying they sounded good really meant that they sounded *expensive*. You could hear it in the booming but still crisp bass, the crash of symbols didn't assault your eardrums but added presence, a bell-like guitar sound that cut through the mix without needing to overpower everything. Mario imagined what his band would sound like if they had that gear, if they'd be more popular than they are now, if he wouldn't feel like he was playing pretend when they played.

A set of headlights turned into the alley behind the bar. The car parked behind James' truck and Arturo, Christian and their girlfriends emerged from the two-door sedan. They started taking their gear from the trunk of the car, a bass amp and a trumpet, as the girls went into the bar for drinks. They finished placing their gear on the ramp, ready to be quickly moved to the

stage as soon as it was clear. Arturo and Christian joined Mario and James up on the bed of the truck.

Mario looked at the ramp with the entirety of their gear on it. He was ambivalent, both proud and embarrassed. The singer of the band playing switched from his usual crooning to a kind of pseudo-reggae rapping.

He and James looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Mariela

Sitting on Eduardo's motorcycle Mariela felt, not quite free, but lighter than she had in a while. Things didn't matter as much here. She held onto him as they made their way onto the highway. Her hair slapped against the back of her hoodie, peeking out under the helmet he'd given her to wear. It was cold today, and she shivered in the wind that got stronger and stronger as the motorcycle picked up speed. She held onto Eduardo more closely, hoping to take in some of his warmth through both their sweaters. No warmth transferred but she still enjoyed the feeling.

It had been a fun night so far. They'd snuck into a bar called The Flying Walrus to watch a band that Eduardo had been talking about for weeks now. The band played Vicente Fernandez covers but in a style she'd never heard before. She knew these songs and their lyrics. She'd heard her dad singing them as he worked on cars in the front lawn of their modest home. Though she never listened to them on her own, they still felt like home to her. Vicente Fernandez, her dad's favorite, was as much her home as her old blanket or sisters hairdryer.

The band played the songs quickly and without trumpets or accordions, just electric guitars and drums. The crowd hopped around wildly and Eduardo and her danced along with them. She'd never seen a band like this before. At weddings the bands she'd seen always seemed so stiff, and dressed up in matching outfits. They would sway side to side in unison, each holding a different instrument. People would couple and dance, hand pressed on each other hips, feet moving on a shiny wooden dance floor, following some set of instructions that Mariela always figured she'd eventually get when she was old enough. Tonight was different. Tonight the floor underneath their feet as they moved was slick with from the rain a couple hours earlier. The band flailed wildly in the open-air bar with an energy that seemed like every member was going to spontaneously combust. As their set wore on she felt that energy building in her as well, and home was all the sudden more alive and vibrant than it had been since her dad was deported and then imprisoned when he tried crossing back.

Home had been quiet in the last two years since the ICE raid, just her and her older sister Angela. Mariela's mother didn't survive childbirth, and as much as she tried not feeling guilty about her own existence she saw it on her dad's face sometimes when he was drunk. "*Tienes que encontrarme una nueva esposa porque me quitaste la otra.*" He would slur these words to her before collapsing on the couch. It didn't happen very often, and he was mostly kind to her, but he'd said the word enough for them to be imprinted in her memory.

She wished she could see even that look on his face again, and hear even those words from him again. Angela worked nights at a club that she refused to talk about much, and spent the day looking after the house and taking nursing classes. It gave Angela more freedom than any other 15 year old she knew. She'd only begun to take advantage of it in the last month though.

She'd met Eduardo through a change in her class schedule that put her in an art class full of seniors. Most of them ignored her but after being paired up at the start of the semester her and Eduardo hit it off. He was sweet and handsome and she could relate to him. His parents weren't legal and he was afraid in all the ways she was. The first time he messaged her after school her hands shook and she tried not to respond instantly. They talked until 4 in the morning that night, and had fallen asleep on the phone together every night since. Through some lies to his parents about where he was spending the night he'd managed to get out tonight. Mariela had no one to lie to, as long as she was home before Angela's shift ended.

Hugged tight against Eduardo's back, she looked around the highway. It was mostly empty, save for a few cars and 18-wheelers. Eduardo's hair would go from a light brown to black as they passed under the light posts. Mariela looked around the at the highway. It was almost midnight, giving them just enough time to get to Mariela's house in Edinburg, smoke a joint and explore each other's bodies before Angela got home.

Eduardo took the exit toward Edinburg, off of Highway 83 and onto Highway 281. On the interchange, a single lane road 80 feet off the ground, Mariela took a long gaze to her right. The horizon here seemed to extend for miles and miles and the lights of every home and lamp post below looked like stars in the night, each illuminating unknown planets with their own stories that Mariela wished she could know. Highway 83, continuing on westward below her looked like the streak of the Milkyway. Eduardo, looking forward vigilantly, was the only story she needed to know right now though. She'd taken this narrow interchange many times before, and it had always made her nervous. But here, exposed to the elements, the cold wind slipping in under the helmet and striking her face, the road shimmering from the light drizzle that had begun to fall, moving underneath her at 75 miles an hour, she felt safe.

They continued onward and Mariela closed her eyes, placing her head, protected by Eduardo's helmet, on his shoulder. A familiar feeling crept into her chest, one she hadn't felt since she was 11 and falling asleep on the couch with her dad watching old Mexican movies. His favorite was *El Hijo Del Pueblo*, where Vicente Fernandez plays a rancher named Vicente who has to look over a group of aristocrats after their plane crashes on his ranch. The passengers are unaccustomed to the countryside and most of the comedy comes from their reactions to milking cows or feeding the pigs. "*Es lo mismo con nosotros. Nos miran como idiotas pero se morirían de hambre si no estuviéramos aquí*" her father would say every time he watched it. Mariela wouldn't hear him say this, as she'd already be asleep on his shoulder by the time the credits started running. Still cold and moving fast, she began to drift to sleep on the back of the motorcycle. Eduardo didn't look like or have the same personality as her father, but this feeling was the same.

After what could have been either a few seconds or a few hours, she was awakened by the jolt of the motorcycle switching lanes quickly to avoid a merging 18-wheeler that didn't see them, followed by a quick skid on the slippery highway and the unmistakable wobble of tires, the wobble letting them know they'd be making quick contact with the asphalt. The motorcycle lurched to the left and they hit the concrete divider, launching their bodies over the divider into the oncoming traffic. Still in the air, Mariela saw Eduardo exposed face hit the asphalt and scrape unforgivingly against the road. Mariela slammed in the ground soon after. She felt her bones snap instantly, including three in her neck and her body rolled three times before she came to a stop, lying face-up on the highway.

Paralyzed there, a Vicente Fernandez song came into her head. Not the version she'd heard tonight, but the version she'd heard sitting on the lumpy orange couch with her father

watching *El Hijo Del Pueblo*. She looked up the sky covered in clouds, the rain drops forming on the clear plastic of the helmet, grateful that she didn't have Eduardo in her frozen line of sight.

She began to sing quietly:

Grabé en la penca de un maguey tú nombre /Unido al mío, entrelazados/Como una prueba ante la ley del monte/ Que allí estuvimos enamorados.

Feb. 6, 2015

Edgar

The report by the Texas Department of Transportation would later read: “*based on the injuries sustained and the force of impact with the F-150, it is unclear exactly what killed Hernandez.*” However, to the mile of traffic forming along the southernmost tip of U.S highway 281 it was less mysterious. The rising orange sun, shining the dew off Hernandez’s mangled body, made it obvious to everyone. He dangled from the steel beam connecting two signs that directed traffic either east towards Harlingen or west to McAllen. The wrecked gray Honda Civic with a human-sized hole in the windshield and the red F-150 with a crushed rear-end blocked the lane going to McAllen. Firetrucks, ambulances and tow trucks blocked the path east.

Edgar strapped the safety line from the firetruck to his belt and started up the pole to figure out how to get the body down. He could feel every phone camera on the highway pointed at him and the body. He hated this about people: their voyeurism. He hated the way they used tragedy to get ‘likes.’ He hated that at parties they always asked him “what’s the most fucked up thing you’ve seen on the job?” More than that, he hated how little he felt now when he responded. He’d change his story every time. There was no shortage of images to choose from. He hated that what shocked him most about this morning wasn’t the blood dripping from the body’s neck onto the asphalt 20 feet below, but how much air the body got when it was ejected from the Honda. This shift, in particular, had been tough. It started at midnight, peeling a skinny kid off the highway after his motorcycle crashed into the concrete barrier and seeing the girl he

was with losing consciousness as she was put into the ambulance. And now it was ending with this this bloody mess of a situation.

Once at the top of the pole he began walking down the horizontal beam where 8 yards in front of him a bloodied leg protruded upward. “It’s a nice view up here” he thought to himself as he looked out at the wide, flat, pink-orange horizon and the businesses that ran up and down Expressway 83. He breathed in the mix of damp asphalt and car exhaust, relieved that it didn’t smell like burnt death. He’d never get used to that. As he approached the body the chief called up to him on the radio.

“What do you see Cabrera?”

“A body.”

“Well no shit. How’s he caught?”

“I’m not sure, the leg maybe” he said as he crept forward, still feeling the eyes of every soul going to work from Edinburg, impatient and morbidly curious. The body rested inside the skeletal four-cornered beam as if on an inclined steel hammock, with one dislocated arm hanging below, waving to it’s audience on the highway.

“It’s just kind of laying here” Edgar said into the radio. “I think I can just slide it out of here.”

“Alright we’ll move the truck over there and I’ll get some of the guys on the ladder.” The chief paused, incredulous. “Jeez, the guy must have been doing at least 80 to have flown out of the car that high.”

Edgar took a seat on the beam while he waited. He looked out at the crowd of cars, feeling naked and powerful at the same time. There’s only a handful of people who’ve seen what I’ve seen, he thought. The old woman in the silver minivan with a rosary hanging from the

rearview mirror had probably only ever worked at home. She'd probably seen a few dead bodies in her lifetime, though. The kid with quarter-sized gauges listening to shitty electro-metal on full blast in a beat up Mustang with a fat exhaust and an unpainted hood would probably end up wrapped around a telephone poll. He wondered if he'd be on call that night. The young father in a sensible sedan reaching around to talk to his toddler in the back seat so she won't look out the windshield would probably die at 50 from cholesterol, or heart disease, or diabetes, or stress.

It was getting to be too much. Every person he saw or met, every girl he made himself not fall for, every relative he'd call at 9 in the morning when he got off his shift to make sure they were safe, the 34-year-old guy in the mirror, they were all just a countdown to an unknown time in an unknown dark place from which no one ever came back. He looked down at the asphalt below and sighed. A solution came to him like a gust of wind then continued on past him. He wanted a better death for himself.

"How long do you think I'll be able to keep doing this?" he asked out loud to the corpse, knowing that he'd know the answer soon enough.

Feb. 7, 2015

Abel

Abel dragged his small size 5 dress shoe along the dew covered morning grass. He liked the way the grass reflected the morning light and the way the grass became less reflective after he'd stepped on it. He turned to look back at the grass patch running alongside the cracked asphalt of Tagle Road and admired the long line in the grass he'd formed while holding his mother's hand. She was deep in gossipy conversation with preaching partner, a woman in her mid 50's with gray curly hair styled in a bob. They both wore cheap but stylish and functional wool sweaters over long, loose fitting dresses that ran down to their calves. Abel could still smell the moth balls from the boxes the dresses had been stored in at the thrift store. He watched the cloud of vapor forming from his mother and the older woman's breath as they spoke about other women who attended the Kingdom Hall in dresses that were too tight, and how their husbands were in the wrong for letting them go out like that.

In his other hand he held a small briefcase that looked as if the briefcase his father used had had a child. Its contents were sparse, a bible, a children's book of bible stories, and a series of small informational packets about how with Jehovah's blessing one could overcome death and live forever in paradise after the apocalypse. He'd read the pamphlet numerous times, along with all the others. Each time feeling less and less convinced by them. All the rules seemed so arbitrary, so strict, but the fear was always real. Not the fear Jehovah wouldn't bring him back from the dead after the apocalypse, or that Satan was out there trying to keep him from salvation, but that his mom would be sad if he broke a rule and celebrated a birthday, or said the pledge of

allegiance in class. The fear was real that one Saturday he would knock on a door and one of his classmates would open it and see him in his stupid blue dress pants and his clip-on tie with paisley swirls. He imagined the Monday morning afterwards, in Ms. Villarreal's second grade class, being called out by and teased. "Hey Abel!" someone might yell out across the classroom. "Stop coming to my house to talk about Jehovah!" And he imagined the whole class laughing at the religious weirdo, all of it made worse because since he suspected that Jehovah might not exist, there was no one to pray to for comfort.

The trio approached a beige bricked house, almost identical to every other house in the neighborhood save for a well kept set of basil plants and rose bushes and a big wind chime with a wooden base and bronze chimes. Abel loved the sound of wind chimes and thought well of the houses that had them. Once at the thrift store he saw one with a broken chime and asked his mother if they could have one and she said no. When he asked why she said that Jehovah didn't approve of them because they were used to keep the bad spirits away. He suspected that she was lying, but he had no one way of knowing.

"Why don't you try this next one, okay mijo?" his mother said as they approached the door with glass panels on it.

Abel nodded. He didn't worry, it had been a slow morning. Only two people had opened their doors in this neighborhood. The first a groggy man in a white muscle-shirt who closed the door immediately after Abel's mother began pulling out a copy of her Awake! magazine. The second was an elderly woman, who listened intently and then began venting about her grandchildren to Abel's mother and her preaching partner. Abel's mother nodded sympathetically and then pulled open her bible for advice and read to her from chapter 6 of the book of Ephesians:

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother which is the first commandment with a promise so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth. Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

The last sentence caught Abel’s ear. His mother recited this passage to him often, but always stopped after the part about a long life on the earth. He felt a small, smug pride in this knowledge that his parents broke the rules as well. He was exasperated often.

In front of the beige house with the rose bushes and the giant wind chime Abel walked up to the door and rang the doorbell. He expected nothing to happen, but when the door knob rattled as it was unlocked he felt himself get tense. He’d practiced a short presentation in the car with his mother before they got to the neighborhood, but to say it to someone who wouldn’t take joy in his ability to say the words just right, someone who’d been woken up or had their breakfast interrupted, someone who didn’t want to be there as much as he didn’t want to be there, was terrifying. The door opened.

In an instant all the fears became real, all his worries justified. Standing in the doorway was Esther in her pink *Phineas and Ferb* pajamas, her hair still messy, her eyes squinting out at the bright morning-sun-covered front porch.

“Abel?”

Abel didn’t say anything. He turned around and looked back at his mother. Her face had an expectant face on it. He could tell she was hoping he’d make her look good in front of her preaching partner.

“*She knows my name?*” he thought with equal parts excitement and dread.

“Hi,” he muttered weakly. Already this was the most they’d ever spoken. He looked at her in class often though, turning away quickly when she’d start looking in his direction. She was pretty but didn’t seem stuck up like the other pretty girls. Abel admired her. Once, in the cafeteria as the special needs class walked by, a boy with Down’s Syndrome stumbled and dropped his plate of chocolate milk and chicken nuggets. He began crying loudly in place. Before the teacher could reach him Esther leapt up from her seat and picked up the nuggets and carton of milk, placed them back on the plate and handed them back to the boy, standing there until the teacher arrived. She never raised her hand, but whenever Ms. Villarreal called on her she’d know the answer without hesitating. She didn’t talk very much, and mostly it was with her twin brother, Julio. Abel was often jealous of Julio for being able to talk to her whenever he wanted.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. Her tone was curious, not judgmental. Abel was still quiet. He tried to find the words to answer her question, or at least just the words he’d practiced in the car, but nothing came out. The silence grew harder and harder to overcome and Abel felt that it would drown him. Behind him he felt his mother’s gaze and eventually a soft reassuring hand on his shoulder from his mother’s preaching partner.

He looked down and began his small presentation: “We’re here to encourage everyone to learn more about the bible and the love of Jehovah God,” and so on. Slowly at first, and then more confidently and his nerves turned into autonomous reciting. When he finished he looked up from the floor and standing behind Esther was her mother Beatriz, having appeared sometime in the middle of Abel reading a short excerpt from the pamphlet. Esther took the pamphlet, looking directly at him as she did so. She smiled, and Abel shifted away his eyes instinctively, as he always did when she looked in his direction.

Abel's mother then began speaking with Beatriz, launching into her own practiced routine of polite conversation that turned always unnaturally into an invitation to the Kingdom Hall, and an offer of an *Awake!* magazine. Beatriz in return politely declined both until she saw the title of the main article of the magazine, "Soon we will see out lost over ones again in paradise." She took the magazine cautiously.

As the trio turned away to continue their evangelizing Esther called out, "See you Monday, Abel." Abel turned back shyly and waved. He thought about her and her tone of voice as they continued down the neighborhood. She wasn't teasing him, he concluded at last as they returned to the silver Dodge Intrepid parked near the stop sign. They drove off and parked again in the next neighborhood. It was 9:30, and this would be the last neighborhood of the morning before he could begin enjoying his weekend. He hoped she wouldn't read the pamphlet he gave her. He hoped she was just being nice. He hoped Monday morning he wouldn't look away when she looked in his direction.

Amanda

They lay on their backs on the half-dead grass in the middle of a field behind her parent's house, half-stoned, holding hands looking up at the night. The air was fresh and every now again a gust would blow that would give her a shiver and Amanda would pull his warm hairy arm close to her for a moment before he'd readjust it, making her feel alone again. Across the cotton field she heard the faint sound of a truck roaring down FM 490, one of the few that passed every 15 minutes or so on it's way to Raymondville, ten miles away.

Josh had been quiet tonight, more than usual. Maybe he already knew. She'd been distracted since she'd found out two weeks ago. His eyes tonight had that hollow look in them

that they did when he was thinking about everything and nothing at the same time. When he showed up outside the house after her parents had fallen asleep he hugged her, but only for a moment and with one hand over her ass, feeling the soft fabric of her teal sundress. This was more habitual than sexual and she didn't give it any thought. He said "Hey girl" in a low voice before pulling out a joint from the breast pocket of his brown-orange plaid shirt that looked like the kind her father and his father before him wore when they worked the fields. He wasn't mad, just far away. They passed the joint between them in a silence that only she knew was awkward. She'd have to tell him, as much as she wanted to pretend that it was only nausea, that the condom hadn't slipped off inside of her, that things could stay casual, that she could finish senior year, that her dad wouldn't call her a stupid *puta* for not being married first.

The grass was soft and brittle at the same time. She tried not to think about the bugs crawling around in the dirt. If she did she'd start to feel them crawling all over her legs and back and would have to sit up and brush them off her legs only to find that it was just grass blades rubbing up against her bare legs. She willed herself to not feel it anymore. She held Josh's hand and with her other rubbed two fingers against the bronze cross she wore around her neck. She looked over at him looking directly up at the stars. He blinked slowly, as did she, as if to make the moment linger.

"You can't see the stars like this in town," he said after a minute of her looking at him. She didn't know what she was looking for. Maybe just reaffirmation that he was hers. "You can even see the Milky Way from here," he said as he pointed his finger upwards and ran it along the hazy silver streak in the black moonless sky.

"It's the only good thing about living out here," she said.

"No one bothers you though. You can do whatever you want."

“I guess,” she said, unconvinced.

They were quiet again for a few minutes. These are the last moments, she realized, the last time they would be carefree together. Once the words came out of her mouth it could never go back to how it was before, when he walked up to her as she clocked out of the drive-thru convenience store and told her she was too pretty to be working there. It was a bad line but he was cute and she needed something exciting. She brought their joined hands to her lips and began kissing his hands, his arms, then turning over to kiss his shoulders and neck. *One more time*, she thought as she moved her free hand over his pant zipper.

“Here?” he asked. She nodded and continued. She lay on him and kissed him, breathing in as much of him as she could. He would soon either become a good man or disappoint her, but he would not remain this. His hands explored her and settled on her hips, his grasp getting firmer as they picked up the pace.

“I have some condoms in the truck,” he offered when she paused to hike up her sundress and slip off her underwear.

“That’s ok, it’s not that time of month,” she said absently. He sat up and she slid him into her, sitting on his lap facing him. He kissed her neck and she looked out at the cotton field, wondering how old the field was and how many generations had toiled away for it’s goods, picking it, refining it, shipping it, turning it into cloth then into a sundress that would be worn as one generation learned of a new one. She closed her eyes and opened them again, ready.

Feb. 8, 2015

Elydia

There was something about seeing her mother on the phone with the insurance company, arguing over deductibles, that made Elydia feel sad. Something about the pitch of her voice, elevated half an octave, made Elydia feel a profound emptiness. It was her polite voice, similar to the tone she used when dealing with Elydia's principal 15 years ago when she was called in because of perpetual tardiness. And while then, that polite tone masked annoyance and aggravation, now it covered desperation.

Elydia looked down at her mother's brown feet, still displayed proudly in leather *chanclas* with flower designs embroidered on them, at the varicose veins running from her shins down to two missing toes on her right foot, at the red nail polish she used on the eight toes that remained.

The table between them was draped with a table cloth and a large sheet of clear plastic. Tucked neatly next to a large clear bowl of plastic fruit that served as a centerpiece were envelopes stacked on envelopes, each one a bill, or advertisement for diabetic medical gear. Next to the stack was a box of lancets for her mother to prick her fingers. As Elydia began looking through the stack her mother swatted her hand away distractedly, almost instinctually. Elydia put her hands in her lap and felt like a teenager again.

"Well, ok then." Elydia's mother said into the phone before hanging up abruptly.

"What happened?" Elydia asked.

"Nothing. They just want money and I don't have any."

“What are you gonna do then?”

Her mother shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. The forced apathy did not make Elydia feel better about her mother’s situation.

“I’m hungry *mija*. *Hazme comida?*”

“Ok mom. What do you want to eat?”

“Whatever’s there.”

Elydia walked over to the kitchen and began perusing the pantry and refrigerator. Unopened packages of sugar-free goods lined the back of the pantry while in the foreground was half-consumed Snickers and bag of potato chips.

“Mom, you know you’re not supposed to be eating this stuff,” Elydia said as she pulled out the bag of chips and confronted her mother back at the table.

“They’re your fathers.”

“Mom...”

“What?”

“Dad’s been gone for a year now.”

“I know.”

“So you’ve kept this bag of his chips for the last year?”

“Yes.”

“So if I open these they’re gonna be moldy and stale?”

“I don’t know!” her mother said, exasperated.

“Fine” Elydia said, throwing the chips and Snickers bar on the table next to the insulin test strips.

Elydia returned to the kitchen and pretended not to hear the Snickers being unwrapped as she placed two pans on the gas stove. She poured vegetable oil in one pan followed by a cup of rice. In the other she poured in more vegetable oil then began to chop up half an onion and a clove of garlic. She poured this into the second pan and then placed two frozen chicken breasts in the microwave. As the chicken defrosted, the rice fried and the onion and garlic caramelized, Elydia remembered her mother teaching her this recipe when she turned 14, saying “one day you’ll make this for your husband.” A husband never materialized but Elydia still made this for her daughter on a weekly basis. And now, despite her annoyance, she was filled with a sort of vulnerable pride as she made this for her mother. From the dining room she heard the ping of her mother’s phone.

“Beatriz is coming over in a bit. Do you think there will be enough food?”

“Is she bringing the twins?”

“Probably.”

Elydia looked down at the pans.

“As long as you don’t want leftovers there should be enough.”

“It’s fine, I can cook for myself tomorrow.”

Elydia doubted she could but she didn’t want to have that argument again. It always ended with her mother in tears and Elydia feeling both guilty and angry because she knew she’d still have to take care of her the next day. She’d drop off lunch on her way to work tomorrow morning.

As she poured water over the frying rice she heard the screen door open over the sound of hissing cold water meeting a hot pan followed by the sound scrambling footsteps. Beatriz’s twins ran towards their grandmother to give her a hug. Elydia looked over to say hello to Beatriz. She

was wearing a black tank top, yoga pants and Nike's. As the twins occupied their grandmother Beatriz walked over to Elydia, now scooping chicken broth seasoning into the rice.

"Smells good Ely" Beatriz said as she put an arm around her sister.

"Damn right." Elydia replied. She looked down at the pan, then to her side at Beatriz' slim figure, than straight down at her own stomach. She'd tried dieting a few years ago when her daughter's father moved out and started dating a Zumba instructor, but it didn't feel worth the constant hunger pangs.

"You doing ok?" Beatriz asked.

"Yeah, why?" Elydia said with a tone.

"No reason. I can't check up on my sister or what?"

Elydia swung her hips sideways to bump Beatriz out of the way. Beatriz lost her footing as she moved aside and fell on the floor. Elydia did not make an effort to hide her smirk. As Beatriz began making her back up to her feet her children ran to her and tackled her back to the floor. Beatriz started tickling them and the three of them rolled around on the floor laughing for a moment until Beatriz was out of breath. As she caught her breath her son walked up to Elydia and tapped her on her side.

"Tia Elydia?"

"Yes Julio?"

"Did you forget to wash your neck in the shower this morning?"

"Julio!" Beatriz called out, picking herself up quickly and moving to grab Julio's hand and pull him out of the kitchen. She and Elydia exchanged a long glance before Beatriz moved back to the table to sit with their mother. In front of the stove Elydia put a hand on neck and

another on her stomach. She sighed and continued watching the rice as it expanded and absorbed the boiling water.

When the food was ready the five of them sat at the table and ate.

Feb. 9, 2015

Fernando

Fernando couldn't figure out why the flags were at half-staff today. It happened too often to ask about anymore. Sometimes it was a Remembrance Day, sometimes a senator died, sometimes it was a hurricane, and other times it was a shooting. There'd been a lot of those. He couldn't figure out why or how someone would decide that that was the best way to handle a situation. He had his own gun wrapped up in a blanket in his closet next to his boots and his wife's clothes. It made him nervous, and it made his wife downright scared. But these guys, pulling up to a school and shooting up the place, what the hell was that about? He shook his head and hopped onto the school bus, plopped down on the linoleum seat and placed his keys in the ignition. Above his head was a picture of Jesus. It wasn't crucifix Jesus, that seemed too brutal for a bus that carried elementary school kids. This was friendly, fatherly Jesus, in some majestic robes with his pale finger pointed up at the heavens. He pulled a cross out from under his uniform, kissed it, and released the parking brake.

As he pulled out of the bus barn he took a glance at himself in the rear view mirror. He wasn't entirely happy with his look, but for being 65 he hadn't aged terribly. His cheeks and neck jiggled slightly in as the bus shook, and his hair was still more black than gray, though only slightly so. His skin, brown and almost constantly on the verge of sweating, had more wrinkles than he would have liked but less than if he hadn't stopped smoking and working in the sun 15 years ago. The construction job he'd worked at before paid well, but here he got insurance. It was too expensive, and the deductible was high, but it was something. It was also cheaper than

paying for chemotherapy out of pocket. Three years in remission and his faith in God and the system was relatively in tact. Shaken, but in tact. He turned onto Monte Cristo and made his way towards Tagle St.

He sang along to the radio station. He was grateful that he got to drive one of the newer busses that had speakers all along the bus. It let him expose the kids to some of the songs he loved when he was younger. He kept the radio station on Recuerdos 96.1. Most of the songs they played were already oldies when he was a child. The songs weren't quite folk songs, but they might as well have been. Though the song playing now wasn't quite so old. It was Juan Gabriel's "Mi Guitarra." It was upbeat and it made morning traffic on Monte Cristo more bearable.

Monte Cristo in the morning annoyed him. Everyone took this street in the morning as a way to avoid going down University, but the road wasn't designed for that kind of traffic. The stop and go traffic causing the bus to lurch forward and backwards, then up and down as he braked, still made him feel vaguely nauseated. It was a shame, because in the evening, when he drove down this street in his own vehicle after all the traffic had died, he loves the solitude of this street. The way that when the sun was going down and the sky turned an orange-purple even the refinery and the Masa factory looked beautiful. This part of Edinburg still looked Mexican to him. Most of the other roads were filled with shops and buildings and houses that seemed to be trying so hard to forget that they were 15 minutes from the border. On this street, on this side of town it felt like they were that close. And all these people, filling the street at this hour, only touched this part of town when it was convenient for them to avoid other traffic. He turned onto Tagle.

Usually, for the Middle school and high school kids, he could just park at the entrance to the road and the kids would already be congregated there, waiting unenthusiastically to start their

day. But for the little ones he had to stop at each house to get them one by one. It meant stopping at each house with a child under the age of 11, releasing a puff of black exhaust to take off once the child had taken their seat. It was more work, but he liked getting to greet every child individually as they got on the bus.

“Good morning Pedro,” he said to the first boy that got on the bus.

“Good morning Mr. Alvarez!” he said cheerfully.

There was genuine enthusiasm in their tone, even if it was sometimes punctuated by grogginess. The older ones said “hi” sometimes, but they mostly just had their headphones on. They looked perpetually tired and apathetic. He wondered what they had to be so tired about. Some of them surely had jobs, but most probably just stayed up too late. Fernando didn’t want to be the crocheted old man who resented teenagers, but it was hard to avoid the fact that that’s what was happening to him. It would only be a matter of time before he hated this job. But the little ones made it better. As did the health insurance. The boy took his seat near the middle of the bus and Fernando released the brake and took off, onto the next house.

One by one he picked up the children until the bus was almost half full. He approached the end of the street for the last stop on this street. It was a set of twins, Julio and Esther. They were sweet and he admired their mother. She still waited next to them as the bus arrived, and kissed them both on the forehead before they got on the bus. She was good looking, and was lucky to look more like her mother than her father. He’d gone to high school with her father, Rafael.

Fernando remembered Rafael as crazy bastard, but a good friend. Once, Rafael played an impromptu game of chicken in his beat up Chevy Apache at the end of their junior year against a guy who had dropped out a year earlier. Rafael didn’t like him, namely because he always tried

hitting on his girlfriend, Beatriz's mother. Fernando sat in the passenger seat and watched as Rafael decided that only way to win was to close his eyes and accelerate. "*No puedes tener miedo si no los ves,*" he said over the sound of the roaring engine and caliche flying up and hitting the underside of the truck.

They spent the summer of 1967 repairing the truck after they hit a pothole and the truck swerved into a mesquite. But Rafael had won, and that was all that mattered to him. Trucks, according to Rafael, were much easier to repair than pride. Fernando tried telling Rafael his girlfriend would have stayed with him even if he had lost the game, but Rafael would have none of it.

They got cancer with two years of each other. When Fernando got it he told Rafael to get checked. But his mentality hadn't changed. *If you don't see the cancer, you can't be afraid of it.* It was only when Rafael collapsed while mowing his lawn that he decided to check himself out and while Fernando managed to slip through the fingers of prostate death, Rafael didn't catch it in time. By the time he'd finally gone to the doctor, it had spread from his lungs to everywhere a cancerous tumor could spread. He was gone in 3 months.

"How are you, mija?" he asked Beatriz as he swung open the doors and the twins walked in, bumping shoulders as they tried to enter the bus at the same time.

"I'm doing well, Fernando. And you?" she asked. Her face smiled but her eyes were heavy. They'd been this way since the start of the school year. He asked her how she was every morning and her response was always identical, down to the tone.

"I'm good. Just happy to be alive," was his response to her everyday. It was a routine, like actors in a play that ran every weekday morning, but it was a role he never got tired of

playing. He didn't pity her, but he thought of her probably more than she thought of him. He waited until the twins were seated, always next each other, and drove off.

Ms. Villarreal

Ms. Villarreal walked into the classroom hungover, unsure what she'd have the kids do today. Something quiet, preferably, though they never were. It was too much to expect 29 eight year-olds to sit quietly and color, or practice their multiplication tables, or read the Lorax to themselves. Her head would just have to pound for as long as it needed to, usually around lunch, before it dulled into the feeling of an old bruise you pressed your thumb down into to still feel. This year couldn't end fast enough.

She walked around the room organizing the desks and rearranging the books in the reading corner. At 36 years of age she could still do this without going out of breath, even if every movement felt like she was being held back by elastic bands. She walked up to the whiteboard and wrote down as neatly as she could in cursive "Monday, February 9th, 2015" before sitting down to choose what pages they'd do from the workbooks today. She pushed her curly black hair out of her pale face and began scribbling reminders to herself on the back of an enveloped with the words "STUDENT LOAN: FINAL NOTICE" visible from the inside. Her scant lesson plans were scattered around the desk. They were mostly bullshit and she knew this, but she had filled them with enough jargon to keep her administrators off her back. She knew the right acronyms to use, and the right things to say at staff meetings to make herself sound competent. "Ms. Villarreal you always seem so calm and organized," they would say during

meetings. She'd even won a teacher-of-the-year award once, though she felt she didn't deserve it. She'd read once about something called Imposter Syndrome and she was positive she didn't have it. Her principal believed she was a great teacher because he was an idiot.

Her classroom was well decorated. In the 12 years she had been doing this she'd figured out that the teachers with well decorated classrooms had very little asked of them. Somehow it just made them seem busier and more put together. The room was filled with colorful posters, and each wall was devoted to a subject. Math posters on one wall, science and social studies on another, English and grammar on another, and the last wall was filled with student work. The students handwriting was still messy, but legible. Their drawings were interesting, she thought. She looked at them often during the day and tried to imagine the drawings her own daughter would have made had she survived her birth. This year Emily would have been in second grade, and with a few favors from her idiot principal she could have been placed in this exact class. She'd done this for Rodrigo when he was in 2nd grade, and she loved the year they had together here. She wasn't a very good teacher then, but she did drink less. She couldn't have been that bad though, he was going to finish high school this year and he had gotten himself a full scholarship to UT-Austin. He wasn't going to have to deal with bullshit student loans or filling out FAFSA information. He could be free in a way she wasn't.

At 7:38 an alarm on her phone went off, letting her know to open the door to her class and wait in the hallway for the kids to come in. It was a trickle at first, giving her time to smile and make small talk with each student as they walked in, than a flood, then a trickle again. She made one last look around to make sure the halls were empty before closing the door and looking at the classroom full of chattering students. Their voices were loud and enthusiastic which made Mrs. Villarreal's head feel like dull shards of glass were scraping against her skull from the

inside out. Ten years ago she would have yelled to get the students to quiet down, but her strategy now included standing in front of the classroom with an expectant look. One after another the students would notice, nudging each other to quiet down until the small roar turned into a silence.

“Good morning everyone,” she said as professionally and motherly as she could.

“Good morning Ms. Villarreal” the class yelled in almost-unison. It felt as if her students voices were punching her in the temples. She smiled sweetly and started the day. The lessons today would involve keeping her movements and interactions with the class to an absolute minimum. She shined in this respect. Despite not really teaching much, she knew how to organize her class in such a way that her students still learned without much of her input, or at least, that 80% of them met the very low standards for second graders that Texas set. She was eternally grateful that the new push in the education industry had been towards “student-centered learning” after decades of “teacher-centered learning.” Training after pointless training all saying the same thing, that students did best when they taught themselves and teachers simply “facilitated” learning. All that really meant for Mrs. Villarreal was that her school would be buying many more student workbooks from the same companies that lobbied for that change in direction and that now she could finish two bottles of red wine on a Tuesday night with little consequence besides the hangover.

From her desk she watched the students chit-chatting as they worked. Many of her coworkers expected complete silence as the students worked, but this seemed needlessly strict. Kids needed to socialize, and thirty minutes a day at lunch was nowhere near enough. She disdained the fact that most of the other teachers she worked with expected more discipline from

their students than they expected from each other. During staff meetings they acted more like children than their students did.

At one of the tables she noticed Esther and Julio. They were twins and inseparable, though they only ever really talked to one another. She'd met their mother once, during meet-the-teacher night, and she seemed friendly enough, though kind of sad. There'd been a death in the family. In their drawings, Julio and Esther often drew cemeteries. It should have been a cause for concern, but their work was good. Though they never volunteered to say anything, whenever she called on them during weekly reviews they knew the answer. Abel was sitting with them today, which was new. They trio talked and giggled together. He kept to himself mostly. The poor boy had religious parents who insisted that he not celebrate any holidays or say the pledge of allegiance, and the other students noticed. He was smart though. She was glad that Esther and Julio had welcomed him into their small world.

Mrs. Villarreal got up from her desk and began walking amongst the students. Some were working but most had settled into a calm chattering. They talked about various things, mostly about toys or youtube videos they'd been watching the night before. As she made her way toward Abel, Esther and Julio she paused to tune into their conversation. Esther was talking about her Grandpa Rafa, and how he used to try playing video games with her and Julio. Abel chimed in saying that his mom always told him that they'd get to see people who died again in paradise, but he didn't know if she was telling the truth about that.

She edged in closed before taking a seat at the table with the new trio.

"How are you guys doing?" she asked, more sincerely than she had said anything in months.

The three of them got quiet before Julio said “we’re okay,” and began talking about a video he’d seen about dinosaurs. Mrs. Villarreal listened intently, and felt the weight of her headache begin to lift.

Feb. 10, 2015

Aaron

Beatriz was out of bed by the time Aaron awoke. He stretched out, moving his hairy arms over to her side of the bed and felt only the mattress and cotton sheets. There was still the slight warmth from where she had laid the entire night, but it only made her absence more tangible. He turned over and breathed in, taking in the bits of her scent that remained on her pillow. It wasn't the smell of perfume or body spray, but it wasn't body odor either. It was some combination of the moisturizer she dutifully applied every night and the shampoo she used every few days when her hair got too oily. It had been a year since they last cuddled in the morning.

She'd had another rough night. Twice he woke up because she was tossing in her sleep. In the dark silence of their bedroom, illuminated only by a dim nightlight by her nightstand, he could hear her grinding her teeth. Every now and again, a phrase would escape her mouth along with a line of saliva. "That's not the way it goes" or "Come back." She often talked in her sleep. He liked when he could tell she was dreaming about the twins. Once she raised up her hand in bed, pointed her finger and said "Be nice to your sister." He kissed her forehead when she did this, which woke her up. "What is it?" she would say. "Nothing babe, I love you" he would reply. She would turn around, away from him, and go back to sleep. Last night, as she tossed, he tried holding her hand. She pulled it away and grunted, displeased. She wanted to be alone in her dreams.

Aaron sat up in bed for a moment. He checked his phone. It was 6:30 and he had 5 notifications. Four of them were pointless, Facebook invites and some news. The fifth was a text

from Carolina. “Hey bud! Can I hitch a ride with you today?” He squinted at his phone, waiting for his eye sight to come back to him. “Yeah, I’ll be there in an hour” he tapped into his phone. He got a text like this from her a few times a week.

He got up from the bed and checked into the living room. Beatriz was there, her thumb gliding up and down her phone, her face illuminated by the scrolling feed.

“You’re up,” she said glancing up for a brief moment. Her tone was flat and it was neither a question nor a declaration.

“Did you sleep ok?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah I slept great.” Her voice pitched upwards forcefully.

“Good dreams?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “There’s some coffee there already.”

“Thanks”

He suspected he was being sent away so she could stop pretending she was doing okay. He needed the coffee though. As he poured the coffee into a mug from work with the letters MTC inscribed on it he heard the twins in their room stirring. Esther emerged from her room first. Her messy brown hair hung down to the middle of her back. She walked over to Aaron and gave him a hug, pulling a waffle from the toaster before plopping down on the couch next to her mother.

The sun was beginning to peek in through windows and outside the neighbors dog was beginning to bark. It had spent the night outside. Aaron worried about the dog. It’s owner wasn’t mean, but she was forgetful. An elderly woman who lived alone, she spent her days practicing her English by watching FOX news. She also made food, constantly. Always cooking, baking, boiling sometimes even barbecuing. Her favorites were enchiladas, meatloaf, mole’, flan and

upside down pineapple cakes. She brought over food almost every other day, whatever was leftover. The twins said they thought she was creepy, as much as Aaron tried explaining that she was just lonely. When she did this, Aaron would take some of the food over to the fence and give it to the dog after she'd fallen asleep. It probably wasn't good for the dog, but he needed to eat something.

In the shower as he lathered up he began thinking about traffic and how long the drive to Raymondville would be. Most of the drive was empty, but getting onto the highway was a headache, especially from near the University where Carolina lived. His mind lingered on her. She was in her late 20s and, while not attractive enough to make Beatriz worry about Aaron giving her a 45 minute ride to the prison they worked at, was not unattractive. His mind wondered over her figure, bulky but still feminine, and how easy it would be for both of them to skip work one day and spend it in her bedroom. Her personality was enthusiastic and she was probably fun in bed. He didn't intend for his mind to go there, and as the bar of soap glided over his pelvis he realized he was hard. He forced his mind to another subject and waited for his erection to subside.

After he was dressed in his uniform he walked back into the kitchen to gather his keys and wallet. Beatriz was in the bathroom now, making sure Esther and Julio had combed their hair properly. They still complained about brushing their teeth but had gotten better about brushing even their molars thoroughly. Beatriz wasn't dressed yet, but she wouldn't need to be until the afternoon when her shift at the University library started.

Aaron paused for a moment alone in the kitchen, taking in the sounds of his wife and the twins in the bathroom: the screech of the open faucet, Esther and Julio giggling as Beatriz ran her fingers through their hair, the occasional tapping of a tree branch scraping against the bathroom

window. The sun was almost fully risen now, flooding the living room and kitchen with its yellow light. The smell of coffee and Eggo Waffles still lingered in the air, and Aaron fought off the lingering image of a naked Carolina in his mind.

“Are you taking off already?” Beatriz asked as she emerged from the bathroom.

“Yeah in a bit.”

“Are you picking up Carolina on the way?”

“No, not today.”

“Ok hon, text me when you get there ok?”

“Sure thing.”

They gave each other a routine peck on the lips and Aaron made his way for the door, unsure why he had lied.

Carolina

In the light of the morning sun, Aaron’s face looked like a better life. He had no stubble on his face and his hazel eyes looked sweeter in the morning light than they did under the fluorescent lights of the prison. His hands on the steering wheel, relaxed but steady, led Carolina’s imagination to more places than she’d be comfortable sharing with anyone. Though not so many places that she’d feel compelled to act on it. She could control herself. She had to if she wanted to keep this small bit of pleasantness in her day alive. Pleasantness came in short supply everywhere.

She usually carried the conversation on the way to work. She was good at small talk and she liked the way it disguised how ambivalent she felt about what they did there. They talked

about football and who the Seahawks were probably gonna trade after blowing the 4th quarter of the Super Bowl, their weekend plans, Aaron's kids, anything but work. Carolina sensed that they probably both felt some sense of guilt about what they did there. She knew if they weren't doing it, someone else would be. They were kind. Or at least, kinder than most. And she definitely didn't revel in the suffering. She didn't get off on the power like some of the other guards did. Aaron didn't get off on the power either, mostly he just wanted paycheck. And that was admirable in its own way. He was smart and he was good to his family. She looked at him staring forward on the highway as he turned into the passing lane to pass an 18-wheeler. Aaron turned on his blinker to exit the highway and turn onto 490.

Marcos wasn't a bad guy either. He was just sad. Or maybe just sick. He didn't like thinking that he was sick, and his Zoloft prescription often went unfilled, and the bottles half-taken before being thrown away. He just said everyone was too full of shit. And maybe they were, but that was something anyone with any sense had to deal with. He was too in his head most of the time. There were things in there that he refused to let her in about. Maybe something had happened to him when he was younger. The idea that he was a nut she could crack to expose the beautiful soul inside him to the world was one that was quickly running out of steam. She loved Marcos, or at least, his potential. What that potential was though, was becoming unclear. He was smart, or at least, smarter than the *taquaches* she used to date. He liked music, and was good with computers. But more and more it seemed like nothing more than fertile ground with nothing planted in it, ground losing its vigor and nutrients with every rainfall.

"So how's Beatriz been doing lately?" she asked Aaron, with no particular response from Aaron in mind. He didn't answer right away, and the sound of the asphalt underneath them and the air rushing around his aged Jeep Wrangler seemed to get louder as he thought.

“She’s doing okay.”

“Better than before?”

“Um, sort of. To be honest I don’t really know. It’s hard to read her a lot of the time.”

“Does she talk to you?”

“In her own way. I mean, she’s always been like that. But since her dad died it’s felt like the air just got taken out of things.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just...Like...” Aaron struggled to find the words and Carolina felt an instinctual guilt for bringing it up. She tried working out a way to finish the statement for him that would ease the pressure on him. The landscape opened up in front of them as the trees passing by them ceased and an open field began. It was private property with some exotic animals on them. On the ground was a large piles of watermelons and cabbage for the bison and deer to eat.

“Do you think that guy has a permit for his animals?” Carolina offered, giving Aaron the space to think about something else.

“It’s like we’re roommates a lot of the time,” he said, turning down her offer. “I know she’s not happy, but I have no idea if I’m making things better or worse for her.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“She’s still good with the twins, though. And if she only has the mental room for one thing, I guess I’d rather it be the kids than our marriage.”

“I’m sure she still loves you though.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s still putting up a face for you, and that has to be hard. She wouldn’t be trying to keep it together in front of you if she didn’t love you.”

“I wish she would cry in front me though. Or let me tell her that it’s going to be okay. It’s like she doesn’t trust me.”

“Don’t make it about you, Aaron.”

“Agh, yea, you’re right.”

“Just be steady for her. I’m sure she’ll come around.”

“Yeah you’re right. Valentine’s day is coming up. Maybe we’ll do something nice then.”

“Isn’t Raul’s wedding on Valentine’s day?”

“Ah fuck I forgot about that.”

Aaron exhaled loudly. “There’s no way that guy doesn’t have a permit.”

“Must have been expensive.”

“Yeah.”

There was a lull in the conversation. Aaron slowed the Jeep down as he approached a sharp right curve in the road. He didn’t slow the jeep down fast enough and Carolina jolted sideways, grazing his shoulder before pulling herself back.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Carolina, saying the words as steadily as she could to mask her heart beating fast.

“How’s Marcos doing?” Aaron asked, turning the spotlight onto her. Carolina groaned loudly.

“That bad?”

“No, I’m exaggerating. He’s fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yes, absolutely fine,” she said sharply.

“Ok.”

There was another lull. A speed limit sign flew by and Aaron sped up to 65 miles and hour.

“I’m sorry, I’m just really annoyed at him.”

“Why?”

“That’s the thing. It’s nothing. I get annoyed at the smallest things. We’ve been having these big fights about nothing lately.”

“That’s not good.”

“It’s not. I mean even this. I shouldn’t have to be bumming a ride from you every other day because he needs my car but it’s easier doing this than getting him to get his license renewed so he can get his own car.”

“Why don’t you tell him that?”

“Because I’m not his mom.” She felt her heart beat rising again, this time in anger. “And it’s not like he doesn’t make enough money, he just spends it all on weed.”

“Do you want to leave him?”

“Sometimes.” She paused. “A lot of the time. But at the same time, it’s not like he’s done anything bad to me. He’s nice, and we have fun on the weekends. But it’s like. I’m almost 30 you know?”

“It’s not like there’s a timetable on those types of things.”

“There is for me.”

“Kids?”

“Yeah,”

“I miscarried two months ago.”

“Oh shit, I didn’t know that. I’m sorry”

“I didn’t tell him though. I missed my period and took the test.” Her tone was flat as she said this. “But while I was figuring out a way to tell him I started bleeding.”

“Ah shit Caro, that’s terrible.”

Carolina didn’t say anything. She felt the warmth on her cheeks from tears. She hadn’t even felt the lump in her throat or the upswell of emotions. The tears were simply there, doing what they needed to be doing. She felt Aaron place a comforting hand on her leg.

“You’re gonna be alright, it’s gonna be alright.”

“Oh shut up,” Carolina said as she wiped away the tears, forcing a laugh. She placed her hand on his and grasped onto his fingers. They were quiet like that for a moment. She looked over at Aaron, looking forward, his hand reaching out thoughtlessly, as if this was his most natural state, as if he wanted more than anything to be a comfort to someone. Realizing that they’d spent too much time like this, he pulled his arm suddenly to return his hand to the steering wheel, too quickly for it to be natural.

There was more silence. His eyes glanced sideways at her, to check if she was looking at him. She was. Though what she was looking at even Carolina wasn’t sure of. Ahead of them the wind farm began to appear in the distance. They were almost there. The Willacy County Correctional Facility was there among the wind turbines, waiting for them.

“I think you should do whatever is best for you,” Aaron offered at last. It wasn’t particularly useful advice, but she knew he meant well.

“Yeah, I will.”

Jerry

The weather was relatively fresh. The morning dew was heavy and the headstones glistened in the morning sun. The grackles moved around the cemetery, pecking at the wet grass then flying to the nearest mesquite tree when they found a bug. It was 7:49 in the morning, and though it should have been colder the sun was heating up the ground faster than it usually did for this time of year. Maybe it was the humidity, maybe it was the just the crowded feeling of death. Jerry wasn't prone to morbid feelings, but when the morning was particularly beautiful he would feel acutely aware of the thin line that separated him from the crowd of people six feet below him. He took another sip from his mug of coffee and looked at his watch. He got a late start this morning, he should have been here by seven, according to Palm Valley Memorial Garden policy, but the family wouldn't be here for another two hours. There was time. He walked over to the parked excavator and lifted himself up slowly. His back had been killing him lately. He was 25 and shouldn't struggle this much to move around, he told himself. But tortillas, menudo and beer were delicious and jokes about living a good 60 years instead of a healthy 80 were starting to resonate with him more and more.

The sound of morning traffic in the distance was muffled by the interior of the excavator, and became inaudible when Jerry placed the key in to the ignition. The engine roared to life and he began maneuvering the large machine swiftly between the trees and headstones to get to the dig site. He'd never hit a headstone, but he got close more often than he was comfortable with. When he arrived he dropped the stabilizing brake and reached over to the lever to move the scooper around.

The first tear into the grass was always satisfying to Jerry, especially in morning when the the dew was still on the grass that the scooper picked up. Today was no different. The older guys said that before the Cemetery bought an excavator they had to use shovels to dig all the graves. He joked about that might have been better and would have counted as the exercise his girlfriends always telling him to get, but only joked. Digging these things by hand would be terrible.

He didn't know anything about today's grave. A hole was a hole and that's all that mattered. The only indication he ever had came from the dimensions the company would give him, and thus he disliked digging very small graves. He wondered about the larger graves. The ones he was instructed to dig a little wider. Was it because the family was wealthy and bought a large coffin with decorations all along it's doors? Or was because the deceased, like him, was wider than he should have been. He wondered, sometimes how large his own grave would be.

When the job was done he looked at the manifest for the day. There were three more graves to dig today. It had only take 15 to dig the hole but it was expected that we wouldn't be efficient and dig new graves while the family was there. His day consisted of digging, waiting, and then, once the first ceremonial shovel-fulls of dirt had been placed on the coffin by the family, to return to the site and refill the hole he'd dug earlier with the excavator. Instead, he was supposed to place the excavator a respectable distance away from he grave, but not so far away that it would take too long to return to the grave site. He parked behind a mesquite tree.

At 9 the funeral home workers arrived to set up the carpet, tent, and chairs. They put up a large frame of the deceased. He was young guy, good looking with soft looking brown skin and black neatly combed hair. It appeared to be a high school photo. The name underneath the photo said Eduardo Hernandez. The procession began pulling in 45 minutes later. It wasn't a long one,

10 cars at most. While the cars parked, Jerry lit a cigarette. He hated burials for young guys. When the deceased were older, the grieving family, while sad, was not hysteric. Burials for the young were hard to watch. They aren't supposed to be grieved for, and grief a family hasn't been preparing itself to feel is often a mix of quiet disbelief followed by the explosions of anger and heartbreak. Which is what today was.

The grief on display today made up for the small numbers. He must have not been popular, Jerry concluded, as he smoked his cigarette behind the tree 20 yards from the hole he'd dug earlier. Burials for the young were always equal parts family and classmates. The young hadn't had the time to have their large circles of friends dwindle down into a small group of people who saw each other once every six months. On days when he was felt jaded he'd assume that these classmates grieved openly as a performance of their empathy. Today he didn't feel that way. If a person under the age of 20 passes away and only has immediate family and 3 or 4 classmates it means that they lived a modest life. The deceased father wore boots with jeans and a clean plaid shirt. His mother wore a simple beige dress. They held each other closely, leaning on each other for support. The mother wept loudly and occasionally the father would bring a handkerchief to his face, wiping away a tear quickly.

Jerry didn't like imagining his own burial but it happened often anyway. His parents would be there, along with all his *tias* and their kids, most of whom he got drunk with often. His girlfriend would be there, but her parents would probably find a reason not to go. They weren't fond of him. He wasn't fond of them either. His friends would be there, the close ones anyway. It was mostly the same dudes he hung out with in high school, minus the ones who were in prison or married with wives that didn't let them party anymore. Once the burial was over the family would definitely have a party afterwards. Mostly just food, no dancing, and then heavy drinking

afterwards, with everyone who mattered plastered by 4 o'clock in the afternoon. It's what they did after every funeral, and it was Jerry's preferred form of partying. So much so, that when someone in the family died, someone he wasn't close to but family nonetheless, he almost looked forward to their funeral. He wondered what bullshit stories would be told about him once everyone was wasted. He wondered which stories his friends would have the common sense not to tell his family. Hopefully none of them.

After his third cigarette he looked over and saw the priest and funeral home workers looking over at him impatiently. He hopped back into the excavator and maneuver back to the hole he'd dug earlier, now with a modest casket in it that carried a young man with a loving immediate family and a few earnest friends. This group wasn't going to party after this. They were going to sit in silent disbelief on their couches and then weep, and then maybe remember to eat a few bites, and then repeat this for a few days before forcing themselves to move on.

When the hole was filled up again he parked the excavator and watched the small group begin walking back to their cars. Part of him wanted to give someone in that group a pat on the back or let them know that this sort of thing happened relatively often, but he doubted that would be of any use. When the last of the cars had taken off he moved the excavator to a spot 30 yards away from the last burial. It was 10:45, and then next group would be here by noon. If it was a large group, he'd have lunch while the ceremony happened. As he dug the next hole the funeral home workers tore down the tent and moved it towards the hole Jerry currently dug. No information about this deceased person either, but it wasn't a small grave, and that was enough for Jerry. The dew on the grass was gone now, and the grackles now mostly roosted in the trees. The traffic picked up again as the lunch hour approached and Jerry thought once again about his own grave, and hoped it wouldn't be dug for a least another half century.

Amaris

From the nurses station, Amaris overheard the yelling from the room. The sound of Angela's screeching voice, the guttural pain coming from pit of her diaphragm and escaping through her vocal chords, echoed through the halls of the Intensive Care wing of the hospital. Amaris put her chart down and made her way towards the room in a half walk/half jog. Her red scrubs made a sort of *zip zip zip zip* sound as her pant legs rubbed against each other. The hallways smelled of antibacterial and slightly burned her nostrils as her breath picked up. She didn't bother with the customary knock before entering and instead pushed the door open aggressively to announce her presence.

"What kind fucking nerve do you have coming here!" she screamed at a young man, seemingly in his late teens or early twenties. The young man had a blank look on his face. His shoulders were hung low and aside from his grey sneakers was dressed in all black. Angela had bags of syringes and medical equipment in her hand that she threw at the him. Between them was a comatose girl on a hospital bed with a thick blue tube hanging out of her mouth. The machines next to the girl beeped steadily, providing the monotonous soundtrack to Angela's fit of rage.

"Sir you need to leave," Amaris said to the man. He didn't respond, and continued looking down at the floor. She said it again, louder. No response. He seemed locked in his expression, glued to some sense of guilt that kept his feet stuck to the floor. Amaris walked over to him, put her hands on his shoulders and began walking him out of the room.

“Come on, let’s get out of here” she said, her voice softer than before.

“Stay the fuck away from her you piece of shit!” Angela screamed at him as Amaris opened the door to walk out. She looked over at Angela as she turned around and closed the door. Angela wasn’t crying, but she was fuming. She hadn’t cried the entire time her sister had been here. Which isn’t to say that she wasn’t emotional. Her emotions were written boldly on every action she’d taken while here. Every question she asked, every fight she’d had with the billing department, every single way she chided the doctors and nurses about every action they did or did not take was colored with the emotions of a grieving woman who did not know she was grieving. She was an annoying family member but Amaris respected her.

Amaris walked out with the young man, her hands still on his shoulders. Once they were past the doorway she his shoulders start to heave, before stiffening up again. He pulled his hand up to his face quickly and rubbed his eyes. She pulled her hands from him.

“There’s a bathroom over there if you need to wash your face,” Amaris offered.

The man looked up at her with pleading eyes, imploring her to wait for a bit and talk to him. It was always guys who did this. Women had each other, but the men kept all the emotions away from their family. She found it honorable in some vague sense but it meant they threw them onto the staff in the form of anger or obnoxious requests. Even Amaris, still in her last semester of nursing school, working in the hospital as an LVN could see that a lot her job was going to be managing family members.

“Come with me,” she said, walking him to the family waiting room at the end of the hallway. The room was a dull grey color with generic abstract reprints of paintings on the wall as well as framed advertisement for the hospital with smiling doctors on them who Angela knew were assholes. The room was mostly empty aside from an elderly couple watching the news on

the flatscreen posted in the corner of the room. Through the window the late winter sun was almost done setting. They sat down on the linoleum bench on the other side of the waiting room.

“What happened in there?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said after a moment. “She was fine for a while but when I mentioned the funeral she flipped out.”

“The one for the boy driving the motorcycle?”

“Yeah. He was my buddy. I came to see how his girlfriend was doing.”

“She’s not doing so great.”

“Yeah.”

There was another pause as he fell into himself again. Amaris had other things to do, bedpans to change and blood pressures to take, but she couldn’t bring herself to leave him.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Lorenzo,” he said, almost ashamed of it.

“Are you doing okay?”

“Um...sort of.”

“It’s okay to not be. People your age aren’t supposed to be going to their friend’s funerals.”

He didn’t respond but nodded in agreement. He sort of looked like what Rick might have looked like fifteen years ago, before he got settled into his routine and before his mom started depending on him for everything. Rick, with his greyed goatee and buzzcut hair, was aging faster than his 37 years let on. Life did that to some people, and 35 seemed to be the age when people’s life started to show up on their face.

Young looking 40 year olds annoyed Amaris. They'd either had easy lives or spent so much time on their appearance that they were probably terrible people. The doctors that ordered her around all looked younger than they were. The few that looked like shit were alright though. She wondered how this event would manifest itself on Lorenzo's face and how her job would manifest on hers. She didn't anticipate that becoming an RN would be any less stressful than her job now, but the money's woes wouldn't weigh as heavily on her at least. She could get a more reliable car, start paying for her own Netflix account, move into an apartment complex where she didn't have to obsess over how reliable the locks were. She could even help Rick out a little bit, maybe get him to sell less weed, maybe get him enough breathing room for him to get a welding tech license.

Rick spent most days smoking and selling weed, playing video games, and looking after his mother. She'd lived a hard life with a set of diseases that mostly manifested from the 25 years she'd spent as a migrant worker. She spoke about her years there often during the 7 months that Amaris spent as her home healthcare provider. Rick watched over her protectively during the time she was there, not trusting this new person charged with looking after his mother. Three times a week Amaris would visit, change the sheets, make sure she was taking her medicine, run a few tests, run a feeding tube if she was refusing to eat, and then if Rick's mother was asleep before her shift was over, chat with Rick. She knew he was a dealer and appreciated that he didn't smoke or make any deals while she was there. When she was switched to a different shift and no longer provided services for them, she let Rick take her out on a date. Life was good with him, and simple in its own way. She could tell he was waiting for her to get tired of him, unaware that only one who was tired was him.

Still, standing here in front of Lorenzo, watching him grieve his friend and try to assuage some type of guilt that wasn't his to carry, she hoped he wouldn't fall down the same path. He didn't seem like the academic type, though what the academic type looked like was unclear to her. He seemed like the type that cared more about having a good time than having a plan.

"Why are you looking down like this is your fault?" she asked him.

"I don't know. I know it's not my fault. It's just....everything is broken."

"These things happen. All you can do is move on."

The words felt hollow coming out of Amaris' mouth, and she knew that as much as she wanted to tell him everything was going to be okay that really it couldn't be. It had to be hard for a while. It had to hurt. Every week there was a few deaths in here, some expected, some not, some insured and not capable of dragging an entire family down into the depth of bankruptcy, others less so. She wondered about Angela, and how she'd make it. Her bill was probably half a million now. No one said it out loud, but she and the entire nursing staff figured Angela would have been better off if her sister had snapped her neck and died on the highway. The cost of that death would have only been the burial costs. This death, the one being postponed by life support machines and Angela's refusal to be alone, was going to pull Angela down with her. Her sister's boyfriend was the lucky one. It's why she lost her temper on Lorenzo. It's why Amaris spent an extra 30 minutes with her everyday after her shift was over. People needed to be walked through death, whether their own or their family's.

She hoped this wasn't what she was doing for Rick. His mother wasn't a hopeless case, but she was close. Her clock was ticking, though so was everyone else's, Amaris figured. Lorenzo's too, though he was only 18. It began ticking the moment he was born. And his friends death only made the sound of the ticking audible at last. It was a sad thing to begin hearing so

young, and Amaris, looking at him trying to cope with this fact, was unsure if this realization would make him more or less reckless.

“What are you gonna do right now?”

“Probably just go home and hang out with my brother. He’s back in town from school.”

“That’s good. Are you guys close?”

“Not really, but we’ve been talking more since he moved down from A&M.”

They continued making small talk for a while. The elderly couple watching the news were holding hands now. Someone would come in soon to pull Amaris away for another errand. But for now, talking to Lorenzo, a younger version of the man she was falling in love with, felt like a way to change a small portion of the world.

Feb. 11, 2015

Samantha

As the Wednesday morning the sun rays sliced through Foy's Supermarket windows as Samantha walked in through the sliding doors, white earbuds dangling from her neck, and grabbed a cart. The crooked wheel shook the cart and the zippers on her Kate Spade bag, nestled into the child seat, jangled along with the cart's metal cage. She meandered, glancing around and walking towards whatever caught her attention. She kept her phone handy, and took a few pictures on her phone when an item seemed particularly photogenic. Something for Instagram maybe, but she pushed the thought away. She put the phone in her purse. The impulse to post bothered her. It always did.

She walked quicker, with some purpose now though she wasn't sure what, as if to overcompensate for her sense of vanity. She approached the produce section and grabbed 5 plastic bags from the roll. Tomatoes, apples, cilantro, cucumbers, then the grapefruits. She held the first one she picked up to her nose.

Tia Gloria's house was next to a big grapefruit orchard in Mission, and when Samantha was a kid she would run through it hoping to get lost. She'd run far enough away that she couldn't see the house on the horizon anymore, close her eyes and spin around until she was dizzy and then open them again. She enjoyed the feeling of losing her bearings. She'd pretend she was hundreds of miles from any other human, some Spaniard stomping through the forest on an adventure to discover gold. The illusion would last for a few seconds, sometime minutes, until the sound of a tractor or workers speaking Spanish brought her back home.

There in the produce section, 15 years removed from that adventurer, nose pressed into the grapefruit, she wanted to smell the fertilizer, the chemicals in the pesticides, the laundry detergent her grandmother used on the sheets that would dry on clothes lines dug in on the right side of yard. All she could smell, though, was the sweet citrus odor of the grapefruit's pink insides. It was silly, she told herself, searching for a memory hidden in a scent buried in the skin of a grapefruit. She tried again though, putting the grapefruit back in the pile and picking up another. And another. Nothing.

She glanced around. It was the middle of the week, most people who'd be shopping at this hour had done their weekly shopping already, and she was essentially alone. She pulled an X-Acto from her purse and cut it, end to end down the middle, in one smooth motion. She squeezed the cut and held the grapefruit to her nose again. Same smell, but stronger, sweeter. But no emotional rush into the past. Disappointed she put the gutted grapefruit into the remaining plastic bag.

Above her, the downward facing mirrors pointed at the produce were warped, and she looked at her hand's reflection grow bigger and smaller as she reached for a grapefruit with with a short stem and leaf still attached. She moved her thumb over the leaf and felt the roughness of a thin layer of dried dirt on it. Samantha grabbed it and tore it off, putting the grapefruit back in the pile. She broke the leaf in two, and then twice again before rubbing the four pieces together in her palms. She cupped her hands and brought them to her nose. There it was. Hidden under the pungent smell of exposed chloroplasts was the sour poison smell of a fungicide.

It came rushing to her faster than she expected, the smell of placing her in the memory faster than any song or picture could have. The smell of Mintezol made her feel 7 again, running through the orchard and bumping into a field worker with a tank of the stuff strapped to his back.

She remembered the concerned look on his face after she fell to the plowed ground and the way he pulled out his sweaty arms to lift her up. She remembered her aunt emerging from the brush behind her yelling her name, spotting the worker grabbing her niece's arm and chastising the worker in a tone she'd never heard before for knocking her granddaughter down, and the frightened pale look on his darkened face as she threatened to call INS.

Samantha pulled her nose away from the torn leaves in her palm and glanced around again. A employee walked by her pushing an industrial sized broom. They made eye contact as he passed her. For a moment Samantha imagined that it was the same man from the field when she was younger, that life had serendipitously brought her back in contact with the man, but she knew better.

“Buenos dias,” he said.

“Hi” she muttered weakly.

She pushed her cart and continued exploring the store, looking for more slices of herself in the store. Her shift at the university library would be starting soon, and perhaps there were more slices of herself there now than here. But that was a thought too real to contemplate fully.

Geraldo

“You’re drinking like a white guy now” Geraldo’s father noted over the sound of the lunch rush at Trevino’s Mexican Restaurant. The scurrying waiters and the clinking plates they

carried on oversized trays from the kitchen to the dining area were beginning to make Geraldo feel anxious. On the wall behind them was a mural of Tenochtitlan, with an oversized Templo Mayor doubling as a slowly trickling water wall. Geraldo didn't fully understand why Pancho Villa and his revolutionary army were included in the mural, looking proudly and directly outward at restaurant patrons eating the kind of Mexican food that only Americans ate. Villa, Geraldo figured, would have fought against the system of rule by divine right that the Aztecs followed.

Then again, maybe he would have fit in with them. Geraldo remembered learning about the town of Namiquipa in a Mexican history class taught by a small, soft spoken woman in her 60s whose outfits included both turtlenecks and dashiki's in equal amounts. In Namiquipa, she told the class of mostly affluent white graduate students, Pancho Villa ordered his troops to put all the women in the animal pen and rape them after setting the town on fire as means of revenge on Major Rafael Mendoza, who sabotaged Villa's attempt to take Ciudad Chihuahua in April 1917.

Geraldo took another sip from his Old Fashioned.

"How do you like being back home?" his father asked.

"It's alright. It's just hard getting readjusted. I'm kind of worried about Lorenzo."

"Yeah, me too. I still can't believe he got arrested."

"I mean that's not really that bad. He's a minor so he won't really have anything on his record."

"Yeah I guess. And two of three sons doing well is good enough. You and Jaime are both college boys. I need somebody to live with us till they're 40 to help me look after your mother."

"You know one of his buddies died last week right?."

“That kid, the skinny wetback, Eduardo?”

“Jesus dad, yea. The funeral was yesterday. Lorenzo isn’t saying much, but I think he’s taking it hard.”

“He’ll be okay though. He’s tough.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok, dad.”

There was a pause before Geraldo offered up another bit of conversation.

“Every time I come back there’s something new being built.”

“That’s a good thing isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is” Geraldo said after a moment.

There was another lull in the conversation, a frequent feature in their interactions.

Geraldo’s father checked his phone.

“Your mom wants us to pick up her medicine on the way home.”

“How’s she been?”

“She’s getting by. She’s just tired all the time now. I’m actually surprised, she’s up earlier than usual today.”

“It’s noon.”

“Yeah,” his father said, the resignation apparent.

“Are you worried?”

“A little, but I’m trying not to let your mom know that.”

“Maybe she’d appreciate it.”

“No, she’d just feel guilty.”

They fell quiet again. His father downed the rest of his Corona and motioned to the waiter walking by for another. His hair was grayer then it was when Geraldo left for graduate school. His mustache still kept some of its color though. He wore a short-sleeve blue plaid shirt with a small hole on the shoulder. He'd done well for himself and his family, but Geraldo was grateful that the silence between them wasn't an awkward one. It was a comfortable recognition that both of them were reserved. He loved his dad, and though there was some part of them that the other could never understand fully, he had internalized that they were fundamentally the same person raised in different circumstances, a single generation and a full culture apart.

"Do you think you'll go back to school in the fall?" his father asked.

"I don't know dad, it's just..."

"What?"

"It's weird. I don't know what I was expecting."

He didn't know how to vocalize the sinking feeling of learning that Cesar Chavez endorsed the regime of Ferdinand Marcos in Manila, or that the party that emerged from the Mexican revolution would go on to participate in the disappearance or torture of 10,000 people in left-wing political groups in the 70s, or that he felt like the token Mexican there and an uppity coconut here.

"Your moms been in a better mood since you've been back."

It was supposed to comfort him but it only made him worry, given that he'd never seen her this bad before.

"That's good"

"Not really" his father said, his brow furrowing.

"Why not?"

“Because you’ll have to leave again”

“That’s not true”

“Yes. It is. There’s nothing here for you.”

“The Valley’s getting bigger.”

“That’s a leap of faith though, you know that”

“Yeah. You’re right

There was another lull. There was a weight to this one. Geraldo looked up at his father and wondered if he felt like his efforts were worth it, if it was worth it to have worked himself raw everyday for decades for a son who’d never be a lawyer or doctor or any other career that would promise a stability beyond being able to survive until the next paycheck. What was it worth to know where he came from? What was it worth to understand his place in all of this? He could feel it in his bones that it wasn’t enough just to know, it wasn’t enough to be aware he, his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and every father before him were small, forgettable characters in a struggle that they had no hope of influencing. He wondered if he’d be happier just not knowing.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you happy?”

He didn’t reply at first, and when he opened his mouth to begin explaining what his hesitation to answer really meant the waiter arrived with their plates. Caldo de res for him, enchiladas for his father.

“You know, when your mom and I got married coming to a place like this one would have been just for special occasions. Maybe just once a year. Now we’re here on a Wednesday afternoon just to hang out.”

Geraldo used his spoon to dig into the square of beef in the broth and break it into smaller pieces.

“You guys worked really hard”

“We had to.”

Another lull.

“I know you’re trying your best mijo.”

“Are you mad I’m not in medical school?”

“I know I still look like I work in the fields but I’m not pendejo. Money’s not the only thing that makes a family rich.”

A lump formed in Geraldo’s throat. He looked away, then into his soup. His father did the same. They remained in a comfortable silence for the rest of the meal.

Julio

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“What is this place?”

“It’s a school for grown-ups, honey” Beatriz said to him.

“I thought you worked in a library?”

“I do, there’s a library at this school, just like how your school has a library.”

Julio was quiet for a bit, before asking another question.

“Mom, why do grown-ups have to go to school?”

Beatriz had paused a bit before answering this, not wanting to tell him simply that adults go to school to get good jobs. Partially because she wasn't sure how true that was anymore and partially because she didn't want him looking at education that way.

“Because there's still lots of things that grown-ups have to learn. So a lot of them come here to learn them”

Julio, satisfied with this answer, continued walking in silence. He held his mother's hand as they walked along the sidewalks of the university. He looked around at what all the brown brick buildings, illuminated in the orange light of the setting sun, and the people walking around with their backpacks. Their backpacks all seemed so plain to Julio. Grownups could get any kind of backpack they wanted. Why would they get such boring ones?

They walked in through the sliding doors of a large building. His mom was walking faster now, checking her watch as the door slid closed behind her. There were a few people sitting around the lobby talking. This library didn't look anything like the library at his school, and it didn't look like the one his parents would take him and Esther to on the weekends. They walked through the lobby and into a hallway. There were elevators directly in front of them and Julio was excited about getting to go on one. He liked the feeling in his stomach when they would lurch upwards or downwards and the way that it felt like magic to walk into a small room and then walk out a few seconds later into a brand new place. As he walked forward towards them he felt a tug on his arm that pulled him to the left.

“Hi Sam,” his mother said to a woman standing behind the counter. She was younger than his mother. Julio thought she was pretty.

“Hey Beatriz! She said enthusiastically, looking up from her phone. “And who’s this you brought with you?” she said looking at Julio. Julio felt a rush of simultaneous shyness and excitement that she looked at him.

“This is my son, Julio. He didn’t want to stay with his dad and sister today for some reason so I thought it’d be fun to bring him with me today. It’s pretty quiet here in the evenings, anyway. How’s it been so far?”

“There’s not too much going on right now. You know how it is. We don’t get busy until the end of the semester.”

“Yea that’s true.”

“Is it ok if I leave him here for a bit? There a couple books that got requested online that I need to bring down from the stacks”

“Sure no problem.”

Beatriz walked away, leaving Julio there with little direction. Samantha returned her attention to her phone. He wasn’t sure why his mother had lied. She was the one who had asked him if he wanted to go to work with her today. He was feeling tired but she’d promised him a slushy afterwards. He looked around the area behind the counter and in a corner he saw a computer.

“Mrs?” he asked Samantha tentatively.

“What’s up Julio?”

“Can I use that computer?”

“Sure thing, but only if you stop calling me Mrs.”

“Ok,” Julio said, not bothering to ask what to call her instead.

She walked him over to the computer and logged herself in. While she did so she asked him what he wanted to do with it.

“I just wanted to use Google Maps. They were teaching us about today in our computer class.”

Samantha gave him a look, surprised by the wholesomeness of his request. Once she was logged in she opened Internet Explorer and went to the website. She handed him the mouse and keyboard and stepped away to attend the front desk. After a moment of stillness, with nobody approaching the desk or even walking by, she turned back to Julio.

“What are you looking up?”

Julio was in Street View, with the image zoomed in on a simple, small red brick house.

“I was looking at my dog.”

There, pixelated and standing next to the mailbox was a Dalmatian

“That’s a really cute dog Julio. But don’t you want to look up something else? You can see anything! Here, I’ll show you the Eiffel Tower.”

She began reaching for the keyboard before Julio shifted and said “No!” with surprising force.

“He got ran over during Christmas break but he’s still here.”

Samantha was still. Julio looked up from the screen and noticed her face, sympathetic and beautiful. After a silence Samantha asked what the dog’s name was.

“Her name was Molly. She was really nice but my parents didn’t like for her to be inside because she peed everywhere.”

“Yeah, a lot of parents are like that.”

“She loved to chase the cars. Look let me show you something.”

Julio took the mouse and moved it towards the arrow on the street. The image blurred and moved left, settling on the house next to Julio's home. In that image Molly was in full gallop, moving in the direction of the map car. Julio clicked the arrow again towards the next house. There again was Molly, airborne as she jumped over a drainage ditch.

"Oh my god she's chasing the Google car!" Samantha said loudly, mid laugh.

Her and Julio giggled as he continued pressing the arrows on the screen, moving the image further and further down the street.

"What are you guys doing?" Beatriz said as she entered the area behind the front desk.

"Look mom! Molly's here!"

"What do you mean?"

"On Google maps!"

Beatriz approached the screen and Julio showed her the same thing he'd shown Samantha. She didn't laugh, but instead wrapped her arm around Julio and kissed the top of his head. It wasn't her idea to keep Molly outside, but she was willing to back up her husband when he suggested it.

"Hey mom, what's grandma's address? I wanna see her house now."

She thought for a bit, trying to remember her childhood address before typing it into the search bar on the side of the image. After a moment a satellite image of the address popped up on the screen.

"You have to drag the little yellow man onto the street to see the house mom," Julio said with a bit of impatience in his voice.

"Okay, okay!" Beatriz said, exaggerating her exasperation.

She followed his instructions. The image appeared with the camera looking down the street. Beatriz clicked on the image and pulled the mouse to the right and her childhood home appeared, with an information box on the side stating that the image was taken in 2011. First the mesquite tree, which she and Elydia climbed when they were younger. When she was 10 she broke her arm after falling down because of a rotten branch. Then, the flower beds that her mother attended to daily. Those weren't there in her childhood, but only appeared after her and Elydia moved out. Then, as the image continued moving rightward, displaying the house itself, Beatriz let go of the mouse. In the front yard, on a rusted red riding lawnmower that he'd had since 1998, was Beatriz's deceased father.

"Look mom, it's grandpa Rafa!"

She didn't respond. Julio took the mouse and scrolled in, zooming in on the image, still pixelated but unmistakable. He felt her arms wrap around him from behind, and then, a trembling. He felt her squeeze him a little and then felt a tear drop land on his forearm. She did this sometimes, when she having bad days. He understood now why she'd made him come with her to work. Today was a bad day.

Julio turned around in his seat and returned the hug.

"I miss him too, Mom"

They stood like that for a moment before Samantha placed her hand on Beatriz' back soothingly.

"Hey Beatriz, it's probably gonna really slow for the rest of the evening. Why don't you take the rest of the evening off. I'll clock out for you."

"Ok Sam. Thank you."

She wiped the remaining tears from her face and went to gather her purse. She took Julio's hand and they walked out of the library.

"Can we still get a slushy even though we left early?" Julio asked sheepishly as they walked past the sliding doors of the library.

"Sure thing hon."

Jaime

Halfway through his 4th gin and tonic Jaime started to think about Erica. Right on schedule. The bartender with the curly dark hair sort of reminded him of her, but then again, so did most girls when he was in this mood: the getting wasted in an Applebees on a Wednesday evening alone kind of mood. He'd let everyone sitting within a 4-barstool-radius know that he wasn't an alcoholic, just sad. And he was mostly right. Yesterday he didn't drink. And Monday he only had two shots to help himself get to bed. Sunday he got pretty drunk but it was with friends, and game-day doesn't count.

He scrolled through his phone's photo library, leaning over it drinking through a straw. He noted the shift in photos, before and after January 20th, 2015. In the 6 months leading up to the day the photos were brighter, Jaime thought. Pictures of Erica, her cat, birthday parties, pictures of him and Erica, pictures from her little brother's soccer game, those 4 topless pictures that she'd sent him when she went out of town to keep him "occupied." The week since the 20th though the pictures were quieter. Sunsets, a squirrel he came across at work, a picture of his two brothers, Lorenzo and Geraldo sitting on the couch playing Minecraft, screenshots of memes he

thought she'd find funny. They remained unsent though, waiting until she returned from her study abroad.

It was a mutual decision, though instigated by her, to go on a break while she was away. He didn't like it, but at the same time, he understood. She told him to explore as well. He tried not getting resentful over the thought that Italian guys were probably easier to bed than Valley girls. It was impossible not to imagine the kind of sex she was having. He should be focused on Lorenzo, he thought. One of his closest friends had just passed away and he wasn't sure he'd be able to graduate. His efforts should be there, but his mind forced them all towards Erica.

He ordered another drink.

"I'm gonna have to cut you off after this one," the curly haired bartender said.

"Do I seem really drunk?"

"No, but it's company policy. 5 drink maximum."

"Alright. Can you make it a double then?"

"No, sorry."

He watched her making the drink and imagined how he might try approaching her. She was good looking and his gaze lingered over the curve of her hips. He imagined himself saying something witty that caught her off guard and made her interested, something that would make her tell him when her shift was over. He imagined meeting her outside the restaurant, going back to her place and then seeing each other off in the early morning. He imagined the feeling of self-worth and gratification. What he'd say to set all this in motion though refused to come to him. When she set the drink down in front of him he looked at her ring finger and saw a modest engagement ring.

"When's the wedding?" he said without thinking.

She paused and examined him for a moment.

“Soonish, maybe by the end of the year.”

“Have you been wearing that for a while?”

“A few months now. We’re waiting till we’re both done with school.”

“That’s smart.”

“Yeah,” she said unenthusiastically. “I’ll bring you your bill in a bit.”

“Wait, wait, before you go can I ask you something?”

The restaurant was still quiet.

“Okay”

“Do I seem like the kind of guy who could pick up girls easily?”

“Um...” She gave it some thought. “You’re not ugly if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It’s not. Thanks though. What I mean is...”

He struggled to find the words. He didn’t really know what he was asking.

“You seem like the monogamous type,” she offered.

“Damn.”

“That’s not a bad thing.

“I know. It’s just lonely I guess when you’re not with someone.”

“It’s not so bad being single”

“Yeah?” he said, unsure how she meant it.

“Give me your phone.”

“Why?” he asked, already handing it to her.

She grabbed it, opened up Snapchat and followed herself from his account.

“Message me sometime.”

“What about your fiancé?”

“People in relationships get lonely too.”

He laughed nervously.

“Let me ring you up.”

Her snapchat name was unmemorable but her real name displayed under it was nice. Lily Vargas. It was simple and suited her, in the vague, arbitrary way that a name can suit a person. As she walked away he looked over her stories. Only one today. Her chihuahua playing with a sock. He moved back to his photos, to the Christmas selfie he and Erica has taken a month ago. Her smile seemed genuine. So did his. He wondered if the idea to take a break was percolating in her mind by then.

Outside the restaurant he stumbled a bit as he made his way to his car. The cool air pierced through his thin hoody. It'd be raining soon. He sent Erica a text, saying he hoped her first two weeks over there had gone well. He didn't expect a reply. He went back to Lily's profile and swiped left to send her a message. He didn't know what that message would be, but it would be something cool, something that didn't scream loneliness, something that would make her think about straying, even if she wouldn't. He wanted to be on the other end of it, the other end of an experiment to see if someone was really committed. “Hey, it was cool meeting you” he began.

Feb. 12, 2015

John

In his office, modest and covered in wood paneling that had been put up in 1983, John rocked back and forth in a creaky rolling chair. The sound, the pitch high squeal of metal springs tucked away in the mechanical box of levers and dials that let him readjust the chair to his heart's content, was almost comforting to him. It was a workout for his knees at least, and he needed that.

The flatscreen monitor on his desk had been almost futuristic eight years ago when he started. Though now it was somehow bulky and tiny at the same time. It was, however, more than enough for John. He adjusted the position of his glasses on his nose as he read through the web page. The nameplate next to his rolodex read John Gonzales, and in smaller print under his name, *President of Willacy County Local Government Corporation*. It was a title, John felt, that was fancier than his actual job, which consisted of signing contracts and taking phone calls. The institution itself had a fancier title than it's function. John simply presided over the shell corporation that acted on behalf of Willacy County. He was a glorified city employee, but it looked good on his business cards.

Things were slow today, as they were most days. The busiest days were behind them, 4 years ago when they renegotiated the contract with the Management and Training Corporation to turn the facility from an ICE facility into a Criminal Alien Requirement prison. John knew there wasn't much of a difference whether it was ICE or the Federal Bureau of Prisons who gave MTC the contract, all that mattered was the money flowing in. It was a \$532 million dollar contract

between MTC and the Bureau of Prisons, a number that sounded, like his job, fancier than it was. Somehow, though Willacy County would make over a hundred thousand a month from this deal, they'd still owe 75 million building the facility. How 10 tents cost 75 million to put up was still a mystery to John. In the end, somehow they'd end up okay.

The headlines from the day, when they re-signed the contract with MTC, read like the corporation had swooped in and saved Raymondville from certain economic doom. And perhaps they had, John thought as he checked his email, but in other ways they had simply chained Raymondville to a future that MTC had decided on. There was a pattern of this sort of thing with these private prison corporations. They'd come in to struggling communities with cheap land to buy and city governments so desperate for revenue they'd sign anything if it promised a few hundred jobs for the community. He was vaguely aware of this in 2011. But by now, after a small inmate strike in 2013 over overflowing sewage, he was aware that there was a price to pay for these jobs. And it was becoming clear that the price might be greater than money could pay for.

His inbox that day was about the same as usual, some junk mail that slipped through the spam filter, shipping confirmations from Amazon, reminders about documents that needed to be signed and then an email from his brother that linked him to an article about a prison in north Texas that had recently raised wages for each of its guards. It was probably a puff piece the corporation had probably paid to have placed on the site. He moved his cursor to the top of the page to check the website. It went by texasprisonbidness.org, and seemed aimed at highlighting activity in the private prison system in Texas. Most of the work was critical so he wondered why an article about raising wages for guards was hosted there. It dawned on him as he read through

the article that it was being framed as a bad thing to have raised their wages instead of improving conditions. It left an odd taste in his mouth.

He found the search bar above the article and typed in Willacy County, wondering what they'd written about the correctional facility he'd signed off on. The most recent, from June 7th, 2014, was about an ACLU report on abuses inside criminal alien requirement prisons, and had a special focus on the Willacy prison. He read through the article and shook his head. Though he agreed with the facts of the article, he'd seen them firsthand, he took issue with the tone of it. There was a smugness he saw, like they were happy to report how dysfunctional the conditions in the prison were because it meant that their perspective was right.

And so what he thought? 2000 immigrants, that would have been locked up somewhere else by someone else are locked up here. He didn't write the laws and neither did MTC. They were simply taking advantage of the situation created by a policy decision. Were the contracts a little convoluted? Yes. Did MTC someone manage to get a better deal than Willacy did? Probably. But there were 400 families in the county who were being supported by the jobs this place brought. They all had healthcare now. They could shop and eat in restaurants in the county. They were paying higher taxes. The city could fix things now with the money they were getting every day for each prisoner.

What was the price of a soul? John couldn't answer that question, but he knew that it cost \$65 to fill a pothole. What the the price of an inmate's dignity? It was unknowable, but it cost \$3,000 to put up a street light. What the cost of of their sense of self? It didn't matter, each salaried city employee made \$30,000.

"Valerie!" he called out to his secretary.

"What's up John?" she called out from her desk in the adjacent room.

“Is Grandma’s Kitchen open yet?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Alright well, I’m gonna take an early lunch. I’ll be back in an hour.”

Feb. 13, 2015

Marcos

Marcos liked drives home like this, when the sunset sky was a thick, humid orange after an afternoon of heavy storms that finally let up and cleared away. The sky bled its dull orange onto everything, and he started the 15 minute trip from Best Buy to the apartment with the dread in his stomach still manageable. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. The stereo was off and he rolled down the manual windows, his shoulders aching as he did so. He took in the humidity and car exhaust as he inched his way down Jackson, relieved that highway intersection ahead looked clogged and time-consuming. The sound of the road enveloped him, engines accelerating followed quickly by squealing brakes, angry honking, palm tree leaves rustling against each other in the breeze. He'd closed his eyes as long as he could before an impatient honk behind him pushed him forward.

This drive needed to be as long as possible.

The conversation waiting for him at the apartment was as necessary as it was unpleasant. They'd been especially thorny lately. He knew the back and forth already, the points they would both make, the look on her face as he'd feel himself dissociating from the situation, falling into his head, and how he wished he was strong enough to stay present in the room.

Her points would be valid he'd think his were too, and he'd reach their all-to-frequent impasse in his head a few minutes before the actual argument would. Yes, if he took his medicine he'd be able to help out more around the apartment, but he didn't like feeling like someone else. If who he actually was was a negative, lazy piece of shit, than that's just what it was. The line between a personality and a chemical imbalance was too fuzzy for his liking.

He turned on his blinker as he drove under the overpass. The echoing car sounds amplified and the sound rattled in his head. He switched lanes with only a slight tap on the brakes and his body lurched to the right. 12 minutes home.

Once the traffic on Jackson lightened up the sun finished setting to his right. It was starting to set a little later, finally. The long nights had taken their toll. Seasonal Affective Disorder always seemed like a bullshit diagnosis for what he regarded as just post-holiday season blues. But the prescription gave it some weight, or at least, something for Carolina to point at as something he could do about the funk he'd been in since Black Friday, although he figured the 2 months of impatient crowds, spoiled teenagers and middle-aged men buying oversized TV's they couldn't afford probably had more of an effect on him than a lack of Vitamin D and an overproduction of melatonin. 8 minutes home.

It would go like this: he'd get home and head straight for the pantry for an improvised dinner. Carolina would be on the couch in a pair of yoga pants and an oversized hoodie with a concerned and vaguely depressed look on her face, phone in hand, TV blaring. He'd give her a half-hearted peck on the lips and sit down next to her. She'd offer him a drag from a bong packed with weed he got half-price from his brother Rick. He liked Rick, and he admired how he took care of their mom, even if it was by selling weed from her house.

He and Carolina would watch an hour of TV before she'd ask him to do the dishes or a load of laundry, to which he would groan, followed by an awkward silence that would lead, in one way or another, to an argument about everything and nothing at the same time. They'd reach a stopping point, or she'd just get tired. She would fall asleep before him, and he'd grudgingly do what she'd asked before joining her in bed.

He crossed Trenton and the dull orange sky had turned a dark purple. 4 minutes home.

He parked next to the mailboxes in the apartment complex and rested his head on the seat, exhaled loudly, and started toward the 2 bedroom. The gravel was loud under his feet. He reached the door, preparing himself for the evening dance that was to follow. 5 seconds home.

He opened the door, greeted by silence and the smell of Pine Sol. Inside, the rest of the apartment was cleaner than he thought it could be. He called out for Evelyn but got no response. The faux-granite kitchen counters shined and the pantry was freshly stocked. He walked to their bedroom and into the closet. His jeans were neatly folded in the dresser and his shirts were hung up. Carolina's shirts and uniforms no longer hung next to his, they were gone. In the living room her books and movies were gone from the shelves. In the drawer underneath the TV, his stash of weed and bong were still there, but even that had been cleaned.

He sat down on the couch, his heart beating faster, and there next a freshly filled prescription bottle of Zoloft was post-it note that read, "I love you, take care of yourself, please"

He pulled out his phone. No messages or voicemails. He started writing her a text but didn't get past "I just got home..." before erasing it. He reached for the remote to fill the silence. He stared at the pill bottle _____ and waited for a decision to come to him.

Angela

Across the long field, spotted with palm trees whose leaves dully reflected the moon and street lights, Angela could make out the lettering on the hospital sign. It read: Doctor's Hospital at Renaissance, with Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* illuminated in a teal glow underneath it. The ideal human body, splayed out in two superimposed positions inscribed in a square and a circle, stared out from its position on the hospital wall out at Dove Avenue.

From where Angela stood the road was no longer called Dove. It instead went by the decidedly less European sounding name, Owassa Road. And the sign on the building that Angela stood next to did not display Da Vinci's belief that the human body was an analogy for the workings of the universe (as she'd read once about the Vitruvian Man for an Art history class she'd failed). Instead it was the Tex Mex Gentleman's Club logo: a silhouette of two busty women and the club's initials on a shield between them. Angela pondered the signs and concluded after a moment that maybe this sign, and this place, was also an analogy for the way the universe worked. We all sell ourselves one way or another, she figured, and at least here, no one is fooling themselves about it.

At the hospital, where she had slept on an uncomfortable linoleum covered couch for 4 hours next to her comatose sister, everyone tried to dress up this fact. The cautious way the nurses asked about her job situation, the way the finance department discussed the dignity that withholding treatment allows and the casual way the doctors tried to hide looking at the wall clocks as they made their way through rounds, it all made the reality of the situation worse. No one wants to do a damn thing unless they're sure they're getting paid for it, even if it's keeping a 14 year old girl alive.

She was grateful, then, that the thing she was getting paid for didn't involve taking her clothes off. It only involved carrying drinks to men who managed to hold onto varying degrees of their own dignity as they watched the women who did. She could have done it if she wanted to. Her manager had asked her to do it a few times already. She had "the right shape for it" is what he'd told her. The pay was close to double what she was making now but she refused to do it, no matter how dire her own circumstances were. She'd only do it if people depending on her didn't have enough to eat. Alas, one of them was circling the drain while the other was having his meals and shelter provided for him by the Management and Training Corporation.

Security here was good about making sure the men didn't grab at her as she placed bottles of Lonestar on the various creaky wooden tables located throughout the club. She couldn't say the same about security at the hospital. Twice she'd been cornered in the elevator by a middle aged doctor who assumed she'd be grateful to have a person like him try to fondle her.

It was a Friday the 13th, and though she wasn't superstitious she noted the occurrence in her mind. Friday night was couple's night. That didn't really mean much of a difference in clientele, but there was the occasional woman in the crowd on these nights, often looking more intently at the dancers than their boyfriend was (and it was always a boyfriend, never a husband). Angela wondered what was going through their mind as they did this, if it was envy or pity, or both. Maybe even lust. Sometimes, a woman would buy a lap dance for her boyfriend and watch him as the stripper danced over him. Once the stripper was done the woman would sit on his lap and kiss him, as if to reclaim him. These were relationship dynamics that were beyond her comprehension.

By 10:30 there was still more staff than patrons, and it made 50 Cent's "Candy Shop," blaring over the house speakers sound more pathetic than exotic. The smell of cigarette smoke

was still strong though, and it made Angela crave one. It'd been a month since her last, but the slow night and the stress of the last week in the hospital was breaking her resolve. Staff wasn't supposed to smoke on the job, but management was less strict about it when they weren't packed so she went to the bar and asked to bum one from Jim, the bartender.

"You've been so good though!" he said, already reaching into his breast pocket.

"I know but this week was sucked."

"Yeah, I know. How's your sister?"

"She's alive."

Jim was quiet for a bit and then said, "That's enough."

"Yeah."

Angela held the cigarette to her mouth and sucked in, exhaling slowly.

"Holy shit. It feels good when you haven't had one in a while," she said.

Jim nodded. He'd been there on the day of the accident, when the Angela's world collapsed even more than it already was. It was a motorcyclist that did it, an older one that Angela's sister had become infatuated with who made her feel safe because he gave her his helmet, and who hadn't seen the F-150 switching lanes. He was gone in the instant that his head met the asphalt, and Angela's sister was not far behind, waiting only on Angela to come to terms with the end. Her mother, gone long ago when Cecilia was born, and her father, stuffed 30 miles and away in an immigrant prison, were unable to make the decision for her. She'd make it eventually, and pay off the hospital bills when she could.

A group of eight men came in as Angela finished her cigarette, loud and already drunk. "We've got the whole place to ourselves!" one of them cried out as they made their way to a booth near the stage. Angela watched them for a moment, deciding which ones seemed

dangerous and which ones seemed like good tippers before making her way to them. It looked like a bachelor party approaching the peak of its debauchery. Before she was there one of them, wearing a too-tight Aeropostle shirt and a wide rimmed DC cap shouted to her, “Just bring us all tequila shots and some Corona’s” as if they’d been there a hundred times before. They hadn’t, Angela would have recognized them. She looked over at Jim, who was already reaching towards the top shelf for the most expensive tequila they had.

She looked into their eyes as she brought them their drinks. Each of them seemed good in their own way, their brutish demeanor more of a show of manliness for each other than a representation of who they actually were. More of them were looking at their phones than looking at the dancers or at her.

“Get off your phone man!” one of them exclaimed to the other. “It’s your last night of freedom.”

Angela had seen too many last nights of freedom, and she wondered how many of them resulted in happy marriages. It seemed more ritualistic than enjoyable, and every member of the group was played their part. After an hour of shots and beers, the man playing the “removed married dude enjoying the lap dances vicariously” role stepped away from the table to answer a call.

“Oh shit! Beatriz is gonna know you’re rubbing your face in tits Aaron!” one of the drunker member of the crew called out.

Angela heard him say “Hey babe,” into his phone as he walked by her on his way to the exit. Five minutes he stepped back inside and instead of going to the booth, stopped at the bar. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and began smoking one after asking for a double-shot of whiskey. He was cute Angela decided, and nonthreatening. Guys who answer their phones like

that are usually alright. She asked him for a cigarette and sat down next to him. She was due for a break.

“Can I get a light?” she asked him.

“Yeah” he said, passing his pack over to her.

She lit up and continued standing by him. Sensing that she was looking for conversation he introduced himself and asked how her night was going.

“It’s fine, just slow, so I probably won’t make shit tonight.”

“Well, the guys I’m with are pretty drunk so they’ll probably drop a few 20s on the table at least.”

“I hope so. You guys having a bachelor party?”

“Yeah. My buddy from work is getting married tomorrow. He’s the only one I know though.”

“That’s why you’re over here then?”

“Yeah, the other guys are his cousins and some friends from high school. They’re kind of idiots.”

“They’re not too bad. I’ve seen a lot worse.”

“Yeah I bet.” There was a short lull as they both finished their cigarettes. He looked over at her.

“Do you like working here?”

“It’s ok, it pays the bills.”

“That’s good then.”

“Yeah, it is. Where do you work?”

“I’m a guard at the detention center in Raymondville.”

“Where they keep the immigrants?”

“Yeah,”

Angela stopped. Her brain sped up. Her eyes took on a long stare, looking not at Aaron but through him.

“Are you ok?” Aaron asked. Angela didn’t respond.

There was a small window of opportunity here. A chance to get a message across. She held her fingers over the cross on her necklace.

“Do you get to talk them in there?” she asked after a few seconds.

“Who? The prisoners?”

“Yeah”

“Management doesn’t really want us to.”

“But could you, if you tried to?”

“Probably. If we’re in the same tent.”

Angela paused for a moment, breathed in deeply and took her chance.

“Follow me,” she said, pulling at his arm.

He followed her outside, near the front entrance. The air was cold again, and it stung against arms and face. She looked back over at the distant Vitruvian man and the building he guarded over, the building her sisters organs were being kept alive by Angela’s insistence that it wasn’t over yet. But it was, she knew it now. God, she told herself, wouldn’t have given her this chance to tell her dad if Mariela wasn’t already gone.

“My dad is in the prison were you work at.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Aaron said knowingly. It meant she hadn’t talked to him in at least a year.

“His name is Rafael Herrera.”

“I’ve seen that name before on a list. I remembered it because that was my father-in-law’s name.”

“Can you tell him something for me?”

“Um...” Aaron said, hesitant to agree to something we wasn’t sure he could follow through on. “I can try.”

“Please.”

“Ok”

“Tell him Mariela was in an accident. She died last week.” Her voice was still as she said it, sounding not necessarily matter-of-fact but something close to it.

“Who’s Mariela?”

“His daughter.”

He didn’t say anything at first, giving the weight of her request a moment to settle on him. Their eyes met and in the tremble of her glance he felt how little choice he had in the matter.

“Ok, no problem.” He wanted to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder but didn’t. “Do want me to tell him anything else?”

“Just that I love him and this it’s gonna be ok.”

He nodded and added unconvincingly, “You know that’s true right? It will be ok.”

“Yeah, I know.”

He gave her his phone number for no reason in particular. She didn’t offer hers. He walked back inside, leaving her outside alone. She looked again at the Vitruvian man, and at last, felt the grief flood over her, wave after uncompromising wave.

Lorenzo

The slow and heavy *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* of the three-blade wind turbine spinning above them was both intimidating and invigorating. In the darkness, the spinning blades were almost invisible, save for the way their shape blocked out a portion of the starry sky as it streaked across.

“I always knew these things were big but I didn’t really realize how huge they were,” Lorenzo said. “They’re kinda fucking terrifying.”

“Yeah man even from the road it’s hard to tell how big they are until you get up close,” Josh said.

“Seriously. And you guys just hang out here?” Lorenzo asked.

“Whenever we get tired of being at our grandma’s house,” Rodrigo said, emerging from behind the post of the wind turbine, pausing to light a Camel Crush before returning to his folding chair.

“Yeah dude, every once in fucking forever that you decide to grace us with your holy presence. You don’t come visit the family anymore since you moved to Edinburg” Josh said from his seat atop the stained once-white cooler filled with ice and an 18 pack of Natural Light Josh’s uncle had bought for them.

“Shut the fuck up Josh! It’s not my fault my mom got a job in Edinburg and wanted to get out of shit-hole Raymondville.”

“Fuck you Rod! We have one of the largest immigrant detention centers in America!”

“Bitch, I’m the one who told you that!”

They laughed and the three took long drinks from their cans.

“Wait, is that true Rod?” Lorenzo asked.

“What?”

“About the detention center.”

“Yeah man, well, sort of. It’s technically a criminal prison for undocumented people. But most of them only committed one specific crime.”

“Crossing over?”

“Yea man, they deport you and if they catch you coming back they charge you and put you in one of those prisons.”

“Fuck.”

“You see that all those lights over there? That’s the prison.”

Lorenzo looked over, past the field of spinning turbines, all buzzing and *whoosing* in the clear cool night, with a red light atop them blinking in unison, at the orange haze just over the horizon. He’d assumed it was just the lights of one of the many cotton gins in the area. He was a bit dismayed by how normal it all seemed.

“Our uncle works there as a guard,” Josh chimed in.

“Wait, who? Raul?” Rodrigo asked.

“Yea man. He started working there last year. You’d know if your ass ever came and visited us.”

“Oh my God dude quit it with that shit. But like, how?”

“What do you mean how?”

“That guy was selling us weed when we were, like, 11.”

“Yeah dude but once he got with Ximena he wanted to get a new job. You’re coming to the wedding tomorrow right?”

Rodrigo shrugged his shoulders and lit another cigarette.

“You fucking bitch you better come. We’re all gonna get fucking wasted.”

“I don’t know man maybe, it just depends on if my mom is coming. You know her work schedule is all weird now.”

“Just drive yourself over. Bring this guy.” He motioned his head over at Lorenzo. “Raul is actually having his bachelor party over there in Edinburg tonight.”

“Are you going?”

“Nah, I asked him but it’s at a strip club and I don’t have an ID. That’s why he got us a bunch of beer, cause he felt bad I think.”

“How’s he been liking it there at the prison?” Rodrigo asked.

“I’m not sure. He doesn’t talk about it that much,” Josh said. “But he said he would try and hook me up with a job there once I graduated.”

“You really wanna work there though?”

“Why not?”

“Because dude, that’s your *raza*. Most of them didn’t do anything wrong besides try to come over.”

“I mean, yeah, but fuck it, if I don’t do it someone else is gonna do it. Plus, what else am I gonna do? That’s the best paying job you can get here.”

“You could go to college you dumb bitch.”

“Fuck you man! Not all of us got a full ride to UT.”

“Come on, don’t give me that shit, you used to kick my ass at school when we were little.”

Josh didn’t reply but instead took a long swig from his beer can. He stood up, tossed the empty can as far as he could and grabbed another from the cooler.

“You want another one man?” he asked Lorenzo. Lorenzo shook his half full can to check how much more it he had to go.

“Uh, yeah man.”

Josh threw it in his direction and sat back down. They sat in silence for a few seconds and Lorenzo, already starting to feel woozy after 3 beers, (or was it 4? He was losing count.) continued staring up at the wind turbine. From where sat, atop the bed of Rodrigo’s F-150, Lorenzo felt like a child again, sitting on the grass of his grandparents yard looking up at their talk oak tree. He tended to get quiet when he was starting to feel drunk, more introspective than he liked, often verging on maudlin, especially after the week he’d had. Death was unfortunate reality, he thought to himself, as was college or prison. One way or another, he thought to himself, we all leave this place. He shook himself out his internal monologue and reached into the breast pocket of his flannel shit. He pulled out a joint he’d rolled earlier in the day at Rodrigo’s house before they drove out to Raymondville.

“How’d you find out about that?” Rodrigo asked Josh.

“About what?”

“About the school.”

“Your mom’s been bragging about it to everyone since she found out. She’s real proud of her little boy.”

“Ah, fuck. I told her not to make a big deal about it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, just cause.”

“Nah you know why.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.”

Rodrigo didn’t pursue the question further. Lorenzo looked over at both them, turning away from the turbine.

“Hey Rod can I get a light from you?”

Rodrigo tossed his lighter in Lorenzo’s general direction. Lorenzo surprised himself when he caught it. He licked a small ring of saliva around the tail end of the joint and brought the flame to the tip. He spun the joint around to evenly spread the flame. He sought a metaphor in this, something about everyone being caught in the flame and being roasted by life but he dropped the effort. He needed to stop being so emotional. He blew on the tip once it was evenly burned and then brought the other end to his lips.

“Oh fuck man! Where’ve you been hiding that?” Josh called out.

“Just waiting for the right moment,” Lorenzo said. “Come over so we can pass it around. I don’t feel like standing up every time.”

Josh and Rodrigo both stood up. Rodrigo walked over to the cooler to grab himself a beer before joining the small circle surrounding Lorenzo. Rodrigo and Josh exchanged looks as Rodrigo opened his beer can and chugged half of it.

“So why’ve you been so quiet tonight Lorenzo?” Josh asked.

“I don’t know man, it’s just...it’s been a fucking crazy week.” Lorenzo said.

“Yeah, it has been,” Rodrigo said.

“I keep wanting to text him. That’s fucking stupid right?” he said to Rodrigo.

“Nah man, I get it.”

“How was the funeral?”

“It was weird man. I thought there was gonna be a lot of people there but it was just his family and couple of us from school.”

“I think a lot of people were mad at him cause his girlfriend got hurt too,” Rodrigo suggested.

“Got hurt? Dude Mariela’s a fucking vegetable. They’re just waiting on her sister to pull the plug.”

“Oh shit really?”

“Yea man, she basically died also.”

“Wait, who was this?” Josh asked.

“It was our buddy Eduardo that went our school,” Rodrigo said. “He was riding on his motorcycle with his girlfriend on the highway and he slipped.”

“Oh shit and he died?”

“Yea. And you know what man?” he said, turning to Lorenzo. “It’s bullshit that everyone was mad at him. He gave that chick his helmet.”

“Yea but she was a freshman. So everyone just sees this young girl with a senior and everything becomes his fault.”

“Was she hot though?” Josh asked, exhaling as he asked to lighten the mood. They all burst out laughing.

“This fucking guy” Rodrigo said in between laughs.

Lorenzo was chucking and was glad that Josh had broken into the depth of his head and pulled him out.

“You know what’s crazy? Her dad is actually locked up over there.” Rodrigo said, pointing his head over at the orange glow of the prison on the horizon.

“How do you know that?” Lorenzo asked.

“Eduardo told me once when he was telling me about her a couple weeks back. That’s why her sister is the one that has to pull the plug.”

“That sucks.”

Lorenzo fell back into himself. Rodrigo and Josh continued their conversation and they continued passing the joint around, but Lorenzo wasn’t there anymore. He was in 5 different places at once now. He was with Mariela’s sister now, in the hospital watching her sister as she contemplated. He was Eduardo, first face-down on the midnight highway with his brains matter spread out over a 20 yard diameter then in a closed casket being lowered into the ground. He was in his English class, looking over a worksheet on *Great Expectation*, a book he’d neither read nor planned nor cared to bother pretending he’d read because there was no way he was going to pass that class. He was in the HEB parking lot with Eduardo, calling him a coward because he was afraid of getting arrested while buying weed. He was in the back of the cop car, incredibly grateful that he didn’t turn 18 for another month and therefore wouldn’t get much more than a slap on the wrist. And then he was Rodrigo, pretending that everything was okay as he agreed to come to Raymondville to hang out with his family.

Then he was here. Fighting off that dizzy feeling. The truck underneath him felt like it was spinning and he closed his eyes trying to keep his bearings. He’d felt it a few times before, having forgotten that rule Rodrigo recited to him every time it happened. “Smoke before drink. If

you get high after you're drunk you're just gonna get the spins." But this wasn't exactly that. This was the last week catching up to him. This was the last year catching up to him. This was everything he'd shoved down into the pit of his stomach where he didn't have to feel it finding its way back up after finding no more room there to fester. He was rotting.

He hopped off the back of the truck and ran to the base of the wind turbine, using to hold himself up as he simultaneously threw up and weeped. He held onto the light gray structure, pressing his forehead against it as he wiped the snot from his nose. The snot was gone but the tears kept coming. Behind him he heard Josh say to Rodrigo, "Dude, your friend can't handle his shit" not knowing how accurate he really was.

"There's two beers left. You wanna just chug 'em and call it a night?"

"Yeah that seems like a good idea," Rodrigo said.

As the tears subsided Lorenzo kept his forehead against the wind turbine, taking solace in its vibration, like a newborn being soothed by the feeling of its mother's heartbeat. He felt Rodrigo's hand on his shoulder, followed by his loud belch, then Rodrigo saying, "come on man, let's get out here."

Lorenzo looked back at the wind turbine as they drove away, watching its massive size get smaller and smaller as they drove away until it was just one in a grand field of them, delicately blinking in unison against a massive starlit sky.

Feb. 14, 15

Rodrigo

In the February night, engulfed in the songs of frogs, the hiss of crickets and the unrelenting humidity, Rodrigo lit a cigarette and opened the window of his F150 slightly as he drove down the pitch black darkness of Farm Road 490. The speed limit was 60 here, but there was no one to enforce it. The road was mostly empty during the day, and at night was a pitch black abyss besides the moonlight and stars. He accelerated up to 80 miles an hour. He looked over to the passenger seat at Lorenzo, drunk and stoned and snoring. The green glow from the clock on the radio read 1:45 AM and illuminated Lorenzo's face. He knew the last week had been rough for him. Guys aren't supposed to attend their friends funerals for another few decades. They aren't supposed to see their own futures collapse in front of them until they've partied for so long that all the doors of opportunities have closed one by one with every bad decision.

Rodrigo wasn't close to Eduardo, but they were familiar enough to exchange gossip when they were bored in class together. For Rodrigo, Eduardo's death in the motorcycle accident was less a cause for grief and more a forced look into his own mortality. He didn't attend the funeral. He probably should have, he thought as he pulled out his phone to find something to listen to, but he had a Calculus test that day and an essay due the next morning. It was fine, no one judged him for it. Lot's of people refused to go the funeral because he was the one driving the motorcycle. Maybe it would have been good to be there for Lorenzo, but the day of the funeral he came over after school and they had a good toke and conversation.

His headlights illuminated a rusted mid-90s Chevy Impala parked on the side of the road with the hood open. As he drove by he looked through the driver's side window and saw that it was empty. He put on Led Zeppelin's "Going to California" and as he started putting the phone down peeked over at Lorenzo's breast pocket and noticed a joint peeking out of the breast pocket of his red flannel shirt. Lorenzo had rolled 3 before they left for Raymondville that afternoon in Rodrigo's bedroom and they'd only gone through 2, one on the way to Raymondville and one while they drank with his cousin. He hadn't planned to bring Lorenzo with him initially. He'd agreed to hang out with his cousin Josh a few days earlier, but as the day approached the more and more he dreaded hanging out alone with him. He was family, but he was also someone different than when Rodrigo used to live in Raymondville. Rodrigo was different now too: still willing to party on the weekend, but his weeknights were mostly studious. The same way there was a path out of Raymondville, there was a path out of the valley. And he'd found it. It was hidden in books and respectable grades and college admission essays where he played up the struggle of growing up without a father and having only his mother teach him right and wrong and the importance of one's culture. He mostly believed what he wrote about in these essays. Mostly.

He reached over to pull the joint from Lorenzo's pocket but didn't quite reach him. He adjusted a bit and reached again, this time making contact with his shoulder. Lorenzo grunted in his sleep, snorted loudly, and then fell back to sleep. Rodrigo took his eyes off the road to accurately reach the joint and stealthily pull it from the pocket without waking him. Lorenzo was probably still emotional right now, and Rodrigo mostly just wanted to smoke alone. As he maneuvered the joint slowly Rodrigo could feel the truck beginning to pull to the right. The road curved downward toward the grass covered rocks at its edge, and when he

finally pulled the joint from it's sheath the truck pulled sharply right and he heard the loud thud of a dog hitting the bumper and then felt it's shape rolling under the floor of the truck. "Oh shit" he said out loud as he pressed on the brakes and pulled over. Somehow Lorenzo was still asleep.

Rodrigo opened the door to the truck. He knew the dog was probably dead, but maybe, if luck and physics were on it's side, it was only wounded. He would gladly take the dog home and nurse it back to health. His mom was the type that wouldn't object to that sort of thing. She was kind, in her own way. She would complain about him bringing home a dog, and then spend the night awake with him taking care of it and then go with him to the vet the next day. She'd probably be asleep by the time he got home, drunk on wine as she was most nights. But she'd help if it came to a dog.

He hopped off the truck and turned on the flashlight on his phone. He began walking, with the light illuminating the asphalt. It couldn't be too far, he began braking almost immediately after he felt the thud against the bumper. He swung the light side to side, systematically illuminating every inch of the asphalt and the grass to his right. As he walked he heard a wheezing sound like labored breathing. The dog was close, and alive. Rodrigo shivered as he looked. It was only 60 degrees but it felt colder.

The wheezing sound got louder. It sounded more human than Rodrigo likes. He turned around and flashed the light back at the truck. There was no movement so Lorenzo must have still been asleep. When he brought the light back in front of him the beam of light landed on a bloodied shoe. Rodrigo froze in his steps. The wheezing continued, slower now, but louder. He moved the flashlight further up in front of him until it arrived at the body of a man wearing a blue flannel shirt not dissimilar to the one Lorenzo was wearing. It was torn and despite it's dark blue hue the blood stains on it were easily noticeable.

Rodrigo began walking, slowly, and then slower still, towards the man on the asphalt. His body was mangled and his leg was bent at an angle it was not supposed to bend at.

“*Ayudame*” he wheezed as Rodrigo approache, stopping when he stood directly over him.. The voice was cracked but audible and understandable. In the clinical white-blue light of Rodrigo’s phone his light brown skin was wrinkled and looked leathery. His hair was almost completely white and drops of blood on it glistened in the light of the phone. “*Ayudame*” the man said again. He almost looked like Rodrigo’s grandfather.

Rodrigo looked around. Hargill was a few minutes up the road. He figured this was the owner of the Impala he’d seen earlier. He must have been walking to the small town to make a phone call. Rodrigo unlocked his phone and opened the keypad. He dial 9-1-1 and moved his thumb toward the call button. Then he paused.

He didn’t think about why he was pausing, he just knew he was. His self-preservation instincts were strong, and as much as he didn’t like being selfish, he also didn’t like being pushed into a situation that would damage him. There were decisions to be made here. He had turned 18 two months ago, he’d been drinking and the truck smelled like weed. He had a full scholarship to UT Austin’s engineering school that would disappear with a manslaughter conviction. His single mother had worked as a second grade teacher for 12 years and had been single for eight of them. She was still grieving Rodrigo’s stillborn sister. Lorenzo was in truck, still sleeping and dealing with death and the fear he wouldn’t graduate. He was 17 still, but he wouldn’t get out of this unscathed.

Rodrigo looked down at the mans shirt. It was torn open and there were gashes all along is abdomen. He looked on the other side of him, and noticed that some of the man’s intestines were hanging out of him, laying on the asphalt. He had the body of a man who had been hit at 80

miles an hour by an F150. The wheezing sounds he heard were not the sounds of a man in distress. They were the sounds of a man dying. Rodrigo finally brought himself to look into the man's eyes. They were looking directly upwards, trembling, with the corner of them beginning to fill with blood.

Can he survive this? Rodrigo asked himself. *Will calling the cops keep this man from dying by the time they get here?* He stood there frozen, looking into the man's eyes as death creeped into them. Then, a more callous thought, *Maybe he's not even legal. They won't really try if he's not a citizen.* And finally, *Will sacrificing my future be of any use to this man? I haven't touched him so they won't find my prints on him.*

He walked away from the man and flashed his light on the front bumper of the truck. There was a dent but no blood. He got on the floor and flashed the light on the undercarriage. There was definitely blood there but nothing gratuitous or the couldn't be wiped down in the early morning. He got back in the truck where Lorenzo was still asleep. The keys were still in the ignition. He put the truck in drive and drove away. In the cupholder there was the joint he had pulled from Lorenzo's breast pocket. He lit it as he approached the solitary street light on Hargills main road.

There was no escaping what had just happened, but the consequences would be for a different time. Lorenzo awoke 20 minutes later, as they approached Highway 281. He patted his breast pocket instinctively and then smelled the truck.

"What the fuck man you smoked without me?" Lorenzo said groggily.

Rodrigo stared forward and didn't look back. "Yeah, I'll make it up to you though" he said, unsure how he could.

Ximena

Beneath her wedding shoes Ximena felt the ground rattling with the bass drum coming from the tejano band. They were better than she was expecting. She was impressed with the accordion player. He looked familiar, like they'd gone to elementary school together, though she couldn't exactly place him. The dance floor was full and she was happy with the way her and Raul's family meshed. Though this wasn't quite a testament to her and Raul's compatibility so much as it was a reflection of what growing up in a small town was like. Everyone knew each other, and when her and Raul started dating, it was decided for them that they would be married soon. They all swooned when announced they'd be married on Valentines day. The wedding shower in December was quaint. Ximena smiled at it often. Raul didn't get wasted at it either.

It was Raul's idea to have a band instead of a DJ, and despite her objections to the price of it, he called in enough favors to make it cost less than a DJ. The blue and yellow beams of moving light pierced the darkness and smoke machines inside El Toro Dance Hall. Raul's face alternated colors as the light beams hit his face. She looked at him looking out at the dancehall. He was handsome. He always had been. From their wedding table overlooking the entire event, she assumed they looked happy and cute together.

She wanted to talk to him but the music was too loud and she didn't feel like yelling into his ear and having him yell into hers. The sound of drums, bass, accordion and a bajo sexto filled up the hall and left little room for conversation or contemplation. It surprised her how little talking they did today. In fact, the most amount of time they'd spent together was mostly just the ceremony and dinner, where they scarfed down their bland chicken cordon bleu, their first real

meal of the day. Everything else was formalities with family, a quick session with a photographer, and lots of handshaking. Weddings are for the family, she'd been told here and there as she planned the day, but there had to be some room for romance. She wanted to ask Raul how he felt, if things were different now, what the whole thing meant. But his face was blank. Probably still a little hungover from the bachelor party the night before.

He'd been elusive about the plans, but if what really just going to be a night of drinking with the guys he would have done it in Raymondville. She was okay with this, she told herself. She reached over and grabbed his hand. He looked over at her and gave her a smile she couldn't read well. It fell somewhere between placating and absent. She appreciated the effort. He looked uncomfortable but attractive in his tux, and an hour into the reception he'd removed his suit and bow tie. She wished there was something of hers she could remove, but her gown didn't give her the option. Her ribs pressed against the built-in corset and Ximena exhaled as hard as she could to make room for herself in the gown. She was trapped in the fabric.

The band began a cover of Bobby Pulido's "Desvelado" and Raul stood up, pulling Ximena up with him to take her on to the dance floor. She thought it was curious that this was the song he took her on the dance floor for. There was a yearning in it that Ximena liked though the closing lyric of the chorus, "*desvelado y sin amor*" felt like some sort of message Raul was sending her as he held onto her hips. He was a better dancer than her and his feet moved swiftly, in perfect time and without hesitation. She looked around at everyone else on the dance floor with them.

Aaron and Beatriz were dancing, which surprised her. They didn't seem like the type. Beatriz seemed stiff and aloof when they'd met at the wedding shower. Raul mentioned that Aaron was getting bored with her. Though from the look of them, they seemed like they were

doing alright. Aaron was dancing clumsily, probably 4 or 5 beers into the night, and Beatriz was stiff but on tempo. They were smiling at each other, and after a moment they gave up and simply held each other swaying to the music.

She looked at the other end of the dance floor when Raul spun her. Her aunt was dancing with Raul's father, his hands lower on her back than Ximena liked. Her manicured hands on his shoulders slid down to his chest as they moved and Raul's father looked at her satisfied as she did so. A few paces away Ximena's father danced with her 3 year-old niece. He carried her and fluff of her pink dress pressed against him and brushed against his face as they moved. He seemed genuinely happy.

Elsewhere, her maid of honor stumbled around the dance floor dancing with herself, far too drunk for 11 o'clock. Ximena didn't hold it against her though. She'd been the sober one at the bachelorette party, and the one who encouraged her to try to get a guy's phone number at the bar they'd settled on in Harlingen to celebrate. "Do it Ximena! Just so you know you still can in case things go south," she'd said. She was also the one who reminded her to delete the number from her phone at the end of the night. He was an incredibly bland guy in a blue Polo shirt that she didn't find interesting attractive, but she did enjoy herself. Sober she'd have felt anxious about the whole thing, but drunk and knowing that at the same time Raul was probably at a strip club, she let herself enjoy the encounter. She couldn't remember what the guy even looked like now.

The maid of honor stumbled toward them and as she approached she picked up speed before tripping over her own foot. Raul maneuvered swiftly to move them out of her path and she fell onto the floor. When she looked up at them from the floor her mouth and nose were bleeding from the impact.

“Oh fuck, Lupe!” Ximena called out, breaking away from Raul. They helped Lupe up off the floor and carried her off the dance floor. In the bathroom, Ximena took a wet brown paper towel and wiped the blood off Lupe, carefully avoiding getting blood on her dress.

“Oh my god, you’re such a good friend Ximena.” Lupe blubbered. She was crying now, as she always did when she was drunk.

“And you’re so lucky too. Raul fucking loves you, too. My brother was at the strip club with them last night and he was turning down all the lap dances.”

Ximena didn’t say anything to this, preoccupied with stopping the bleeding.

“You’re such a fucking bitch too Ximena. Getting that guy’s phone number, you slut”

“Oh my god Lupe, shut the fuck up,” she said, checking the floor underneath the stalls to see if they were empty.

“I’m never gonna have anyone like that,” Lupe said, falling into another set of tears. “You know I saved that guy’s phone number. I called him this morning? I basically offered to fuck him if he was my date tonight and he still didn’t show up.”

“Ah Lupe,” was all Ximena could offer.

“Am I that fucking ugly?” Lupe’s voiced quivered as it moved into a drunken high-pitched squeal. They both knew she wasn’t, but Lupe liked the reassurances that she wasn’t. Ximena found it annoying most of the time, but it was compulsive, and combined with she’d said earlier, all she could do was give her the reassurances she craved while holding the wad of paper towels to her face. The sound of the band was muffled from the bathroom and it gave Ximena some space from what was outside. The family, already discussing how many children they would have, the cake, the drunk friends, all waited for Ximena and tightened around her like the corset on her wedding dress.

There was a knock on the door and then Raul peeked his head in.

“Anyone else in here?” he asked.

“No just us” Ximena replied.

Raul walked in and looked at Lupe in tears, with a bloodied towel pressed up for her mouth. He smiled a bit and chuckled. It was the first time Ximena had seen him look happy today.

“Damn Lupe, you’re fucked.”

“Shut up, Raul. What are you doing here anyway?”

“Checking up on my wife, making sure you aren’t putting crazy ass ideas in her head.”

“Nah that was last night,” Lupe said.

Ximena’s eyes widened instinctively but closed before Raul noticed.

“You mind getting out of here so I can talk to Ximena?” he asked.

“Oh shit, you guys aren’t gonna wait? Damn” Lupe said, as she hopped off the bathroom counter, stumbled into the stall door, and then wondered out of the bathroom. Raul locked the the door after she walked out and looked over at Ximena. Neither of them said anything for a bit. But Ximena was relieved that his face wasn’t blank anymore.

“You ok, Xim?”

“Yeah, why?” she said, wondering what he was getting at.

“You’ve just looked kinda distracted all day. You’ve had this blank look on your face.”

“It’s just stress.”

“Yeah i get you. I’m glad we got to dance for reals though. The first dance felt weird with everyone looking at us.”

Ximena was happy hearing him feel awkward. She didn’t feel alone in the night anymore.

“That song was the first one we ever danced to together.”

“Really?” Ximena said, feeling almost guilty that she’d forgotten.

“Yeah. At Carla’s wedding.”

“Damn, that was here too wasn’t it?”

“Yup” he said, putting his hands on her hips and reaching in for a kiss. Ximena, for the first time that day, felt relief. Her gown felt looser.

“I wish you didn’t have to work on Monday,” Ximena said.

“Yea me too. But hey, in June we’ll go on our honeymoon. I promise.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are we going?”

“Wherever you want, babe.”

They kissed again. Ximena felt okay with this, with the settled feeling, with the family and the future and thought that in time they might get tired and bored with each other. She was fine with it because right now there was a spark and a promise of happiness. He would keep working at the prison and she would wait tables at Grandma’s Kitchen until she got her cosmetology license. They would stay in her Aunt’s old house on Wood Street until they could get a place of their own. She looked at him and knew she could have done worse.

“We should probably go out there again,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess we have to” Ximena said.

Feb. 15, 2015

Gilbert

The bells of the Raymondville's Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church rung loudly, emanating from the top of the modest but respectably sized church. It's dull orange-brown walls rose 40 feet into the air and towered over the neighborhood that surrounded it. The bells rung every Sunday for mass. Today mass was held an hour earlier to make time for the funeral. Gilbert Gonzales walked in with crowd of mourners. His face was freshly shaven and his gray hair was combed back. He wore a gray suit with no tie. He disliked the way his ties hung over his stomach.

He didn't know most of these people, but it behooved him to get to know them better. He'd be announcing his run for mayor soon, and it made sense to show up before then to make appearances like this seem less political. He did know the man who died though, and he was sad to see him die in such a gruesome fashion. They'd gone to high school together, and had even had a couple classes together. They weren't close, but in Raymondville everyone sort of knew everyone else, even if just by name.

The story about it on the 10 o'clock news KRGV Channel 5 news was brief, and snuck in after the weather but before the high school basketball scores. News out of Raymondville was seldom, as they didn't have much of an impact on the rest of the valley. Towns of 11,000 rarely did.

"A 63 year old Raymondville resident was killed Friday night in a hit and run," Oscar Adame said from behind the news anchor desk, before turning the story over to a faceless

reporter that Gilbert couldn't remember. From the crossroads on 490, in the heart of Hargill, the young woman in a pantsuit said into the camera that Guillermo Martinez was walking down the road after his car broke down late Friday night when he was struck by a vehicle. He was found dead on the road that morning by a passing trucker. The police were still looking for the owner of the vehicle that hit him but so far had no clues. In the interview the trucker looked shook but also happy to be on television.

Gilbert watched the mourners from his seat in the back of the church and as the church filled up that choir began their tune. They seem rehearsed but still unsure, as most church musicians seemed. They were not improvisers but the keyboardist that led the group seemed like she was itching to burst into a more interesting song. At the end of every phrase she would add in a trill or a note that was implied something only there for her own enjoyment. She was there for herself and Gilbert understood her that way.

"Good morning brothers and sisters," the priest began. He was mostly bald and a bit overweight, but his gown hid the fact. His funeral service seemed like a retooling of that morning's mass, and occasionally he would ask the funeral mourners to turn their bibles to a specific bible verse. John 3:16, then Romans 6:23, then John 14:6. Gilbert had heard this mass before, at every funeral he's been to over the last 20 years, but it still held some sort of truth to him. In real life Jesus might have been self-righteous and annoying, the kind of dude that he and his friends would have written off, but he gave a shit about the poor, and that counted for something.

Of the funeral mourners there, about half of them were dependent on the prisons nearby. He wondered what he could do about this besides just keeping the Management and Training Corporation or the Corrections Corporation of America happy. He scanned the room, and of the

40 men in the hall he estimated that 10 worked for MTC, another 10 for CCA, and the others were either mechanics, truckers, or worked out of town. He resented, but could understand, the mentality that Raymondville was a dying town being kept on life support by cheap land offered up to private prisons.

There wasn't much for Raymondville to offer them and their children would either join them in working at the prisons, sell drugs, or if they were lucky, develop some sort of disease and get to go on disability. Any talent that Raymondville had to offer would leave as soon as they got the chance.

And yet, the wind farm offered hope. The large turbines with their 100 foot blades swooping through the air overlooked the prisons and illuminated a path forward. Those jobs paid almost as much as oil field jobs and would keep those sons and daughters in town. If he was being hopelessly naive and optimistic they even offered a path out of oil dependence, but that was a problem much bigger than his own. He needed to find a way to keep the skill in town, working on those wind turbines, making more money and feeding it into the local economy. But before all of that, he needed to make sure he'd be able to win the election in 9 months.

When the priest was done and the mourners began pouring out he stood by the side of the exit, shaking hands to whoever he recognized and whoever wasn't mired in grief. "It's a goddamn shame what happened," he would say to whoever stopped and talked to him. He knew a lot of these people, he'd met them when he worked as a salesman, and it was easy to make small talk with them about the situation. When everyone was gone he didn't follow the procession to the burial. Instead he got in his truck and drove to Mi Tierra, a small Mexican restaurant on the main road that split the town in half.

There, he sipped his coffee and talked to whoever would come by. He knew most of these people as well. And just like at the funeral, many of them kept their stomachs full through hard labor or employment at the prisons. “How’ve you been?” he would say loudly and more enthusiastic than he would say otherwise to whoever passed by that he recognized. The woman working the register and occasionally bussing tables gave him a look whenever he did this, wondering what he was up to. She owned the restaurant, or at least her family did. He chatted her up as well. She was middle aged and not unattractive. She wore a fitted orange shirt with brown hair that went down to the middle of her back. It was partially pinned up with a large bow that at one point, 15 years ago, may been stylish. They’d been acquaintances for decades now, but never close, as was the case for most middle-aged people who lived in Raymondville. She owned the restaurant, and would be a good person to have on his side when the time came.

“Gilbert what are you doing?” she finally said, a bit exasperated.

“What do you mean Gloria?” he asked, knowing what she was getting at.

“You know damn well what I’m getting at. I know you’re not that friendly.”

“I’m just trying to get to know people more. I’ve been feeling lonely lately.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And your wife and kids, they’re not keeping you company anymore?”

“They are, but I want to know more people.”

“C’mon Gilbert. Cut the shit, what are you doing?”

Gilbert sighed. She wasn’t going to let this go.

“Alright you can’t tell anyone this,” he said, as he stood up to approach the register. He didn’t want to say it across the restaurant. “I’m thinking about running for office.”

“No shit, commissioner or what?”

“Mayor,” Gilbert said sheepishly, looking down at the as he said it.

“Oh wow, you’re going straight for the top.”

“Yeah, might at well.”

“You think you have a shot,”

“I don’t know, that’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Well, what are you in it for?”

“I mean, why? What are you trying to get out of it?”

“Nothing. Well, not nothing, but I think I could make things better.”

“Like what?”

“Just fixing up some of the roads, getting some more money into town.”

Gloria paused and looked at him, then the restaurant, than out the window at the main road. City hall was across the street and it would do the restaurant well to have a friend in office across the street.

“Well, get yourself a good poster and I’ll post it up here for you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re a good dude Gilbert. Just don’t be a fuckup.”

“Of course,” he said. He paid his tab, a cup of coffee and a plate of migas, said good bye and walked out. Everything was transactional, he thought as he got back into his truck. And everything would be a tradeoff. Every good deed would need to be paid for somehow. Every bit of help repaid in a favor or loosened restriction. Every fixed pothole came with price tag. Every bit of money into town would have to be earned. He drove up Main Street and turned right onto

the highway. He didn't have a particular destination in mind, but just wanted to see Raymondville again through a politician's eyes.

A quarter mile down, as he approached the the first intersection before the access road led onto the high way, he saw Raymondville High School to his right, and on the same road, like a factory line leading under the highway to his right, was Willacy County Correctional Facility. And beyond that, a little further down, was the expansive field of wind turbines. There was a price for all this, and it would need to be paid one way or another. He couldn't fool himself into thinking he could be a wall that shielded the students from the entry level jobs they could get at the prison, but possibly, he could be a rock in the gears that slowed the process, and maybe even divert some of them around it, into a future where they did not guard over immigrants, people who looked exactly like them and who, two or three generations ago, they might have even been themselves.

There was a price to pay for all this, there would have to be.

Feb. 16, 2015

Esmeralda

Esmeralda felt the eyes of the two other Laredo Taco Company employees in the Stripes watching her as she walked through the doors into the kitchen, and put on her green vest and hairnet. It was only 6:30 but the morning was already bustling. There was a line 8-person-deep at the counter and in the kitchen there was another 6 waiting to give their breakfast orders to the 20 year old kid. He would take the order and then scramble to shovel two spoonfuls into a tortilla and wrap up the taco in foil paper. The other kitchen worker, a late-middle-aged woman who wore loose jeans with an unstylish tear at the knees was putting together a fresh batch of chorizo and egg and flipping tortillas.

“Hey Esme,” she said as Esmeralda joined the line.

“Hey Julie” she said flatly.

“You didn’t get the day off today?”

“Amanda said I could stay home if I wanted but I knew you all were short staffed so I figured it’d be better if I came in” Esmeralda said. She walked over to the front and started prepping the orders as they were given to the kid. The heat coming off the food trays was a thick one filled with the smell of bacon, chorizo and nopales and when she looked over at the kid, he was sweating heavily. He was new and she hadn’t memorized his name yet. He would remain the kid until his name was absorbed or until he quit, at which point he would become nothing at all. It’s what happened most times. The young ones didn’t last long. The person who was there before the kid, a girl in her early 30s, left after a month to work in the prison cafeteria. It paid

better, she said on her last day. Julie shook her head in disappointment then shrugged. “Well you’re cooking for the immigrants so that’s good I guess.”

Esmeralda and Julie had been here for three years now. They were two old Mexican ladies making tacos and just because they weren’t working from out of their own kitchens or in a generations-old restaurant didn’t make what they were doing any less genuine.

Aaron and Carolina were in line. They came by every morning a few times a week. She liked Aaron, he was one of the few who really made eye contact with her and called her by her name when he spoke his order. Even though he was always in his guard uniform he always looked friendly and inviting. She wondered how this worked for him in the prison.

“Hey Esmeralda,” he said bypassing the kid.

“Hi Aaron. How are you?”

“Good, good. You?”

She paused before saying, “Getting by. What can I get you?”

“Just a Q with bacon.”

“Ok mijo”

He reminded her of her son Jeremiah. He didn’t come around very much but she was happy about that. Her friends with sons that visited them often were just the ones that never got off the ground and needed the most. Jeremiah was doing okay. He was here for the funeral though. That was enough.

She prepped his taco as if she was making one for her own son, which is to say generously. When she was done she had was only able to fold the tortilla over once. When the customers looked rude or didn’t make eye contact with her or the kid when they ordered, or were on their phone, she made it a point to be extra *pinche* with the ingredients.

Management often got after them for not properly measuring the ingredients as they made the food. “We’re running short on chorizo again Esme!” Amanda would say at the end of the week when they did final inventory of the kitchen, her short straight brown hair swinging in her face as she said it, but neither one of them was ever fired for it. She was 35 and unmarried, which meant she was old enough to know better than to really get after them, but invested enough in the job to stress about it.

The kid was starting to sweat, and though they were now working in a tight rhythm the line hadn’t gotten any shorter. Though their faces were different, the types were the same most mornings. It was an even split between people in McDonald’s or Whataburger uniforms, high school students and people in guard uniforms who worked at one of the three prisons. The mostly had the same look on their faces: blank, hungry and in a hurry.

Most days, Esmeralda didn’t feel the way they looked. She was happy to work there. It was invigorating to get out of the house at last. The kids had been out of the house for 10 years, and she’d finally convinced Guillermo that it’d be alright if she got a job to get out of the house. They didn’t need the money he argued, but that wasn’t the point. She liked making food for people. She liked feeling useful. Her children hadn’t given her grandchildren yet. When they did maybe she’d stop and help look after them, but until then all she would do is waste away and get old in their small home on the north side of Raymondville if she didn’t have some way to get out of the house.

At 10:30, after the breakfast rush but before it was time to begin prepping the lunch dishes Julie asked if she wanted to step outside with her to smoke a cigarette. Esmeralda didn’t smoke, but wanted the company. Outside, the sun pierced through the mostly cloudy skies and illuminated Highway 77 for a brief moment before being the grey came in again. Her and Julie

looked out at the highway in silence, at the 18-wheelers and cargo trucks zooming by to and from San Antonio or Houston. The breeze was strong but pleasant, and their hairnets were also wind-guards for their hair.

“How are you?” Julie asked, softly, sympathetically.

“I’m okay. Happy to be out of the house.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t go to the funeral yesterday, Esme.”

Esmeralda shook her head emphatically.

“No, no don’t worry about it Julie. I know Amanda wasn’t gonna let both of us get the day off.”

“Yea, but I feel bad.”

“Don’t.”

There was another pause and Esmeralda felt annoyed, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on why. She was supposed to feel sad, but mostly she felt an infinite stillness permeating every bit of her being.. Her patterns were disrupted. Her husband was killed in a hit and run on Friday night, was taken care of by the city on Saturday, and was buried on Sunday. She didn’t want to bother with a viewing or an elaborate funeral. They didn’t have the money for it anyway, and even if they did Guillermo would have called it a waste. It was better this way. One day he was here, and one day he was not. 34 years, not happy but not miserable, and then nothing. She tried not to acknowledge what was really brewing in her heart, because it was not appropriate. She tried not to imagine getting to hold the remote control and watching whatever she liked. She tried not to imagine having to eat at Boot Co. every time Guillermo wanted to splurge. She tried not to imagine not needing to act as a buffer between Guillermo and Jeremiah every time he

visited because otherwise they fought. She tried not thinking about dating again. She was not supposed to feel relieved. She was not supposed to feel free.

She tried thinking about the money woes that would fall upon her now that there would be no income from the trucking company. But the house was paid off years ago and she qualified for Social Security. She could try picking up a few more hours here to pay off the few debts they still had and some bills. She had her vices too. She played more Bingo than she needed, but she broke even more often than not. Truth be told, Guillermo's vices were the biggest bill they had. A pack of cigarettes a day added up and a 24 pack of Bud Light every week added up to \$250 every month.

And now that was gone.

He was gone, and she wanted to be sad about it.

And maybe one night, laying awake in the silence of a room without a roaring snore, she would. But for now all she felt was a disruption in her patterns, a disassociation from herself, a disorientation.

"Hey Julie, do you think I could try one of your cigarettes?"

"You smoke now?"

"No, but I'd like to try one."

"Alright."

Julie handed over her pack of Marlboro Lights and the lime green lighter. Esmeralda turned the pack over in her hand, looking it over like an alien object she'd never seen before. She pulled out a cigarette and brought it to her lips. It didn't taste like anything. She flicked the lighter but the wind made it difficult to light.

“Here let me help you,” Julie offered, creating a shield with her hands around the lighter. When it lit Esmeralda took a deep breath and felt the burn and sting of the smoke going down her throat. She coughed violently. It tasted terrible. She brought the cigarette to her mouth again and tried once more. It didn’t get any better.

“This sucks,” Esmeralda said. “Why do you do this?”

“I don’t know. It’s just habit.”

“I’ll pass. Do you want the rest of this?”

“Of course.”

Julie took the cigarette from Esmeralda to finish it. She made a point to inhale deeply and exhale with a slight sigh of pleasure.”

“It gets better Esme,”

Esmeralda shrugged her shoulders. As Julie finished the cigarette Amanda popped her out from the door.

“Come on girls, we’re getting close to lunch time.”

Julie tossed the cigarette in the ash tray/trashcan and they walked in. Esmeralda looked out at the highway again. Guillermo’s truck wasn’t on that highway anymore, but soon the truck would be assigned to another driver. She wondered if she’d recognize it on the highway when it was.

Rafael

The toilets were overflowing again. The smell of sewage was strong and familiar to Rafael. It happened at least twice a week, and the smell would take more than a day to clear out after it was dealt with. Here in the Special Housing unit it wasn't as bad as it was in general populations in the tent, it didn't overpower your entire being, but it wasn't pleasant either. Some inmates would spend the day gagging, others would stay stoic and stone-faced, forcing themselves to focus on anything else besides the smell or the humidity of the tent, others would improvise. They would take a pillowcase and wrap it around their face and mouth to hold out the smell. Rafael couldn't imagine that the pillow cases smelled any better than the air, but regardless, they did it, playing cards or staring up at the ceiling from their bunks with an off-white pillowcase bandana around their face.

Even if it didn't smell any better, perhaps just the fact that they had done something, however insignificant, to improve their condition was enough to get through the day until the smell had gone away. Bit by bit, through the small air filter in the kevlar tent that housed them, the smell would dissipate and be replaced by the smell of body odor and a distinct and unmistakable yet unknown smell of artificial chemicals. It wasn't a delousing substance. Rafael had smelled that once during a night in jail in Chihuahua when his friend was busted with a bag of cocaine on him and he was thrown in with him. No, this smell was different. Maybe it was the smell of the fabric of the tents. Maybe it was just the combined smell of everything, the showers, the cheap laundry detergent, the antibacterial soap, the old books on the tiny bookshelf they called a library. Rafael hoped that smell would come back soon, that it would replace the smell of days-old piss and shit that was once tap water and bland cafeteria food.

Though it wasn't punitive, Rafael enjoyed solitary confinement. He heard somewhere, probably in a youtube video, that solitary was supposed to be the worst punishment a human could receive. But here, away from everyone, afforded a bit of silence, he could think for once. He hadn't done anything wrong, they'd just run out of space. Most of the others in solitary confinement were in the same position. The guards treated them better here, since they hadn't done anything to deserve this harshest of punishments. They let him get first pick of the library, which for him was significant though not particularly impactful. Most people had shit taste, and without first choice he'd still be able to find something of substance.

He'd read a quote once in a play called *El Tragaluz* by a man named Antonio Buero Vallejo, stashed away in the back corner of the modest library that read: *"El mundo estaba lleno de injusticia, guerras y miedo. Los activos olvidaban la contemplacion; quienes contemplaban no sabian actuar."*

He wanted to act on this, on this place, to put his mark on in in some way, whether it was making it better or burning it all down. He wanted to do both, to act on his contemplation. And it killed him not to be there planning the strike. But here at least, he had his calm and a place to read. It wasn't the loneliness that got you, it was the boredom. In Juarez, even on slow days when there was little to do and few visitors to the bakery, there was people to watch. There were mountains a few hours away. There was snow up there, even in late spring. Here there was kevlar, there was concrete floors, and idiot guards who read from charts and followed orders from some place far away from them. Rafael felt almost bad for them. Their blank stares and empty brains. He overheard them sometimes, alternating between American football and how they would pay the bills this month, and wondered if they knew. If they knew that they were

prisoners too, if they knew that they were trapped in a larger cage than he was trapped in, if they knew that they were even more expendable than he was.

Still, they were the ones who told him when he could shower, when he could see the sun, when he could grab a book, when the lights were turned off and when they turned back on again. They were ones lucky enough to be born 10 miles north of where he was, and thus, in this place, they were the ones in charge. Somewhere else, they might have been friends, or he might have been their boss, but not here. Here, like every place else, it was a hierarchy, determined by a set of rules that only a select few had had a say in deciding on. It was curious, he thought from his solitary bunk where the smell of sewage was slightly muffled, that they thought they were free, and that his place here was, by some disgusting logic, and attempt to preserve that freedom. He turned over in his bed, and again began to daydream.

When he was small a bobcat showed up in the courtyard of the apartment complex his family stayed in. Rafael, hands tightly gripped on the chains of the swing set, made eye contact with the animal. It watched him and then, when it heard the bang of a dumpster lid slamming shut, ran off. He remembered wanting to know what it was doing there, in the middle of the city, and if it would be safe where it went after that. His mother called him in from the balcony of their apartment unit, and upon his entrance into the apartment was scolded for not coming in sooner. He'd often get after Angela for the same thing 30 years later when she was out with friends. And she'd have the same look on her face that he had as a child. Exasperated and impatient with their parent's inability to understand what was really going on in this place.

Angela and Mariela, daughters who he tried to understand more than his parents understood him, were wonderful in the same way he was when he was a child and they had managed to hold onto that wonderfulness into their adolescence, long enough that he wondered if

the United States had ruined their ability to survive hardship. How were they getting by without him? He had visitation rights that would give him some sort of space to guide them, but they were so convoluted and wrapped up in privileges he knew they didn't have that he might as well have not had them.

The guard that mostly looked after him and the others in solitary, Aaron, was kind but lost in himself too often to be of any use to him. Rafael talked to him sometimes, but never really knew what to do with his sense of self-interest. It was very American of him, but it was also rooted in something else that he couldn't put his finger on. When they talked, the conversation would always turn to his wife, and though he could tell that he was beginning to fall out of love with her, she and the children were his entire reason for being.

He wondered, after talking to Aaron, if given enough time he would have fallen out of love with his wife. In the hospital, hemorrhaging after Mariela had forced her way through her birth canal two weeks early and ripped her apart, Maria told him to be strong without her. He'd done his best, and though he loved her long after she was dead and tried his best, he wondered how much happier his daughters would have been had it been more than only he who raised them.

He looked over at the makeshift door with a plastic flap for a window and saw Aaron pacing behind it. He looked more troubled than usual. He brought his fingers to his mouth and paced before finally entering the room.

"You good Aaron?" Rafael said to Aaron in Spanish.

"Yeah, I'm good," Aaron asked in English. "Have you heard anything about the the strike they're planning out there?" he asked.

"No, I've been in here the last few month. You know that."

“Yeah you’re right.”

“What’s going on out there?”

“It’s getting tense.”

“I can imagine.”

“Do you know what the demands are?”

“What you would expect.”

“They’re doing the best they can.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because this place is a piece of shit.”

Aaron didn’t answer but nodded slightly. “The higher ups are worried about it” he said after a moment.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, they’ve called us in for meetings about it.”

Rafael hid his smile. They were worried. And so maybe, they were going to try doing something about it. For months, before they’d transferred him to solitary, he and other inmates had talked about it. How they would stay in their beds when roll call happened and then refuse to work or do much of anything else. He, like everyone else who was planning the strike, didn’t quite know what their leverage was, but with enough numbers and force, they’d have to be able to get some concessions from the institution.

“Listen, Rafael there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“What is it?”

“A woman came up to me this weekend. She said she was your daughter.”

Rafael was shaken from his fantasy of the strike.

“What was her name?”

“Angela.”

“Was she okay?”

“Sort of, she’s a waitress at a club. She wanted me to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“Ah man, I don’t know how to say this the right way.”

Already, Rafael could feel his stomach sinking. This wasn’t the tone of voice of a man with good news.

“Just say it.”

“She said Mariela was in an accident. That she died last week.”

There was more to Aaron’s words, more explanation, a hug perhaps, but he couldn’t remember it. There was only blankness, the four quiet walls around him, closing in on him while at the same time exploding outwards into nothingness. Aaron left the cell, and Rafael was alone again. He didn’t want the solitude anymore. He didn’t want anything. He wanted to see Angela and Mariela, to sit on the couch with her and watch old Mexican movies with her, to make her mole’ again, to hear her throw a fit about not being able to date yet.

He wondered how it happened. Aaron didn’t seem to have the details. All he had was that bit of information, thrown out into the universe by his oldest daughter for him to catch. But then again, the details didn’t matter. All that mattered was that she wasn’t here anymore. She was gone, more gone than he was. More gone that he could ever be. More gone that being thrown into jail after being deported and caught on the truck trying to bring him back in.

This jail for immigrants didn't matter. The smell didn't matter. The fact that someone was making money off of all them being here didn't matter. All that mattered was Mariela, dead and young and beautiful.

Before he left Aaron said he'd do something to get him out of solitary confinement. Rafael didn't know if that would help or not. He knew that right now all there could be was grief. Like the bobcat in his childhood apartment complex, he had just heard that slamming door that should have scared him off, and he was fighting to not run away.

Feb. 17, 2015

Raul

The conversations dulled to a whisper when Raul walked by the huddle of men surrounding the bunk where they planned. The strike wasn't a secret, but it was an instinct to them, to not include the guards in the plan. Raul couldn't blame them. In these situations, he and they had their own motivations.

He couldn't blame them for needing to do something and if he were in their position he'd probably do the same thing. Just being here 8 hours a day was enough to smother his soul and sap away whatever post-nuptial happiness remained after his wedding 3 days earlier. He couldn't imagine having to live here in a kevlar tent with 150 other men, having your toilets overflowing constantly, seeing the sun twice a day and eating the garbage they were fed or starving.

When he was a teenager his father sat him down and told him about the Pharr Riots in 1971, how his father's friend Alfonso was shot in the head by a deputy from the Hidalgo County Sheriff's office in front of Ramos Hair Styling Center, and how the town was brought to the brink after decades of racist police brutality. He shrugged it off then, not thinking about it much and caring more about getting laid than the struggles of la raza, but since becoming a guard here he started thinking about it more. He wanted to know he was different than the cops his father's generation rioted against on Cage Street. He hadn't had the opportunity to talk to his dad about it again. Their relationship consisted of his father giving him bad marriage lessons and even worse financial advice. But more often than not, Raul thought about the lessons of that story. He thought about the way that violence, even for those who called themselves pacifists, was still a greater

catalyst for change than protests or boycotts.. But it was a gamble. Violence changed things, but in whose favor was never guaranteed.

The inmates, as much as Raul didn't want to call them that, weren't kept behind bars. The entire tent was a cage. It was cheaper this way for MTC, he figured. Walking up and down the main corridor of tent #6 he wondered about the accounting decisions that contributed to the making of this building. How much cheaper was kevlar than concrete? Perhaps it was deemed unnecessary since the structure wasn't supposed to be permanent. Though if that was the case why had they not built the real prison in the 9 years since this place had opened.

When he made it to the end of the corridor of the kevlar tent, his hands behind his back, he turned around and walked back, approaching the huddle of men again. Their voices quieted to a whisper again. He wanted to know the details of their plans. Not in the way management wanted to know, but more to know how they planned to fight for themselves. There was a nobility in it that he felt was absent in his own life. They were trapped in here, but not by their own will. They had not fallen into this, as he had fallen into this job and his new marriage, they were stolen into it. He slowed his pace as he walked by the huddle, but they were too quiet for him to hear. He'd heard that in other private prisons the guards were so outnumbered that they had to rely on the gangs to govern themselves and act as a kind of extended security team that kept the rest of the prisons in order. That wasn't the case here though. Here 70 percent of the criminals had only been found guilty of "re-entry" after their initial deportation. They weren't gang members, most of them had families and probably even paid the taxes that provided the funds to build this place and provide profits for MTC.

"Raul!" he heard a man shout, 75 feet behind him. He turned around and saw his manager, 10 years older than him and obese in the way that was so common you almost didn't

really notice it, standing at the entrance to the tent. He wore a uniform as well though it was different than Raul's. The fabric seemed like it was of higher quality and his name, Octavio Garza, and the MTC logo were embroidered on it next to his badge. He had a handgun on his belt.

"Come here, son" he said and Raul walked in his direction, unsure if he had done something wrong.

"Hi sir, what's up," Raul said when he got within normal speaking range.

"So I heard from some of the guys that you got married this weekend."

"Yes sir, that's true."

"Well, congratulations son," the manager said, holding out his hand to shake Raul's. He didn't like that this man, not even old enough to be a young uncle to him, was calling him son. Still, he was happy not to be in trouble.

"Thank you," Raul said, his hand being shaken violently by his manager.

"And you still showed up this week, didn't even take a day off?"

"Yes sir, that's true."

"Well I appreciate your dedication to this job. I'll make sure they know up in admin about this."

"That's not necessary but thank you."

"I disagree, there's a lot of people that are just here for the paycheck. I'm glad to know that you're not one of them."

Raul didn't know how to respond because that's exactly why he was here. He stayed quiet.

“Listen Raul, there’s been a few whispers around about the prisoners having a strike. What do you know about that?”

“Not much sir, just some rumors. I don’t think they really want us to know much about it.”

“Of course not. Corporate is little worried about it though, so you let me know if you hear anything about it and I’ll let them know that the info came from you. I’m sure there’d be a little bonus in it for you.”

“Why is corporate worried about it though?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first strike at one of their prisons, they’re afraid of losing future contracts.”

“That makes sense.”

“Alright well,” Octavio said, adjusting his pants, “you let me know.” He opened the door to the tent and locked it behind him. Raul turned around, the huddle of men was looking in his direction. Protocol said he was supposed to break up any gatherings of 10 or more people who were together for longer than 10 minutes to avoid fighting, but he didn’t really feel like following that protocol, and if he was being technical there was only 9 men in the group. Something about the interaction he’d had with him manager left a sour taste in his mouth.

He continued his patrol, up and down the length of the long tent, seeing the group hush as he walked by. Finally, he stopped at the group and sat in the bunk next to them. They all turned towards him and gave him a look that was equal parts suspicion and fear.

“*Que miras?*” one of them said. His name was Francisco and was in his 40s and seemed to be the leader of this group.

“I’m looking at you guys,” he said, painfully aware of the way the English tasted like silver coming out his mouth. He understood Spanish well, but speaking it made his tongue feel fat and useless, much as they understood English but spoke it in only brokenly. They managed to find a way to communicate when necessary.

“Quieres algo?”

“Listen guys I need to talk to you about something. The higher ups, they know something is going down on Friday.”

They exchanged glances with each other but no one said anything.

“Now, I’m not gonna try to stop it or get in the way. But just tell me, what’s gonna happen?”

There was still silence from them.

“Do you think anyone’s gonna get hurt?”

“Eso depende de ustedes.” Fransisco said. Raul paused and thought for a bit.

“Well, what do you all want?

“Ser tratados como humanos. No somos perros que nos pueden tirar aquí y luego olvidarnos”

“That’s fair. But what do you want?”

“No seas idiota. Sabes lo que esta mal aquí.”

“That’s the thing though, they know also, but they don’t care. You’re just a paycheck to them.”

“Es lo mismo para ti también, no?”

Raul didn’t have a proper response for him. The man was right. He just as much a part of this system as the MTC owners were. Objecting to the conditions in his head did nothing. There

was no action he could take though. He could quit in protest, but his position would just be filled by someone else. He could file a complaint to someone higher up, or take video of the situation and then release it to the news. But everyone who would be infuriated by the conditions already knew, was already angry, and had no way of affecting the situation.

“What can I do to help then?”

“No lo empeores y déjanos planear. No queremos violencia.”

These were simple enough instructions and was just another extension of what his life had been up to this point, _____ letting himself fall into place so that what had to happen would.

Octavio

The mix of grass and caliche crunched underneath Octavio’s boots. He liked the sound and the impression his boots left on the ground. It had rained recently, and the dirt gave way easily under his weight. He enjoyed the feeling, and stomped down harder than usual to leave a bigger foot print. He looked over, beyond the kevlar tents at the entrance sign that read Willacy County Correctional Facility, then beyond that to the highway to took everyday to get here from Harlingen.

It was difficult getting here this morning, traffic was heavier than usual though he could tell why. From his perch atop his lifted F250 he couldn’t didn’t see an accident up ahead, which annoyed him. He liked the chaos of the accidents, the flash of ambulances and firetrucks, the

plastic and glass shards scattered on the asphalt, the twisted metal and look of panic and frustration on people faces. But not this morning. This morning it was just a lane closure due to construction. It was boring.

He checked his watch. It was 10:45. Forty minutes until his lunch break. Most days he packed lunch, but today he felt like treating himself to Tucker's BBQ. He felt almost embarrassed by how much he was looking forward to this. This place was miserable, but it paid the bills, and he had to endure working here. Especially if he wanted to get the attachment he wanted for the front grill of his F250. His daughter needed glasses too, but she wasn't getting those until her mother pitched in half.

Corporate was breathing down the warden's neck, which meant the warden would be breathing down his neck to get some answers about the strike the inmates were planning. The whole thing pissed him off. These *mojados* got free housing, three meals a day, medical coverage and didn't even have to work while they were in here. And then they had the nerve to complain because sometimes the toilets overflowed or because they couldn't see a doctor right when they wanted to see one. *What a bunch of little bitches*, he thought. Sometimes his toilet overflowed too, and the insurance plant MTC offered was so *pinche* he'd be lucky to see a doctor if it wasn't an emergency. MTC wasn't much better though. They cut costs everywhere they could so they could make a little bit more money for themselves off those government contracts. The owners were probably millionaires at this point.

The new Major, Salazar had him going tent to tent this morning, asking every guard what they were hearing from the inmates about the strike. There was electricity in the air, their movements and discussions had an air to them. They were pissed off, there was no doubt about it, but what did they think this strike was going to do? All the sudden make it so that they,

weren't fucking illegals? He'd gone through the first 6 tents already. Everyone had told him the same thing. Yes they knew about it, no they didn't have any specifics, yes they'd let him know as soon as they found out about it. Now to Golf Tent. The tents were named by military alphabet. The seventh tent, instead of being called G tent, was just called Golf. He thought it was stupid. But he thought most things were stupid.

Aaron was here. He liked Aaron though he could tell Aaron wasn't really fond of him, he seemed like a solid dude, or at least, like he wasn't a dipshit. The tent was loud and Aaron paced forward and backwards along the tent. The inmates here seemed like they were less miserable than in some of the other tents. A group of 4 inmates were playing cards. He approached them before going up to Aaron.

"Excuse me gentleman, what's going on here?" he said with as close an approximation to slyness as he could muster.

They didn't reply, turning their gaze downwards.

"Are you all gambling?"

They did not respond.

"Que esta diciendo?" one of them said to the others but they didn't respond.

"You all know that gambling is a violation of Texas law, yes? And that being caught gambling could result in a fine and some extended jail time?"

No response. Two of the men shifted in their bunks, uncomfortable.

"Well, I'm gonna assume your silence is an admission of guilt. I'm gonna have to confiscate these cards."

Octavio reached into the center of the group and grabbed the cards from the bed, then reached over to each inmate and tugged harshly at all the cards they still held in their hands. He gathered the cards in his hands and then placed them in the breast pocket of his uniform.

“I’ll make sure to refer your names to immigration judge. Have a nice day.”

He walked away pleased with himself and made his way towards Aaron.

“Aaron! What’s up fucker!”

Aaron looked over at him and quickly looked down again.

“Hey, Octavio.”

“I need to ask you something. What do you know about this strike thing?”

“Uh, not much really. Just that it might be happening Thursday or Friday.”

“You know who’s running it?”

“Nah, these guys aren’t gonna trust us with that, you know that.”

“Yeah that’s true. Alright well, I think I’m gonna take an early lunch and go to Tuckers. Gotta get there early before they run out of brisket. You wanna come with me?”

“Can’t, I’m stuck here till I’m relieved by the next guard.”

“Hey don’t sweat it. I’ll call it in so they can replace you right now.”

“No don’t, they’re short staffed over there” Aaron said, too quickly.

“Oh I see what’s going on.”

“What?” Aaron said, noticeably confused.

“You wanna have lunch with Carolina.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw you two leaving together after work. You getting in a little side action on your wife or what?”

“No man, it’s not like that.”

“Alright whatever you say man. She’s got a pretty fine ass though, right?”

“Um..”

“You know I’m right. Alright man, well I’ll leave you to the beaners. I’m out.”

Octavio walked out of the tent, stomping through the grass and caliche before getting to the parking lot, where he hopped onto his F250, parked in the middle of yellow line to take up two spaces. He drove down the frontage road of 77 and after two miles made a right to turn into a neighborhood that fed into the main road on which Tucker’s BBQ was located. He parked and entered the restaurant eagerly. On the walls there were buck heads and pictures of the owner and his family on hunts and fishing trips, posing next to dead deer and hooked bass. Octavio had killed more impressive bucks, he was sure of it. He sat, placed his order, a brisket sandwich and a baked potato with chicken alongside a cup of sweet tea, and took out his phone. He swiped through his Facebook feed, a collection of pictures of his high school classmate’s children, advertisements for Cowboy’s merchandise, memes about dumb feminists and posts from pages devoted to attractive women.

While he waited for his food, slurping on his iced tea, a group of 3 men in boots and camouflage t-shirts took a seat at the table next to his. They seemed to be a father and his two sons as they all shared the same facial features, the same dirty blonde hair and blue-green eyes. They placed their orders and then chatted about the conditions on the bay today. Octavio looked out of the window and saw their boat, attached to a truck similar to his own, parked at an angle that slightly interfered with Octavio’s own way out of the parking lot. It would be a tight squeeze but he could make it. He continued listening to their conversation. They didn’t seem stupid. They

seemed like good dudes. He continued looking at his phone, listening in, waiting for an opportunity to jump in and start a chat with them to relate to other real men.

Their conversation jumped between fishing and work. They appeared to be pipeline workers, in town for a month before heading back to Midland for another tour laying pipe. He had an acquaintance who worked for a pipeline company in the area a few years back. It was weak, but it was something he could work with.

“Hey, so what company are you guys working with?” he asked loudly.

The trio stopped their conversation and looked at each other, unsure if he was speaking to them. The father looked over at him, but didn’t say anything.

“Yea, you guys? What company are you all working for?”

“NGL” the older one said.

“Oh wow, that’s cool. I had a buddy that worked up there for Nesco.”

There was a pause as Octavio waited for them to continue the conversation as well. The other two men sitting at the table just looked down.

“He said it’s pretty hard work.”

“Yea, it is.”

“It pays pretty well right?”

The older one gave a non-committal nod of his head and turned his head down again. They started talking to each other again, quieter now. Octavio felt a flush of embarrassment rush over him that felt simultaneously overwhelming and familiar. The food arrived at the table and he ate it quickly, not really tasting it. He replayed the interaction in his head over and over again, but nothing came up that would have made the situation any better. These guys were just fucking assholes, he decided. He stood up and walked over to the cashier to pay for the food. He wrote a

zero under the line for Tips and signed his name. As he walked out the youngest of the three men was telling a story about a time in a trench for laying pipe where he and the guy he was working for saw a rattlesnake and the other guys climbed out of the trench faster than he had ever seen anyone run. The three of them laughed.

Octavio walked back to his truck, There was a car parked next to him now and the tight squeeze to get out of his parking spot next to the board was even tighter than it was before. He got into the drivers seat, grunting as he squeezed in through the small space he was able to open the door into, turned the wheel as far as it would go, reversed two feet, put the truck in drive and turned the wheel as far as it would go in the other direction and went forward three feet. He repeated this twice before barking in frustration. The truck wasn't making much progress out of the parking space.

"Fuck it," he said out loud. He straightened the steering wheel, put the truck in reverse and accelerated quickly. There was a loud screeching and tearing sound and his bumper pushed the boat out of the way. He looked over at the boat as the damage came into view in his passenger window. There were definite scratches and even some cracks that would let in water. Pleased with himself, he fully pulled out the space and started back to the prison. It was 12:37 now, he was late, but it was fine. He put the truck in drive and smirked as he saw the three men from the table seated next to his emerged from the restaurant in his rearview mirror.

Feb. 18, 2015

Francisco

The group of men, most of them tired, worried, sick from the smell, huddled around Francisco's bed. They kept a deck of cards, each with a few cards in their hands, to make it appear to the guard on duty that they were playing a game. Francisco looked into each of their eyes, as a poker player might to gauge the other opponents at the table. Though it wasn't misdirection he looked for, nor was it fear, because that much was obvious, he looked for anger. Anger meant conviction, it meant a willingness to suffer for the cause.

The Fox tent was loud. It was always loud. Two hundred men weren't supposed spend this much time together in one place for this long. The smell, the concentrated smell of human boredom and desperation, filled the tent. Francisco breathed in deep, as if to fill his lungs with the desperation and let himself be fueled by it. There was only so much a man can take, he thought, and that point had been crossed a long while ago. By the look on the faces of the men all around him, they were there too.

One of the men in Alpha tent hadn't been told he had Hepatitis, and was left to suffer to months on end before his condition became a problem for the the higher ups. Anything that wasn't a deep gash or broken bone was an ibuprofen. Francisco wasn't mad at the medical workers. They were hopelessly understaffed and understocked. Healthcare was expensive, and not profitable for a prison. And they did seem to try their best with what they had. Still, any injury meant hours of waiting. It sometimes meant death as well.

In March and April last year two Paisanos had died, waiting on medical care. They were friends of Fransisco's. The first had an asthma attack and didn't have his inhaler. There was no doctor on staff and the nurse practitioner in charge didn't know how to intubate him. The next month, one of the men in Bravo tent cut himself and the wound got infected. He died of sepsis a week later.

Paisanos weren't a gang here like they were in other prisoners. Here, because of how understaffed the entire operation was, Paisano leadership was basically an unpaid part of administration. Fransisco knew this and used it to get concessions from the guards. Most of the time they just wanted to avoid problems, and would bend the rules to make life easier for everyone. He appreciated this. Some of them were power-tripping assholes, but most of them were just holding on to a job.

"So tomorrow then?" one of the men asked in Spanish.

Fransisco nodded his head. The man was named Pedro and was in his early 20s. He looked nervous, but he had more of a reason to strike than almost anyone, or at least, his wounds were the freshest. In the courtyard last week he'd fallen down and rolled on his ankle. Even from 15 yards away Fransisco had heard the snap of his ankle. He was in excruciating pain and was given a wrap and an ibuprofen. He'd been limping around the prison, asking everyday to see the doctor for a cast, though there was never an option.

A rat scurried by their feet as they talked in hushed tones. Though the rats bothered everyone, Fransisco didn't mind them as much. They were wildlife, and in some odd way they felt like freedom. They weren't supposed to be here, and yet they'd managed to get in. They came and went as they pleased, with their main priorities revolving around eating and not dying. He wondered where home was for them.

“I fucking hate these rats,” Pedro said.

Another man in the group tried stomping on it as it scurried but it picked up speed and disappeared under the bunks. Fransisco watched it, trying to see if there was a hole in the tent somewhere. But it was small and made its way out of sight easily. He admired it’s ability to take care of itself, to fend off death and captivity. It was as unwanted as he felt, and yet, it seemed at ease with itself. It felt no need to strike or protest. It just adapted to it’s conditions. Perhaps freedom is what gave it this. Perhaps, because it’s entire species had always been despised it had simply adapted and evolved to this fact of life. A race and a species were different things. He daydreamed about rats from different places hating each other and forming rat armies to force each other off an island. It was a silly thought, but silly thoughts made him feel better. A few days before they moved Rafael to solitary he had conversation with Fransisco over lunch. Over soggy cornbread bread that they checked for maggots before eating, Rafael told him that that as long as your mind was free it didn’t matter what happened to your body.

Fransisco disagreed with this. “They aren’t separate things Rafa. When you’re starving you can’t think straight. When your body is broken your mind breaks too” he said in Spanish.

“What other choice is there, in this place?” Rafael said, his voice exasperated and trying to convince himself as much as Fransisco. “If you don’t break your mind and body apart you’ll go insane.”

“What do you think is going on here? We’re being broken here. Everyone’s forgotten us and we’re a can of gas ready to explode.”

Rafael nodded, understanding. It was an unfortunate situation, in every sense of the word.

“Listen, whatever you’re planning, if it gets violent it’ll only make things worse. Whatever you do, don’t get violent.”

“That’s not our call. That’s theirs,” Fransisco said, nodding over at the guards.

Here and now, the strike would start in 24 hours. At 8 PM, the would get into bed and refuse to work. No one would lift a finger. This group of 9 knew men in every tent. The word would spread during lunch and recreation time outside. By 8, everyone would be onboard.

The group of men, already together with a deck of cards began playing poker, for real this time. They didn’t have much to bet so they placed favors or future meals as bets. Pedro took note of everyone’s bets on a scrap of paper, and Fransisco made sure to bet as little as possible, both because his cards were terrible and because he needed to lose as little as possible.

Feb.20, 2015

Warden

It was early, and the sun had only just begun to peak over the horizon. He checked his watch. It was 7:00. He was not usually here this early, his day usually started at 8, two hours before the inmates were to rack up by their bunk and be accounted for by name. He would get to his desk, check for any emails that needed to be responded to right away, read the news for a bit while he finished his coffee, signed paperwork and made phone calls, before making a stroll through the bowling alley.

The bowling alley was the long alley between the inmate tents, There were five rows with two tents each. Each tent held 200 men, with 4 permanent structures behind the main tent that held another 200 each, for a maximum capacity of 2800 inmates. The warden liked how organized these structures were. There was a symmetry to their organization that brought him a kind of peacefulness.

Today though, peace was far from his mind. He was more annoyed than anything. Annoyed that he had to handle another strike, annoyed at how spoiled the inmates were, annoyed that MTC were cheap and didn't give him the staff he needed to handle it if things got out of hand. He doubted that would happen today though. He had a basic idea of the complaints. Lack of medical coverage and unsanitary conditions. He could understand where they were coming from, but even then. What they got here was better than anything they'd be getting in their home countries. At least, that's what the email from MTC headquarters told him to tell the press if they

asked during the 2013 strike. What he wasn't to tell the press was that he had placed the two leaders of strike in solitary confinement for 3 months.

The two deaths last year were unfortunate but statistically, they had a lower rate of death per total population ratio than the whole of the United States. This too he was instructed to say to the press by MTC. Ultimately, he thought as he made his way to the Fox tent, what he thought about all of this didn't matter. He was doing a job, a job he did well and was paid well to do. The morality of this situation was not his to judge, he was to be an executor of the will of the government, and he was not in a position to change what they wanted done if he wanted to. These words comforted him slightly.

Last night, at 8 pm, the entire prison came to a standstill. The inmates stopped working, stopped what they were doing in the recreation halls, and simply got into their bunks. He got a call last night that it had started. There'd been whispers for the last few months, and then louder voices the last few weeks, but they'd never had an exact date or time.

The smell of the inside of Fox Tent slapped the Warden across the face as he entered. The mix of sweat, sewage and disinfectant was overwhelming. He tried not letting it show on his face. Most of the men were awake already, though some still snored at the far end of the tent. There was a group of five men standing by a bunk. They looked over to him as if they were expecting him. Their eyes looked forward at him, unblinking, defiant. He adjusted his posture, a bit straighter and his gait became firmer, though it hurt his back to do so.

"Ok then," he said to them, skipping all introductions and formalities. "What do you want?"

Their eyes didn't blink.

“Queremos mejor atención médica” a man named Francisco said. The warden knew of him already from some of the reports written by his staff about the possibility of a strike.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak Spanish, can you say that again,” the warden lied.

Francisco missed a beat, and formulated the words as best he could in English.

“We want more doctors,” he said with a heavy Mexican accent.

“Well I wish I could do that for you, but we’re doing the most we can with our budget.”

Francisco paused again, thinking through his next English phrase.

“You lie. There is money but they spend it on yourself.”

“Listen Francisco, I only spend what my employers pay me. If you have a problem with the budget here I suggest you write a letter to the Management and Training Corporation. That’s the only way something is gonna change things. This, whatever you’re doing here, is not going to change a thing.”

“Why don’t you tell them? We are being treated like animals.”

“That’s not true. You’re being treated like inmates of the United States Bureau of Prisons.”

“Yes. Like animals.”

“We’re doing the best we can.”

There was a pause before the warden continued.

“Listen, if you tell your people to stand down and end this thing, I’ll get you on the phone with them.”

Francisco thought for a bit. There was an opening here. The warden read his eyes and saw them contemplating. It seemed to come down to whether Francisco trusted that the Warden did want better conditions for them. It was a gamble. He was ambivalent about the conditions.

“Get them on the phone first. Then we can talk about ending this.”

It was an acceptable enough agreement. No it wasn't an absolute end to it, but it was a start. With some luck this would be over before lunch. He felt ambivalent about MTC. They were often indifferent to even him when he called about concerns he felt were legitimate. Money and safety concerns about the guards being wildly outnumbered were waved off. He was treated like an employee. And he was, to some degree. But he expected better. Still, that's not what his agreement with Fransisco entailed. All he promised was a phone call. To let him hear for himself what they like. It wouldn't make like easier for him, but at least he'd know what he was really up against.

He walked out of Fox tent. it was 7:45 and the sun was fully hung in the air and the light streaked a strong orange across the sky, silhouetting the wind turbines in the distance. There was a slightest bit of hope that this would be alright. Perhaps MTC would even consider adding some more people to the medical staff if it wouldn't hurt their bottom line too much. He marched back to his office and began to prepare for the morning meeting he'd have with the supervisors and guards about how to proceed for the rest of the day.

Robert

In the mirror, Robert looked at himself, decked out in full riot gear. He felt like a video game character, or at least, a child controlling one. This wasn't his usual dress, but it was

necessary today. To his left the rest of the disturbance-control team was fully suited up. All eight of them had the same excited expression on their faces, a combination of children ready to go and play way and high school football players waiting in the entrance hall of their first game of the season. Robert looked into the mirror again, at his name embroidered onto his vest that read Robert Salazar, a name more professional than he considered himself.

“You guys ready?” Robert asked the men.

“Yes sir,” they said, not quite in unison but closer than Robert expected.

“Now, this is gonna be a simple show of force. Nothing too extreme. Don’t expect any action,” Robert said.

They all nodded. “What’s the plan if they don’t rack up?” a man name Daniel Leyva said. Robert could tell he was itching for permission to brutalize. He was that type.

“Simple by-the-book escalation. We negotiate but we let them know that we’re not messing around.”

“And if they still don’t?”

“One step at a time Leyva. Just remember your training.”

The task was simple, march in full gear to the Echo Tent to let the men know they weren’t playing games. It was an act of intimidation. No one expected any rioting or to have to make use of their bullet proof vests, but it was instead to let the inmates refusing to rack up and be counted know who was in charge. Perhaps it was this lack of expected action that made the men look so giddy, Robert thought. If there was violence to be had, perhaps then they would look nervous or afraid. Instead, they’d get to go out, act tough and make a collection of men stand up and do, essentially, roll-call.

The first four tents, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta all racked up with no issue. Not racking up wasn't part of the strike, Robert was told by the Warden. Robert didn't usually rack-up, it was a task usually left to some of the lower level supervisors or even a guard. Today though, the tension was high and Robert, newly promoted to Major, one step below the warden, was tasked with this. The prisoners were familiar with him and they mostly respected him. So when he walked into the tent and called out, they promptly racked up.

Echo tent was different. Maybe there had been a miscommunication, maybe a disagreement, but once, twice, three time Robert called out and the inmates stayed in their bunks.

"We're not racking up until our guys come in here and tell us to rack up. You all need to talk to them. We're dying in here" one of them said in a clear English that surprised Robert.

It wasn't a particularly dangerous kind of protest. There was no real damage in what they did. But it had its own form of power. There was a power in rebellion that could only inspire more. Yet it planted a seed that could grow into something worse. Something that the perception of power would not be able to hold back.

Robert and his group of 8 men marched out of the front offices of the prison. He made they marched along side every window of every tent to make their presence known. Daniel was in front. Robert actively disliked Daniel, most people did. He was obnoxious and infatuated with control. He was one of the few, Robert figured, who was not here for the paycheck. He was here because nobody gave a shit about non-citizens and he'd be less reprimanded for being himself. Still, he did his job well, when he wasn't abusive, or saying things he should be saying about the female staff. He was head of the Willacy's Special Investigations Services unit, and though he was only supposed to look after gang and drug activity, he followed the handbook of rules to an

annoyingly specific degree. He and his little lapdog Octavio kept people in line without giving an inch. It made him popular with corporate, and despised by almost everyone else.

Robert approached Echo tent again held up his hand and the men stopped marching. They were stopped in full view of the windows between Echo and Fox Tent. Robert looked over at Fox tent and a man by the window signaling over to the men in Echo, as if telling them to stop. He entered the tent and before he said anything he noticed that the energy in the room was different. As he stepped in the talk dulled to a whisper traveling around the tent and then into silence. It was more tense and Robert sensed every eye on him. He held his weapon in one hand and a clip board in the other.

“Alright everyone,” he said, somewhere between his normal speaking voice and a yell. “I’m not gonna ask you again. Rack-up!”

There was a shuffle in the room, and within ten seconds, all 200 hundred inmates stood by their bunks. Like sardines stuffed into a tin box, their parallel bodies stood still as they waited for their name to be called. One by one, as their name was called they deflated back into their bed. Robert didn’t know if this meant the event was over, but it meant there was progress, it meant that within the next few hours everything might be back to normal.

He marched back and forth as he called names, making eye contact with each as he called them. It was unnecessary to do so, but it established power and order again. He felt bad for them, he did, but there was nothing to be done. There were forces beyond both their controls that kept this system in place, and there was nothing that a strike was going to do about it. Perhaps it was just that the illusion of a fight is enough to keep a person going. Given another set of circumstances, a few generations or presidential administrations earlier, he might have been one of these prisoners. He looked like them. His skin and eyes were a dark brown, his nose was

shaped the same. The European in him and in all these men was hidden far away in his features. And yet, he, separated by generations, laws and political winds, marched back and forth through the tent, calling out names, watching them slump down again like protest sign being crumpled in the wind.

He looked over at the tent window, into the Fox tent and saw saw men looking out at them, their mouth and noses covered by pillow sheets. It wasn't quite over yet.

Daniel

Robert was a little bitch and everyone knew it. He'd prance around back and force from his truck to his office like he was big shit, sometimes peeking into the tent if he absolutely had to, but nobody respected him. At least no one one who knew their head from their ass. It was unfortunate, Robert thought often, that the warden wasn't one of them. Daniel was next up for a position just under the Warden, but just when he thought he had it in the bag the Warden called him into his office and said, "I need you where are Leyva. You're good there, keeping the gangs and drugs in check." *That's I get for being damn good at my job*, Leyva thought.

And now this, Robert walking back to his disturbance control team with his dick tucked between his legs. He shook his head. He'd called out for them to rack up three times. And then just walked back. Something had happened in Echo tent, but it was like the air got sucked out of him. Now here, in Fox, where it mattered most, he was useless.

"I can't do nothing," Robert said. *No shit you can't*, Daniel thought. Robert looked frustrated and defeated. Of course this tent was going to be the hardest to rack up. This is where the instigators were. They would be the hardest to tamp down, but the most important. Once they

were defeated though, everyone else would follow through. Robert had done what he always did, follow procedures and then act like an idiot if things didn't go according to plan. He didn't have the balls to do what was necessary to make them comply.

A couple weeks back, when one of the Paisanos didn't make eye contact and then spit on his hand as he reached under his bunk looking for weapons he found him in the recreation yard and took him to the bathroom, where they didn't have cameras. He punched him the stomach and when he keeled over he kicked his feet out from under him and placed his boot on the front of his neck.

"How's that feel? That feel good?" Daniel seethed over then man. He looked down at the number printed on his uniform: 02832-049, and spit on it.

The man didn't respond and then went limp. He'd passed out. "Piece of shit," he mumbled. He walked over to sink and scooped up water in his hand. He splashed water in his face twice until he came to, and then splashed him a third time just for fun.

"Get back to the yard," he said, watching him lift himself up slowly and then walk out of the restroom. He wouldn't report him, and even if he did, no one would believe him. He had a clean record. Clean records didn't always go along with being able to get things done, but Daniel was lucky. Nobody reported anything here because they all knew that didn't mean shit.

Robert walked away from the tent, and got on the radio with the warden. *Fuck this*, Daniel thought. There were two teams ready to go now, and with a little encouragement they'd all be able to get the maggots racked up. He walked over to the tent and opened the door.

"Hey!" he yelled out, booming his voice out as loud as possible. "Y'all need to rack up!"

There was no response. He looked up and then were standing around or sitting down, all with pillow cases wrapped around their mouths. They were ready for a fight.

“I’m not gonna say it again! Rack the fuck up!”

Still no response. Only the flat stare of angry men ready for anything. *Alright then, they want a fight? They wanna get shown who’s boss? Fine.*

He reached to his belt a pulled out a hornet’s nest grenade. They were his favorite. They wouldn’t kill anyone but they’d hurt like hell. It was a small explosive surrounded by 75 rubber BB pellets that would fly in any direction. One of these would get them all in line. Or at least, let them know they weren’t fucking around. He didn’t have a legal justification for throwing one just yet, but it’d be easy to figure one out once it came time to file the report. Something about a threatening stance and fearing for his safety, probably. He pulled the pin and threw it into the tent. There was an instant quiet as it hit the floor and then giant rush of men running to the sides of the tent, lifting mattresses over themselves to shield themselves from the explosion. The grenade exploded and Daniel felt a rush or joy run from his feet, to his legs and up his spine as he heard the he rubber pellets hit the walls followed by loud scattered groans across the tent.

Daniel signaled over to the rest of the crew and they all rushed in. Two other men had grenades in hand and another had a canister of tear gas. He looked in the tent, pleased with himself. Some of them men were on the floor, writhing in pain. Others were huddled behind their bunks. And yet others, seeing Daniel signaling the others to rush in, grabbed their makeshift knives made from the razors included in their shaving kits.

As the crew rushed in, the three men with grenades and tear canisters threw their toys into the tent, screaming “Get down!” as they went. Most dropped to the floor, and those who had grabbed their blades ran for the door on the opposite side of the tent. Seeing that it was locked, and wanting to avoid getting blasted again, they took their blades the kevlar fabric of the tent.

Daniel felt his heart sink fast. This wasn't supposed to happen. They weren't supposed to have a way out.

Upon seeing others sawing away at the kevlar, some inmates grabbed brooms and broke them in half. Pushing them toward the officers, trying to get out. Two of the officers shot rubber bullets at the inmates cutting through the kevlar, but there was too much adrenaline rushing through the tent for anyone to be stopped. Daniel looked to his left, and saw a bloodied man on the floor, begging to be let out or see a doctor. An officer stood over him and shot him with a rubber bullet.

When the hole in the tent was big enough, they began pouring out. A few at a time at first, and then, as the hole grew bigger, in larger and larger numbers. Less than 5 minutes after Daniel had stepped in to control the situation, almost all the inmates were in the courtyard. 20 inmates remained, all laying on the floor, afraid for what was to happen next. Daniel stood there, in the almost empty tent, feeling the power drained from him, the control gone, the consequences of his rashness beginning _____ to bear down on him, like a boot on a neck.

Jesus

In Bravo tent the sounds of grenades and bullets echoed through the bowling alley and entered through vents. These tents weren't meant to be soundproof, and the sound fear and misery rang through them easily and penetrating the psyche of the two hundred men in Bravo.

Jesus sat on his bunk, tapping his fingers on his knees trying to occupy his mind. So far the strike, like the strike two years ago had gone smoothly.

At 8 last night everything slowed to a crawl. He'd heard from other Paisa members in the courtyard yesterday that it was starting that day, the word spread quickly through the tent. Though there was some disagreements about how much they were going to disobey. They needed to punish the right people. Not working and staying in the tents was obvious. The people who suffered from a lack of prison labour were obvious. However, not racking up might make life harder for the guards, and most of them were ok. They were severely outnumbered and they knew it, so they worked with them. Obviously there were things they couldn't do for them, things their bosses said were off limits, but when it came to things like getting an extra lunch if there was leftovers, or letting two of the men fight when it was necessary, they let things slide.

And yet, some of them were assholes. But maybe that was true on both sides. It seemed like the ones who wore different uniforms than the regular guards, the ones with a badge or nicely embroidered uniform tops were the real assholes. Was it worth it to make all of them suffer for a few of the guards? If the question was reversed, as in reality it was, how would they treat it. Perhaps it was a question of them being as human as they were. It's not like some of the men weren't assholes either, Jesus thought at 8 when they stopped working. Some of the guys in here were meaner to him, on average, than the worst guards. Being powerless makes you crueler to those you can inflict your will on, Jesus figured. The guards were powerless too in their own way then. They probably weren't getting paid very much, and most of the ones he talked to were as dumb as he felt.

Then again, none of the men he was locked up with had ever pressed a boot down on his neck until he passed out. There was a blurry line between those who deserved to suffer and those

didn't. The question of racking up hadn't been fully resolved in Bravo tent by the time Jesus went to sleep. When he woke up in the morning some of the guys were still arguing about it. Whatever happened, he'd go with the flow of it. He didn't want any problems, either with the guards or with the other Paisa members.

And so, when Salazar came in that morning, they were all surprised. He wasn't a run of the mill supervisor that usually did rack-up. He was one of the higher ups, which made Jesus think that they'd rebel for this, but then again, he was one of the few higher ups that everyone seemed to like. He always had a sad look in his eye around them, like he knew how wrong this whole thing was. And with that resigned look in his eye, when he called out for them to rack-up, they did so without a struggle. *Was it planned this way?* Jesus thought when Salazar called his name.

Certainly, what was happening now wasn't part of the plan. They didn't need to discuss it now. A group of men huddled by the windows and looked.

"*Se están saliendo!*" one of them shouted, in equal parts disbelief and joy.

"Let us out man!" one of them called out to the guard on duty, though he didn't reply. He looked scared. The sound of grenades and rubber bullet shots continued. The started piling up by the door, hoping to convince the guard through sheer force in numbers. He didn't move, which Jesus respected, in a way. Jesus, still at his bunk, lifted his mattress and pulled out his makeshift blade. He held it in his hand for a moment and contemplated. Before he let himself fall too deeply into his head he stood up and quickly, with purpose, to the wall of the tent and stuck his blade into it above his head. He pulled down with all the force he had in him. He struggled for a moment, but as he found his rhythm the kevlar tore easier and easier. Soon others joined him.

“They’re getting out!” the guard said into the radio. As soon as he finished saying it, Jesus heard from the radio: “All officers, get out if you can.”

When the hole in the wall was big enough Jesus pushed his arms through, tore the hole wider and let himself through. The air was cool and though he’d seen these surrounding everyday for the last 13 months, when he looked around it was as if he was seeing for the first time. The tall fences that surrounded every tent, the recreation yards where they passed the time before being sent back to the bunks it all looked different.

It was loud out here, louder than he’d ever heard it. There were men shouting in every direction. All around him, men poured out of holes in their tents, like ants escaping from their hills. There were a few more rubber bullet sounds and grenades in the distance, though it was likely that it was only a few yards away and the adrenaline the flowed through him was muffling the sound. Jesus smelled the air. There was smoke. Somewhere someone had lit a fire. This too, like the chaos would spread quickly. It all needed to burn.

The men picked up rocks and pipes and broomsticks and took them to the fence the begin making a new hole into the bowling alley that separated all ten tents. It was a giant, beautiful, chaotic exhale and pent up human rage and desperation. There was nothing to be gained from all this destruction, and yet, it was the most logical thing he’d seen in all his time here.

He breathed in it, all of it, and felt it all travel through him. This was a freedom more pure than crossing into the United States, more pure than his first pay day, more pure than any law or constitution could provide. It was an awesome terrifying feeling, and even then, in the thick of it, he already knew that it would, and should, be impossible to maintain.

Nicolas

The control room was hot and smokey. The fires were spreading. He didn't know who set them, or how far they'd spread, but they were there. The tent next to the Special Housing Unit, where they kept the guys in solitary confinement, was on fire. and not matter the question of how far the fires would spread, it was defiantly going to spread there. The special housing units, unlike the tents, were not made of kevlar fabric. They wouldn't be able to use their blades to cut their way to freedom. The guards were all gone, called away on their radios for their safety. When the fires reached the housing unit, all 75 of them men in there would be trapped.

In the unit a group of men were trying to break down the doors to get inside and pull out the men. They'd been at it for 20 minutes now and had had no luck. It was only here from the control center that they'd have any hope of keeping those men from burning alive. He was angry at everything and everyone. At the system that made them angry enough to riot. At the doctors who refused to treat his broken ankle with anything besides a wrap and some ibuprofen. At the guards for leaving the facility without opening the doors for these men. The inmates for not being to control themselves enough to not light the place on fire. At himself for not being able to figure out how to open operate the control center.

One of the inmates popped his head into the control room.

"How's it coming along Nicolas?" the man asked in Spanish. Nicolas didn't know his name or face but somehow her knew his.

"I'm trying to figure it out."

"Well you need to hurry up. The building is starting to catch."

“Fuck”

Nicolas looked at the control panel frantically. He could feel his nerves beginning to fry as if they themselves in the fire. He looked over every button and knob for something that just said open all gates. There was a computer there and on the monitor there a video feed that alternated between the outside of the tents and the inside of the special housing unit. He looked at the monitor for a moment. The inmates in the SHU were pacing around their rooms quickly. Some where trying to jiggle the doors or find a way to escape. They could smell the smoke and Nicolas was sure they had heard the grenades and shot blasts.

Rafael was in there, sitting on his bed calmly. Nicolas didn't know why he was so calm, maybe he knew there was no way to get out and had accepted what was going to happen. In the pixelated video feed Nicolas could see that Rafael's face was blank, and he seemed unmoved by the chaos around him. Where did he find his zen?

Before he was moved into solitary, he and Rafael would have conversations in the recreation yard often. Mostly it was small talk but every now and then it would veer into family. They'd both lost people. Rafael's wife died in childbirth, Nicolas' father had drowned on a family vacation 10 years ago when Nicolas was 15. He didn't want to look up to Rafael as a father figure, but Rafael his father's age full of advice. It was difficult not to see him that way. What wisdom was in his head now, Nicolas wondered, that kept him still on the bed? He couldn't bear the thought of losing one father to water, and another to fire. The fear, however, didn't sharpen his senses and critical thinking. It just made him panic.

Next to the monitor was a phone. Printed on the receiver was the number to MTC employee services. Nicolas called the number and let it ring. It rang twice before a woman answered the phone.

“Hello?” she said. Her voice was courteous and professional.

“We need some help here,” Nicolas said frantically. “I’m in the control room. How do I get these doors open?”

“Ok, no problem. I see you’re calling from our Willacy center. Can I please have your employee number before I authorize access to system admin privileges?”

“I’m not an employee. Please! I need some help. The building is burning down and there’s still men in there!”

There was a silence and then Nicolas heard whispering that he couldn’t make out. Then there was a click and a dial-tone. She had hung up. Nicolas looked back at the monitor. More men were on the outside of the Special Housing Unit trying to get in. They had picked up a table and were ramming it against the door in unison. The door burst open finally. When the image switched to the view inside the SHU he saw them all going to the cell doors and finding them locked again. They ran around looking for something to open the doors with. Nicolas could see some of them stopping from time to time to cough. The smoke was getting heavier.

In a panic he called 9-1-1.

“9-1-1 what is your emergency,” the operator said, sounding more sincere and straight forward than the MTC employee.

“I’m here in the control room of the Willacy Prison. I need someone to come in and open these goddamn doors. There’s people burning in here!”

“Sir please hold. Let me patch you over to the Texas Ranger on the site.”

There was a series of clicks followed by the sound of a man’s gruff voice. He had a Mexican accent, which relieved Nicolas a bit. Nicolas explained the situation.

“There will be a lot of dead people if they don't come in time. The fire is getting over here already,” Nicolas concluded.

“Well, will you tell everybody to go back into their units?”

Nicolas knew this was an impossible request. There was no way to put all of this back energy back into the tents.

"We need to make sure we're secure there before we can go in" the Ranger added when Nicolas did not respond immediately."

“Ain't nobody gonna do nothing to you,” Nicolas replied.

“We can't just go in there like that after you guys have rioted like this.”

There was some silence Nicolas watched on the monitor as more men rushed in and out of the building to get some air. Some of the doors had been torn down already but the majority of them men remained in the cells. Rafael remained seated on his cot. Watching and waiting.

After a moment he heard the Ranger say to someone else, “There's a fire in the SHU and there's prisoners in there and they're saying that they're probably going to burn alive.” Then the voice asked him how many men were in the unit.

“I'm guessing like a 100.”

Nicolas heard him ask someone how to reroute the calls and then the call went dead. Nicolas fought the urge to slam the phone against the wall in anger and continued looking. Finally he found it, a key hanging from the wall. He grabbed it and inserted it into a lock on the control board. He twisted it and suddenly, on the monitor he saw the doors swing open. The inmates ran out of their cells and quickly emptied out from the building.

Rafael remained in his bunk. Looking out at the open cell door. The smoke got thicker and he began to cough. *What are you doing?* Nicolas thought. Finally, as driven by more by

instinct than his own desire, Rafael stood up slowly, and walked out of his cell calmly. Nicolas hobbled out of the control center and walked out in the yard to greet Rafael.

“What were you doing?” Nicolas asked him in Spanish. “You almost died in there.”

“This is a disaster,” Rafael said. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Well it did.”

Rafael stopped and looked around, at the hundreds of men, some of the yelling, some of them running around the yard.

“They’re not going to let us go. They’re just gonna move us,” he said. “I’m gonna go find some place to lay down.”

Josh

From the inside of his English class Josh looked out of the second floor window of Raymondville High School. It was busy work today, and even it wasn’t he probably still wouldn’t have done it. He looked around the class. Mostly everyone, including the teacher, was on their phone. He tapped his fingers on his desk. The clock refused to move. It was stuck at 10:45. At 12 he’d get to leave. Amanda’s OBGYN appointment in Harlingen was today and he was determined to be there. Her parents hated him, but they weren’t going to stop him from being there. He and Amanda were 18 anyway, there wasn’t much they could do.

They’d never talked about abortion, it wasn’t an option. Not for moral or religious reasons, it just never crossed their mind. Her parents had brought it up when they sat down told them, but he just nodded his head ‘no’ at the dinner table and held Amanda’s hand. Her family was Catholic, but it didn’t seem like something they took seriously.

He imagine what life would be like in two years, when the little booger would be walking around and causing trouble. He'd be working at the prison with Raul, and Amanda would go to cosmetology school. Raul worked there and had managed to have a decent wedding this last weekend. His wife seemed happy and they lived a content existence. It wouldn't be a glamorous life, but he wasn't going to be a fuck-up. He knew that in a vague sense before Amanda told she was pregnant after they'd had sex in the field behind her parents house, but after that it was crystal clear what life his life absolutely could not be.

He couldn't be a drug dealer like some of his cousins, or absent like his dad. He wasn't going to college like Rodrigo, but that was already a given. And maybe it was better that way, if he had planned for college he'd be resenting this situation. The baby gave him a path forward, something to keep him focused. And today he'd get to hear the heart beat for the first time.

He looked out of window again. The wind turbines and the prison was in his view. He looked closely and noticed something he hadn't seen before. There was a plume of smoke rising from the direction of the prison. Maybe a car had caught fire over there, or maybe a farmer was burning his fields to get ready for the next season.

The intercom above them beeped loudly, then again, and then a third time. It was a lockdown. The teacher put her phone down, stood up from her desk and walked over to lock the door from the outside. Shame back inside, turned off the lights and told the class to keep quiet.

"Miss is this another drill?" a student asked

"We just had one last month!" chimed in another.

"Guys, calm down" the teacher said.

The class settled for a moment. Most of them were back at their phones. Josh returned to daydreaming about his child and watched the plume of smoke grow higher and higher before one of the other students broke his focus.

“Duude! Check this out!” he said to the entire class, phone in hand “My uncle just posted this from the prison. They’re fucking rioting!”

A group of of his friends surrounded him.

“They set that bitch on fire!” another one exclaimed.

“That’s why they have us in lockdown,” the first one said.

Josh clenched his fist. He hoped the lockdown would be over by 12 so he’d be able to leave for the appointment. Amanda said they’d be able to hear the heartbeat today. He didn’t want to think about what this meant for hiring at the prison. Not yet, at least. He wanted to enjoy today. He breathed in and continued looking out the window, at the smoke plumes getting darker and darker.

Feb. 27, 2015

Sheriff Spence

He parked his car in the parking lot of the prison and stayed there, listening to the radio crackle. There was nothing coming in right now from the station, the silence of a town with 300 newly unemployed men. He thought it would be loud on the first Friday since the prison exploded into a riot. But there was a stillness in the town. Maybe when night fell it would get loud again. Maybe the whole town would break this time. It was noon, and the last of the inmates had been transferred to other facilities this morning. Along the fence the trash and rags of the last week was piled up neatly.

On one of the walls of the tents that remained unburned an inmate had spray painted *Revolution Paisa*. On another someone had written *Todo for tu culpa Leyva*. Sheriff Larry Spence felt ambivalent about both these phrases. Leyva wasn't one of his guys, but he still represented a wing of the of the side of the law he was on as well. He'd heard the stories from some of the guys about how the whole things started. And he disapproved of it. There were better ways to affect change, and there were better ways to tamp down on unruly forces. People were terrible. They always have been. There was very little a person could do to change this fact besides education and hope. And these were long term solutions that meant very little day to day. Close to 30 years as a sheriff for the county had taught him this.

Vietnam taught him this as well. The senseless violence of the whole thing, where neither side was right and all there was was a power struggle. He sprayed Agent Orange in the jungle to clear a path and cut down hiding spots for the VietCong and to expose booby traps they set, but

he also sprayed it on crops to starve a village. There was no right or wrong here, there was only power.

Perhaps that was what was at play here as well. He'd heard the whispers from his officers that got to see the prison, and how they shook their heads in disbelief when they came back to the station. He knew why most of those inmates were there, and they didn't deserve what they were getting there. He voted Republican, but he also knew that illegal immigrants weren't the same as rapists, or even people who repeatedly got DUIs. At the same time rioting wasn't going to do them much good either. It probably felt good, but that destruction wasn't going to hurt MTC in any really way. It hurt the town. And MTC didn't give a damn whether the town was hurt or not. They'd find another place.

Sheriff Spence got off his patrol car and walked up to the fence. He looked closer at the facility, unsure what he was looking for. He knew there was no answer to this, no puzzle piece that would things about this makes sense. *This is just what happens with humans sometimes*, he thought. *We are a messy species*. Nothing had to make sense. It was unreasonable to expect it to. He learned this in Vietnam and then made himself forget it when he met his wife and they had Gary. Vietnam was what he had to go through to meet Maria and have Gary It all made sense. And then in '76, six months after they moved to Raymondville he was reminded again that the meaning of all this is a joke. She was killed in a car accident like any other. He'd been the officer on call for accidents like that one before and he'd been there for countless other ones after.

He checked the fence and saw that it was unlocked. He opened the gated fence and the creaking of the metal hinges pierced the quiet, and seemed to Sheriff Spence that it would travel through all of Raymondville. He stepped into the facility and took a look around. They really

didn't give a shit about any of this, he realized. There was trash everywhere, the remains of a people pushed too far, and the smell of sewage and burnt kevlar filled the air. *This is what the Onion Strike could have turned into*, he thought.

In '79, when Raymondville was one the of the onion capitals of the country, the largest onion farm in the area decided that it could cut wages for the field workers in half without consequence. Anglos thought they could get away with anything back then since they owned everything. They still do, Spence thought, but they're smarter about it now. Cesar Chavez had just had his strikes but they didn't think that the cause reached all the way down here. They were wrong and for 6 days they didn't work. They marched and carried signs. It was a real moment for them. He was still deputy then, raising Gary alone and still trying to get his bearings on everything.

He remembered the day when some threw something at one of the strikers. It must have been trash or a rotten fruit because it was enough to break the striker out of the march. Spence looked at him and saw that he'd pulled a gun from his waistband. People have their breaking points. Spence rushed towards him, as did a group of other marchers who came to the same conclusion. Somebody getting shot would ruin everything and turn the whole thing into a bigger shit show than it already was. Spence reached for the gun and put his finger on the backside of the trigger, keeping it from firing it case the the trigger got pulled, which it did. Spence felt good that day, like he'd avoided disaster.

A few days later Orthal Brand, the guy who later became McAllen's mayor decided to buy up the entire crop and send his own workers to go pick the field. A riot had been avoided, but it was still a disaster for everyone who wasn't already in power from the start. The farm got

paid, Brand made a profit, but then, like now, the people got screwed. Sheriff Spence walked around the facility thinking about this.

He felt a tightness in his stomach. The anxiety built up in him. It wasn't the rich who angered him, or MTC, or even the rioters. It was the pointlessness of the whole thing. He'd had this feeling in Vietnam and when his wife died. It was the feeling of smallness, the feeling that nothing they did mattered because the faceless power of the great machine they worked in would grind them to dust if they ever put up a struggle, God and government and corporations, the great gears that they travelled in circles within. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, waiting for it to pass over him. This would pass, and they would recover, somehow.

His radio beeped. A domestic disturbance issue had been called in. One of the patrol cars would handle it, but he decided to attend to it as well. He had a feeling there would be a lot of these today.

March 10, 2015

Esther

“Dad’s been home a lot,” Esther said to Julio as she reached up into the snack cabinet that she knew she wasn’t supposing to be getting into by herself. She was balanced on a stool that Julio grabbed onto to keep steady.

“Yeah I know,”

“It’s nice. Is he still in the room?” Esther asked

“Yea, I think he’s watching TV in there.”

Esther was relieved. Dad didn’t have a temper, but he’d be mad if he saw them up here after he’d told them they couldn’t have a snack until after lunch. Spring break was nice, but it was boring, and snacks made the time go by faster.

“Are there any Oreos left?” Julio asked. Esther got on her tip toes to reach into the back of the cupboard. She pulled her hand back as far as it would go. The bag of Oreos was just out of reach. Julio was looking up at her expectantly, eyes wide. If she could just get one extra inch she’d be able to reach them. A small hop would do it. She took a deep breath and jumped, not seeing that Julio had let go of the stool.

Her jump sent the stool flying out and when Esther came back down her bare feet didn’t meet the wood of the stool but instead kept falling. On her way down her lip hit the sharp rim of the bottom of the cupboard. There was a loud crash of the stool, then Esthers body, then the crinkle of Oreo container smashing into the floor and scattering five of the dark cookies across the kitchen floor.

Aaron ran out from the bedroom and into the kitchen. Julio ran away before he got to the kitchen. Esther didn't notice the wasted cookies, or Julios quick footsteps, or her dad's heavier frantic footsteps. All she could pay attention to was stinging feeling on her lip and blood drops on the floor. She'd only seen her own blood a few times, and it was always made her feel faint.

"Esther!" Aaron exclaimed as he saw the scene, knowing instantly what had happened. He picked her up without saying a word, and carried her to the bathroom. He hadn't picked her up in a long time, he hadn't needed to. But when she or Julio was hurt, he instantly became the dad he was when they were toddlers.

In the bathroom he sat her down on the counter, cupped his hands under the running water and brought it to her face.

"Ah sweetie," he said. "Are you ok?"

"Mmhmm" she said, nodding. His face was genuinely concerned, and though she was worried he might be mad, there wasn't a hint of anger on his face.

"Stay here," he said. "Let me get some ice."

He walked out of the bathroom and came back with a ziplock bag with ice cubes.

"This might hurt a little bit but it'll keep your lip from getting swollen."

Aaron brought the bag to her lip. The cold stung almost as much as the edge of the cupboard. "Just hold it there for a bit. We don't want your mom coming home from work and seeing you with a big broken lip." Esther grabbed the bag.

"Where's your brother?"

Esther shrugged her lip.

"Ah well, come with me. Let's just watch some TV on the couch."

They sat on the couch and watched *Pawn Stars*. They made guesses about much each item might be, and they high fives each other whenever they were close to being right. Aaron would and her would chat during the commercials switch over to the Cartoon Network. After a while, Julio joined them. They sat on either side of Aaron. *This is nice* Esther thought as she and Julio drifted off to sleep on Aaron's shoulders.

Beatriz

Breath in. Left foot, right foot. Breath out. Left foot, right foot. Breath in. Left foot, right foot. Breath out. Distance: 3.5 miles. Pace: 9 minute 46 seconds per mile.

It's been ok Beatriz said to herself, half earnestly, half trying to convince herself. Her Nike's were a little torn. The sharp gravel of the rocks on the train track was starting to take it toll on them. She was proud of herself. She was working almost twice as many hours as before and still kept the energy to run. She saw the light of the train up ahead, as she did almost every night she ran on these track. It was probably a half mile ahead.

Aaron had been doing well at home. He hadn't found a job yet, but it had only been two weeks since the prison shut down. He'd been applying everywhere, and even signed up for an

accelerated AC repair program at STC. It'd be good money, probably even more than the prison was paying him and he wouldn't need to travel 40 minutes each way anymore.

There was a path out of this.

She was grateful to be busy, she hadn't thought about her father in a while, or at least she hadn't been incapacitated by his absence. Aaron being home more helped as well. He was bored at home, and in his boredom he'd taken up cleaning as a way to kill time. He wasn't a slob before, but she liked that he knew she was working more to keep the lights on.

The train up ahead honked, spotting her.

It's going to be ok, she said to herself again.

She stopped playing chicken with the train, she hadn't in a little while. As soon as it honked she'd step off the tracks. She didn't daydream about it smashing into her and taking her away. She did the same today, stepping off the tracks and onto the grass. She stopped for a bit and stood there waiting for the train to pass. Aaron was at home playing with the twins in their room. Work was busy but she wasn't checked out there.

The money was tight, but they were alive, and together.

The train passed and she stood there reveling in the whoosh of air of each car. She counted each car, as she had for every train she'd seen since she was a child. 18 on this one. She'd be ok. She'd be ok. She got back on the track and kept running.

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