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## Live, Love and Lyft

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LIVE, LOVE & LYFT

A Thesis

by

DANIEL OLIVAREZ

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major Subject: Creative Writing

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

May 2022



LIVE, LOVE & LYFT

A Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

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My thesis has a critical introduction that gives a short history of creative nonfiction. I focus on Lee Gutkin's contribution to creative nonfiction. I also gave some examples of creative nonfiction in my introduction. I included Mary Karr, Lauren Slater, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Shakespeare. My thesis contains twelve pieces of writing ranging from narrative nonfiction to poetry, highlighting my experiences growing up in a single parent home in a small border town. I utilize the literary aspects of totemic writing, the journey to the green world, the motif of loss and growing up in a small town, and the realism embedded in a world of a journey through adolescence to adulthood. Through my writing I am forced to face repressed memories and struggles, leading me to a renewed sense of self. Much of my writing is influenced by the works of Mary Karr, Ernest Hemingway, and Shakespeare.





## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my work to my grandfather, Joe. V. Sanchez. All the stories you shared made a big impact on me.

I am grateful for the never-ending support and encouragement from my family. Even when times were difficult, they always believed me.



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CHAPTER I  
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

When writing creative nonfiction the writer can mix poetry, prose, journalism and other forms. In *Creative Nonfiction: A Movement, Not a Moment*, Lee Gutkin points out that, “Creative nonfiction writers are encouraged to utilize literary techniques in their prose-from scene to dialogue to description point of view- and be cinematic at the same time” (6). He further elaborates in the article by saying how creative nonfiction writers write about themselves and people they know, creating “special magic” They can discover things about themselves and express their ideas freely.

In my writings, I wanted to include my hometown, Weslaco, Texas and its rich history, stories about my family and how we've grown together after losing my father, and the things I went through as part of growing up in a single parent household. Reflecting on my past has made me see the mistakes I've made. It's like a collage of my life. Memoirs, thoughts, poems. Part of it is a manual for Lyft. Another is a mixtape. My thesis ran a course from the time I experienced great loss as a young teen up until I faced up to some of my trauma and realized I was taking risks in my relationships and job.

Growing up in this small border town, I've experienced life in a type of microcosm. To others Weslaco may just be a small town, but not me, it's my life. It's all I've ever known. Writing about it connects me to the world. It makes me relive certain memories. By doing Lyft I saw other things in the Valley I've never seen before. I saw that the Valley isn't just a small,

insignificant region. The lively nightlife and quiet day life are literally two different worlds. While doing Lyft I got to hear stories from all kinds of different people from all walks of life. It felt like I was being heroic in my dealings with people in need of a friend or a ride.

Another element of creative nonfiction is the memoir. Mary Karr talks about this in her book, *The Art of Memoir*. She compares memory to a pinball machine saying it “ricochets around between image, idea, fragments of scenes, stories you’ve heard” (1). Memories are made up of different pieces of the past and present. It rekindles memories that may have been repressed. Karr gives another example of igniting a fire into recesses of your memory, making you remember things you had long since forgotten. She encourages you to reflect on your past experiences with family and friends. Karr expresses how one memory is triggered by certain events in your past, and suddenly you can remember details that were once buried deep and locked in your memories (1-2). Learning to cope with the loss of my father and grandparents made me revisit my past friendships and relationships. It was only by doing this that I was able to deal with different types of people in my experiences working with Lyft. I realized that losing some of the people I loved the most helped shaped who I am today. All these experiences have led me to where I am today: a candidate ready for his master’s degree, and a future teaching career. I wrote about how I remembered things; a way to vent. I wrote some of these stories in workshops for my creative writing classes. I got to share my personal experiences with classmates. I built a bond and a strong relationship with each of my classmates throughout the years. I’m trying to cross bridges before they crumble. I’m trying to get across to the other side. I’m trying to write how one piece brought another piece of memory to life. Learning how to deal with loss and rejection. I wanted to write about my experiences with Lyft and how they impacted me.

Mary Karr explored the use of totemic objects in writing; she explains how totemic objects help trigger important memories. One totemic object used in my writing was my grandma's old upright piano. I played alongside her as a small child. Karr explains that "in writing a scene, you must help the reader employ smell and taste and touch as well as image and noise selecting sensual data items, odors, sounds to recount details on their psychological effects on a reader" (71). I have found this plays a big role in my experience as a writer. I enjoyed using all my senses to bring my stories to life, giving the reader a strong and sensual sampling of my reality.

Northrop Frye uses the term "green world", when describing a metamorphosis. The "green world" as described by Northrop Frye in "Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays" is "the archetypal function of literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from "reality," but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate"(184). The green world is where characters go through a metamorphosis once getting out of the city. In the green world there are no laws, and you can live in freedom; it is contrasted with the real world. According to Frye, Shakespeare uses the green world to have his characters grow and learn from their mistakes. This concept was important to my development as a young man. The idea of going through a metamorphosis while leaving the safety of my comfort zone intrigued me and shaped my writing. I wanted to create my own world where there were no limits and infinite freedom; a different world for readers safe from the harshness of society all while telling the truth.

For example, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the forest symbolizes rebirth and forgiveness. Shakespeare's characters die in the forest and are resurrected with their true desires. Julia is reborn as a chimera to satisfy Proteus' desires; she originally died for Proteus' sins.



Valentine is resurrected as a divine ruler of both heterosexual and homoeroticism in the forest. Characters are transported to a temporary reality where their innermost desires are released out into the wild. Balance is restored once the roles of the character are back in order. Rebirth occurs when the character goes back to the normal world after the metamorphosis. I incorporated this into my writing when I took a journey to the *Prop*. I left the land of laws and ethics and entered a new world where rules do not exist. I was a different person at the *Prop*. In reality, the *Prop* was just an old, abandoned property owned by a close friend of mine. Friends would flock there late at night to socialize and let off steam in a lawless atmosphere. We were free to do what we wanted without being judged, such as partying.

Another instance where the concept of the green world was incorporated in my writing was when I traveled to the Water Gardens, a nature trail, complete with an abundance of greenery, ponds and wind chimes playing softly in the wind. Vanessa, a girl who meant the world to me at the time, took me to this place, and I was shocked to have not seen it before even though it was a couple of blocks from my grandma's house. I had an intense attraction to her and even though it didn't last long she had a profound effect on my life. I really did believe we had entered an alternative reality. To her it was just another normal day. I tried to ignore the fact that I probably wasn't the first person she had taken there, but I gave into the moment and made every second count. We crossed over to a fantasy world complete with a Minotaur and a mythical maze. The laws of physics did not apply there. It took on a dream-like quality. We had entered a distinctly new world. Later, we entered the green world again when going under the bridge, covered with graffiti and spirits of people that had been there before. It felt like we were away from civilization out in the open and able to express our deepest desires without shame. In my stories I travel into a fantasy- like realm that turns into a normal state at the end.

In Gutkind's book "*In Fact the Best of Creative Nonfiction*" he includes Lauren Slater's essay "Three Spheres" where a practicing psychologist conquers her past. The mental institution she's at in the essay is the same one she was at as a child. Visiting Ms. Whitcomb brought this painful memory back along with other memories of her time at the hospital. Slater traveled to the hospital to see her patient, Ms. Whitcomb, but mentally she did not arrive as a doctor, but as a patient. In this story Slater used intimate details which helped capture the relationship with her and her mother. This reminded me of the trauma I faced while having to go back to the hospital and experiencing the pain of losing my dad again. The hospital brought back memories and feelings that I had hidden deep in my heart. I needed an outlet to get away from these painful memories, so I used Lyft not only to make money but as an escape.

The incident of losing my father led me down a path full of unfulfilling relationships. I was trying to feel complete again, to fill in the emptiness inside of me, but I was completely unsuccessful. My emptiness only grew stronger. In Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, it is explained how:

"the terror of [a] traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments.

The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others. The dialectic of trauma operates not only in the survivor's inner life but also in her close relationships. It results in the formation of intense, unstable relationships that fluctuate between extremes" (73).

This was evident in my relationship history. I fell into a pattern of wanting to cling onto others. Thinking I needed someone to make me feel complete again. Many of my relationships fell into this pattern of a need for love to take away my emptiness.

In the article “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as Fundamental Human Motivation” by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, they point out that “the need to belong should therefore be found to some degree in all humans in all culture...The need to belong entails those relationships are desired, so interactions with strangers would mainly be appealing as possible first steps toward long-term contacts” (499-500). I found out this applies to my journey and constant need to have someone by my side. What triggered this chain of events was the death of my father and my unresolved feelings of guilt and loss. Herman also states that “the ultimate goal...is to put the story, including its imagery, into words...first attempts to develop a narrative language may be partially dissociated. [you] may write down [your] story in an altered state of consciousness and then disavow it” (204-205).

Digging deep down into repressed memories would put me in an altered state. Some of these memories in my writing were difficult to remember. I had to relive traumatic memories in order to bring them to life. It’s like watching the person you love die all over again. Just having to deal with trauma led me to different modes of research. It wasn’t until I relived these moments that I realized the depth of my psychological hurt. Herman conveys that “[you] must reconstruct not only what happened but also what [you] felt. The description of emotional states must be as painstakingly detailed as the description of facts...[You’re] not simply describing what [you] felt in the past but are reliving those feelings in the present” (205). Sharing these experiences in my thesis was cathartic which helped me deal with my repressed feeling of trauma. I left my comfort zone in the hope of finding someone to build a connection with. One of the relationships I talk about in my story is my experience with a young woman named Kayla. In the story I have a deep desire to form a connection and bond with a girl I had just met.

In Saul McLeod's online article, "Id, Ego, and Superego" he describes Sigmund Freud's concept of the "pleasure principle". McLeod places emphasis on Id, which is "the impulsive (and unconscious) part of our psyche which responds directly and immediately to basic urges, needs, and desires." In this article McLeod explains how the Id goes hand in hand with Freud's "pleasure principle." He further explains what Freud's concept means, "that every wishful impulse should be satisfied immediately, regardless of the consequences. When the id achieves its demands, we experience pleasure. When it is denied, we experience 'unpleasure' or tension." I believe my need to find a connection with someone was deep rooted in Freud's concept of "pleasure principle".

Within my experiences as a Lyft driver, I got to see the true faces of people. Although I initially used my job as a Lyft driver as an escape mechanism for my depression, the people's anonymity led them to lower their defenses and show their true colors. The trauma I experienced helped me realize that I was not seeing the true nature of people and just taking them at face value. Now I understood there can be an evil side to most people who seem ordinary in broad daylight but can become less inhibited at night.

The setting in my stories contains aspects of deep surrealism. In the article, *The Forest of Goodman Brown's Night: A Reading of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"* Reginald Cook points out how Brown discovers the horrible truth of human nature and its evil roots. Cook further elaborates on human nature, "the descent is symbolized by the journey, from daylight into night, from subconsciousness to subconsciousness, from reality, to illusion, from physical to physical, from light to dark" (478). Many of my stories contain the elements shared by Cook. For example, my journeys to the *Prop* with my friends where we try to escape the real world and my journeys to the Water Gardens and late-night drives working for Lyft where I ventured into

unknown territory. The loss of my grandmother hit me real hard. I came into a realization that everything comes to an end. We all must die and watch our loved ones die. It's part of life. My grandma always believed in me, while others didn't, and gave me hope. Her death was a significant experience. Herman explains how "those who lose important people in their lives face a new void in their relationships with friends, family, or community. The telling of the trauma story thus inevitably plunges the survivor into profound grief" (216).

In Colin Murray Parkes' article "Coping with Loss Bereavement in Adult Life", she talks about the different stages of grief. The stage of grief that applies in my situation is the third stage. "Many find themselves going over the events which led up to the loss again and again... The memory of the dead person is never far away... at times of drowsiness or relaxation, [you] see or hear the dead person near at hand" (857). I was able to relate to this due to my experience with my father. I feel that perhaps I could have prevented his death by being with him and calling 911. But instead, I chose to go on a date I wasn't even sure would work out. There's been many nights where I dream of my father and in these dreams, he's alive and well. It's as if nothing ever happened. Those dreams always feel real. And when I wake up, I am confused as if he was alive.

Lyft is an app-based job where people use the app to give and find rides. In the article, "Free to Work Anxiously: Splintering Precarity Among Drivers for Uber and Lyft" Brenton J. Malin and Curry Chandler define Lyft as an "exemplify 21st-century "sharing," "gig," or "on-demand" economies... in the case of Uber and Lyft, driving a car—into forms of collective labor" (382). The process to apply for Lyft can be done on your phone. All that is required is your driver's license, proof of insurance and a background check. Pretty much everything is done through your phone, "when customers request a ride, they do so through a passenger-

specific app, which routes those requests to the app of the nearest working driver, each of whom is, in theory, free to drive whenever he or she chooses” (382). While under employment with Lyft you are considered an independent contractor, which means you control the hours in which you work and don’t work. You have to pay for your own car insurance and car fees such as gas and repairs. In the article Malin and Chandler interview people who work for Lyft and Uber. both jobs are very similar like Pepsi is to Coca Cola. One person interviewed explained one of the cons of working for Lyft/Uber, was Eric. He said:

“Uber doesn’t take taxes out of anything. They send you a 1099 K...So if I go out and do a five-dollar trip and they pay me three dollars and twenty cents, my tax form shows five bucks. It doesn’t show three dollars and twenty cents like I paid. So now I got to chart, take that dollar eighty and use it as fees, show it as fees on my tax form” (385).

I’ve been doing this same thing recently when filing my taxes. Whenever I need to put gas while on the clock for Lyft, I save a receipt. I keep all my receipts in the glove compartment. Same goes for whenever I get tires or an oil change. I must work extra hard to make a profit and that’s why I think Lyft offers small bonuses to keep the workers motivated.

Another interview mentioned in the article is from Lisa, another Lyft driver, who stated that, “When you sign up you know you’re an independent contractor. You’re not guaranteed anything. You’re not guaranteed health insurance. You’re not guaranteed help with your car. You’re not. You’re an independent contractor. That is what that means” (386). I always hated when I got a flat tire after driving a whole night of Lyft. It’s a hassle having to pay for repairs out of your pocket. Yes, you get to write in manually when doing taxes, but this is something that should be provided by Lyft. There are times when I’ll get a ride notification twenty minutes

away from where I'm at. It'll take twenty minutes to get to the destination, yet it is still not guaranteed if the person will show up. This has happened to me numerous times where I waste gas driving to the destination. only to get a canceled ride. You do get compensated by Lyft but getting three to five dollars for a twenty-minute drive is not worth it. That's gas right there. Let's say the person is there. You let them in your car only to see their destination is less than three minutes away. I wasted more gas for that one ride than what I made for the ride. It's a gamble sometimes.

In another interview from the article, Irene, a 25-year-old driver, says that "there are better times to drive than other times, but if I woke up at four in the morning and couldn't fall back asleep, I could go drive" (388). This has happened to me on numerous occasions. Random times in the night when I'm bored, and I can't fall asleep I'll just turn on the app and get a ride notification within minutes. You never know what you'll get. The excitement and mystery can be fun. You get a sense of freedom and escape while out on the road in the middle of the night. Most of the time there are no cars on the road besides you and the cops. At times it feels like being a Lyft driver is like being a volunteer police officer. As a driver, you'll be doing work the cops refuse to do, such as taking drunk people home and having to drive people home who may have just been arrested. I remember picking up a man out of the middle of nowhere in Alton, Texas. The drive to pick up the man took about twenty minutes. Once I got there, I saw a bunch of red and blue lights. I was blinded by them and knew something was off. A police officer approached me and asked me to take a man they had in custody straight home. The guy I picked up was handcuffed for assaulting a neighbor for hitting on his sister. This man made me feel uncomfortable and unsafe in my car. He would get close to me when speaking and was very loud. I felt obligated to take this job since the police asked me to take him home. I felt like I was

being a good citizen. It turns out that this man had just beat up another man, and now he is sitting in the backseat of my car. I don't know why the cops didn't take him home, but I did. The man thanked me for picking him up. He said he'd get locked up in jail if he didn't get a ride in thirty minutes. I guess the cops thought no one was crazy enough to drive out there. Well, they thought wrong. He told me the story of how he was on a date earlier that day and went bar hopping with his date. She couldn't keep up with him when it came to drinking and puked on the pavement outside a bar. He dumped her there because she couldn't hold her alcohol. He later got a Lyft to his sister's house where the assault happened. The man initially promised me a good tip but ended up proclaiming he had forgotten his wallet at his sister's house. I totally miscalculated this man's intentions. I took it as a lesson learned and kept on driving.

Every night I turn on that app. I don't know what or who to expect. You meet interesting people who share interesting stories. I always tell passengers "It's not like we're ever going to see each other again." It's partially true. To this day, I've only seen less than a handful of the same passengers I've previously picked up.

In a *Washington Post* article, "Uber and Lyft want to keep cars driving after curfew, but it's complicated" by Faiz Siddiqui, he explains how some states in the U.S. shutdown ride sharing services such as Lyft and Uber. "Shutting down our platform is a major decision that can leave people stranded." This is true since people need a ride to and from work. Some people don't have a vehicle and have been relying on ride share services. Siddiqui brings up Lyft spokeswoman, Alexandra LaManna, who said, "this is why we are remaining operational during curfews in regions where we haven't been explicitly required to stop operating." In other words, you'll be able to work for Lyft during curfew, but only to pick up people from work and to take them home, no other favors.



In the first summer of Covid-19 there was a big Black Lives Matter protest triggered by the death of George Floyd. Alongside the protestors there were looters who took advantage of the situation and swarmed to the streets. A mass chaos ensued. Siddiqui references Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York, mentioning to CNN the city's decision to suspend Lyft during curfew hours. "The decision was made because "looters were using them," although the city has not backed up the claim. In San Francisco and Oakland, California., the companies said city officials asked Uber and Lyft to suspend service." I never picked up any looters in Texas, since the protests in the Valley were small and orderly. I never thought of the possibility of a Lyft driver picking up a looter during this historic moment in time. I thought it only happened in movies. During this turbulent time, I was driving every night, but never had to deal with this situation here in the Rio Grande Valley. The curfew mandate was not followed by many people in the Valley. The nights were not busy as they were before Covid-19, the streets and cities looked abandoned and dead. Everyone I picked up was grateful for my assistance due to the low availability of drivers at this time. I took a great risk every night I stepped into my car. I had to deal with passengers who refused to wear a mask. And some passengers who told me that they had covid previously. I was constantly sanitizing and washing my car. Every time I went home, I was scared that I was exposing my mother and sister to the virus. My strong desire to want to belong to someone conflicted me even more due to the lockdown. I felt isolated and alone. For a while I followed the lockdown guidelines, but eventually I felt the need to interact and feel connected with somebody. This probably fueled my level of risk-taking, and I'm fortunate nothing seriously dangerous happened to me during this time.

The pandemic was causing me a lot of anxiety and it also affected my job with Lyft. At first, I wasn't sure with the idea of exposing myself to strangers, but I risked it because I needed

the money. Even though Lyft claimed they would make it safe for drivers, but in reality, they only did the minimum to protect us. In the article, “Impact of COVID-19 on Travel Behavior and Shared Mobility Systems”, Nikhil Menon, Yaye Keita, and Robert L. Bertini, point out the effects of Covid-19 towards Lyft transportation. The article states that, Lyft has distributed over 160,000 sanitizing products and face coverings at no cost to drivers. The company also plans to spend \$2.5 million in supplies (e.g., masks, bottles of hand sanitizer, wipes) for drivers” (36). During the summer of 2020 on the day of my birthday, July 8th, I received a package. The box said “fragile” on it. At first, I thought it was a gift from a secret admirer. Sadly, once I opened it, I was disappointed by the sight of a miniature hand sanitizer and a black face mask that looked like it was cut out of one of Madonna’s iconic cone bras. All my passengers would comment about my bra mask. I’d just giggle and keep driving. This was the only thing Lyft has ever sent me. I felt cheated, but it was all that I had to make money. I wished they would of provided us with screens, Lysol spray, a box of masks and more hand sanitizer. I had to purchase these items on my own. I did not want to get the virus and spread it to other passengers and my family. The article lists the new guidelines Lyft has made for drivers during the pandemic:

“•Drivers and riders stay home if they have COVID 19 or related symptoms.

•Drivers and riders wear a face covering.

•Drivers keep the car and their hands sanitized at all times.

•Riders sit only in the back seat.

•Drivers keep the car windows open for better air circulation” (36).

Despite these guidelines, the passengers did not take them seriously. Half the time passengers failed to bring a mask and I had to provide one of my own. After I would drop them

off, they would just leave the mask on the seat. This caused me great frustration, but I kept going. Passengers also hated how I would roll down the windows to circulate the air. They told me it was too hot inside the car while others thought it wasn't necessary. I spent lots of time arguing and explaining the guidelines to the passengers.

In the article "The Hero's Journey: A Mudmap for Change", Clive Williams brings up how a Hero's Journey can involve trauma and or grief. Williams states that, "Whether intentional or unintentional, the Call to Adventure separates the person from all or aspect of their previous life and this Separation is characterized by grief and anxiety" (528). In my case, the Call to Adventure was unintentional. The death of loved ones triggered this. I failed to accept the fact that my father died, by repressing my feelings, but it was hard to avoid when my grandmother passed away. He calls the hero a client-hero in the article since the clients are seeking therapy. Williams further elaborated on his concept by stating that, "unintentional calls may include the discovery of infidelity, the death of a loved one, the diagnosis of an illness, or the unwanted ending of a relationship." (527-528). He refers to the unintentional call as the refusal stage:

"Traumatized clients can often attribute blame to another person, or organization. Their adoption however of avoidant behaviors (withdrawal, numbing, control) will overtime lead to increasing isolation, difficulty managing a range of emotions they would rather deny and increasing tensions in significant relationships" (528).

In my writings I use the loss of loved ones as a motif. In some stories I lose someone important to me, which leaves me with the pain of learning how to cope and deal with the grief. I found this similar to how Williams explained the unintentional call to adventure.

Being a Lyft driver was my call to adventure. It made me feel like a hero because of all the people I helped. Not many people are willing to work late hours of the night and drive long distances. I did it since I had a financial need, and once I started seeing how grateful my passengers were after giving them a ride, it fueled my desire to help people in need. It didn't matter to me if I took a risk, I just wanted to do the right thing.

The death of my father was what triggered my call to adventure. I had all these new responsibilities and pressure of trying to be the man of the house. At first, I didn't want to do it. I made a lot of mistakes in my stories, and I had many temptations. I tried to fill the emptiness I had after my dad died. I tried many things and had many vices in hopes of replacing that emptiness. But each attempt gave me only temporary relief. My primary goal was to be able to live my life successfully and to sustain myself. To be able to live on my own and not have to depend on anybody. The loss of my grandmother opened my eyes. It made me realize how much I loved my mom and how difficult it is when a person loses their mother. My grandmother was like a second mother to me; she took care of me because my mother and father had to work. Her death is what propelled me to have a healthy, successful life. I did not want to let my grandmother or dad down because of all they had done for me. In many of my stories, I'm searching for love. Success to me was finding my significant other, my soul mate and starting a family. But I wasn't enjoying what I had, it wasn't till I was writing that I realized that I already have a family that I love. I need to just be happy with what I have. At the time I didn't value the relationship with my dad.

I changed the names of many people to protect the privacy of friends and relatives. I also changed the name of some locations to protect the privacy of people. I wrote how I remembered things. Everything in this story is true as I remember.

After much introspection, I came to the realization that I was learning how to deal with the loss of my father. These challenges made me make decisions, which may not have been the best, but it was the best I could do at the time. The situations we faced together as a one-parent family stemmed from these circumstances. I drew inspiration from my mother and how she coped with the losses of our family. And now watching her being successful, working as an educator, despite it all, gives me hope. I can also be triumphant and make my way in the world. All these experiences have come full circle for me and now I can “connect the dots” as Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer and Pixar Animation Studios, stated so eloquently in the text of his Commencement Speech for Stanford University. I now have the will to move forward, to leave the past behind, and strive for a better future. I attend to publish my work and I look forward to incorporating hybrid genre into my writings. I can see my work being used in a classroom where students are encouraged to experiment with different forms and genres.

## CHAPTER II

### RED CIGARETTES AND ALCOHOL

Looking back now, I never experienced tragedy up until that day. Back in my Junior year my parents' relationship diminished day by day, arguing left and right. Seeing my mom's tears became routine. Yes, everybody has dealt with family issues, but what made mine different? I still remember what happened in that mournful month of March 2005. The last newspaper my dad read still collected dust in that bathroom cabinet. We left it there as a remembrance of him. It read March 25th...that's all I recalled. We had just moved into a brand-new apartment at Keystone, and already the toilet seat had been broken by my dad. After living there for five years, no one ever bothered to fix the seat. My mom treasures any memory my dad left behind. She keeps them alive to this day. By now you have enough clues to guess what happened...my dad passed away that month.

Excited with the arrival of Spring Break back in the year 2006, and the luxury of having no school for a week, I thought nothing of the horrors that waited for me with each passing day. My parents conducted their weekly ritual, arguing over adult problems I could not comprehend at the time, never getting behind schedule. The excessive drinking and smoking habits my dad possessed seemed to leave my mom in denial, perhaps as a coping mechanism, blurring the image of what she once loved and cherished.

I spent the first day of my break at home, anxiously preparing the list of exciting things I wanted to do, such as meeting up with the girl I had a crush on.

Already three forty-ounce bottles in the trash, and my dad was already under a spell of alcoholic rage. He only drank Budweiser, a professional binge drinker from what I remember.

The ashtray smothered itself with Marlboro Reds, each stealing a day off his life. Right on cue, and right on began to bicker with the smell of alcohol and cigarettes. It drenched the living room leaving foul smells of old, moist water and the odor of a smoke- filled bar. I am surprised the management never ID'd me when walking into the apartment. After all those years of being around it, I was lucky I did not catch any lung diseases. Lady Luck must have been on my side. I heard the arguing in my room, lowered the TV, and immersed myself into their usual dialogue. My mom insisted that he stop drinking, claiming to take him to a zoo, in order to contain him. He was hairy like a lion. A self- proclaimed king among men. Both eyes fixed on his prey, staring right at my mom, he threw the half empty bottle at the wall, pieces of glass flew in every direction leaving the floor a place of pure hazard. The floor covered itself in poisoned glass shards, making every step a death trap. Within seconds my dad slapped my mom, not only breaking glass, but breaking her into tears. Who in their right mind hits an innocent person? My dad did, a man drunken with rage. No amount of sorry's saved him. She called him a monster and kicked him out of the house. He disappeared leaving behind the foul aroma of the fight. Half-past midnight, day one of my Spring Break complete...six more to go.

Earlier the previous week, I had asked Erica out to the Mercedes Livestock Show. We planned to get a bite after getting on all the rides, a typical date for teenagers. The day we planned to meet, which was a Wednesday, ended up being a mess. I danced with her at my cousin's Quinceanera, stepping on her feet more times than I can remember. I never forgot her blue starry eyes; I fell for her along with the stars. I later found out Erica wore colored contacts, shattering my dreamy blue starry- eyed girl. My cousin tried to set up Erica and me countless

times, but my shyness always got the best of me. She eventually got a boyfriend, and it felt like a punch in the heart. A fight that left me without a black eye, but a broken heart. Tuesday during my break, I escaped the trauma from the smoke-filled apartment and spent it at my cousin's house. I didn't have internet at home, so I enjoyed using theirs. My cousins even let me download songs illegally. System of a Down, The Red-Hot Chili Peppers, Weezer, and The Killers each added to my library of songs. My cousin, Jimmy looked the other way while I used their internet, but still managed to recite the many laws I broke under his breath. In some way, shape or form, my dad's menacing habits planted their roots into the choices I made. I fell prey to the sins of my father. We ordered pepperoni pizza and ate to our heart's content, I even ended up having a beer belly just like my dad after demolishing four slices. After many rounds of Mario Kart, the Sandman failed to do his job, leaving my cousin tired, but wide awake. Later that night, I became a ghost leaving all my attempts at reaching Erica unnoticed. My existence left her mind, possibly finding someone else to go out with instead.

I still held onto hope the next day, looking on the bright side of things. The sound of the telephone made my heart jump, thinking Erica had called me. I let the phone ring four to six times before I answered, playing smooth and not excited. Once I heard his voice, my voice succumbed with disappointment, crushing all his hopes in seeing me. I told him I planned to go on a date with a girl and did not want to cancel. The man on the phone differed from the lion that slaps his prey, carrying a soft friendly voice, with much to say. I heard no roars, but pleas of him wanting to see me. Frustrated with his voice, I hung up the phone. Possibly the biggest mistake I ever made.

Have you ever wanted to go back in time and fix a mistake you made? Someone help me build a time machine where I go slap myself in the face, preventing the hang-up. Well after that,



I stayed in my bed waiting, looking at the ceiling fan spin in circles, following each blade with one eye. It felt like I slowed down and stopped time, since Erica never called me. I still wonder why I never called her myself, maybe she waited for me to call. My Aunt later called asking if I wanted to go to the Livestock show before it closed with my cousins. I agreed and left my hope at home, suppressing any sign of rejection I felt. Many long lines later, the stock show did it's job and made my night fun with screams and cotton candy. I got back to my cousins' house past midnight and passed out with Erika still on my mind.

I woke up the next day, feeling just like any other day, and went back to downloading music for my iPod shuffle. My Aunt walked in and told me to go with her somewhere without explaining our destination. We got in her black Escalade and arrived at the Edinburg hospital. I thought grandma got sick again, I already dreaded the visit, time stands still once in the hospital. Minutes turn to hours, the cold temperature inside sends shivers down every bone. White everywhere, I close my eyes and picture a bright white light when thinking of a hospital. The nurse directed my aunt and me to a room in the ICU, where I saw my mom. I saw my dad's lifeless body with no signs of alcohol or smoke on him. Again, my mom was stricken with tears. Even dead, my dad still made her cry. I felt not one shred of sadness or feelings of loss with the spectacle before me. At the time, I felt like asking to borrow some of my mom or aunt's tears to fit in. The nurse told me he died of a heart attack at his parents' house. Not a very bright nurse since my dad died in ICU. Both my aunt and Mom thought the corpse left me speechless, showing me the way out of the room. I told my mom the story about the phone call from the previous day, leaving me with deja vu, she yelled and slapped me. "Why didn't you tell me, how could you do this to me." Once again, my mom filled with tears, questioning my lack of emotion. Did he die because of me? I wish to ask him, but he's not here anymore. My mom kept the

clothes he last wore in a hospital bag, white socks, a Dallas Cowboys cap, a plain blue tee, and his dirty underwear. Today the bag lives in a drawer in her room. I sometimes open it and remember my dad's bad sense of style.

Fast Forward to the rosary, where family members filled the funeral home. Each one hated my father. Their presence angered me, and I believed not one voice of apology. Stuck in a church with a bunch of liars, who probably jumped at the chance of my dad's death. They each gave my mom a living hell for loving him, each masking their true intentions with lies. It ended up being a masquerade not a rosary. Fake tears everywhere, possibly tears of joy from my aunts, uncles, and my mom's parents. I did not want to be there with all those liars, yet they faked crying better than me.

At the end of the service, my dad and I stayed in the room. An open coffin, his presence again not smelling of cigarettes or alcohol. I walked towards it and refused to look at him, treasuring the memories of him being alive. Why look at a lifeless body? With chances of tarnishing an image filled with life. My dad's father lay his hand on my shoulder telling me to "look at your father one last time." I reluctantly turned to the coffin and saw a white body. His face was empty of emotion, like father, like son. We both carry the same name and birthday. Dressed all in white, the once proud lion taken down. Put up to display for the enjoyment of my family. His beard shaved off, showing signs of old age and being dead for two days. The king dethroned with me next in line, covered in flowers and pictures of my mom, sisters, and me.

To this day I still have no recollection of my dad smiling, just a lifeless shaved face. To this day I still don't know the exact details surrounding his death. All I know is he was found dead at his parents' house. The once proud lion got taken down with no roar or fight. I wish I could have been there to save him. The presence of the hospital crept up on me, with seconds

feeling like minutes, and a cold chilling air filling the room. I turned away and saw my dad's parents and mom crying, the raining of tears mixed with strong winds made the night into a terrible storm. I still showed no tears for my dad's passing, I think about him every day. My mom confronts and cries to me occasionally, saying she misses him. Several times I met him in my dreams, where instead of dying, he went missing. In these dreams he smells of alcohol and cigarettes wearing his bushy beard proudly. He asked for cremation instead of a funeral, my dad very well knew all the family hated him and refused for those people to see him buried. His parents followed his wishes, and still keep the ashes in their house. I visit them and still feel my dad's presence in their house. I sleep in his room sometimes, pictures of me and my sisters surround his bed. Pictures of us all going to Fiesta Texas and SeaWorld, each bearing real smiles. My grandparents say I look, and smile like him. I plan to carry on his name and his smile, not making the same mistakes he did.

The memories I have for my father shaped who I am today. I still remember my sixth Christmas, for that whole year I begged and pleaded for a Nintendo 64 from Santa Claus. I asked my parents for Mario Kart 64. I even had it on my list for Santa. My mom did not know what it was or where to find it. My dad convinced my mom with his boyish charm, a skill he perfected while winning her heart. He just wanted me to have all the things he did not have as a child. I woke up Christmas morning to find no presents under the tree, only presents for my baby sisters. I recall looking at the direction of the T.V to find Mario Kart being held and displayed by a Barbie toy couch, which came from my sister's Barbie Dreamhouse. I looked confused since I did not see a Nintendo 64 anywhere. My dad had ordered me to go to the backroom to get something. I fail to recall what he asked me to get, but I found a brand-new Nintendo 64 unwrapped. I never forgot how happy and grateful I was, it meant so much to me. This became

the most unforgettable Christmas thanks to my dad. I hope to have an impact on my child's Christmas if I ever have any kids down the line.

I still wonder why I shed no tears for his death. I didn't even tell my friends. I think of him and smile, I remember the good times, not the bad. Maybe one day, I'll be stricken with tragedy, sick and helpless like my mom. Shortly before his death, he left a kitty that was born at his house, for my sisters and me to raise. We took care of the cat and fell deeply in love with him. We named him Tutu, after my mom saw an anime with my sister called, "Princess Tutu". My dad left a small piece of him with us. It stayed with us because of Tutu. At fifteen, I did not know how to cope with death or dating. Let me turn back time and accept my father's phone invitation, possibly preventing his death. I am left with the thought of me hanging up on him causing his heart attack. Forever inflicted with rejection and heartache from my mom and me. Neither the ambulance nor I made it on time to save him. Time is of the essence, treasure it, and enjoy spending time with the people you love. Waste time like me and end up emotionless with dry eyes. It was Friday of my spring break. And I had two days left without a date and without a dad.

Recently, my mom showed me a video from her phone. She came across an untitled video of our cat Tutu's last moments. It was the final gift we got from my dad. On the last day of December 2019, Tutu died. His death destroyed my family. We all cried and stayed by his side till his death. Tutu always had problems with his kidneys and eventually the pain was just too much for him. Tutu had a smoky fur coat. His fur was so fluffy. And he had the prettiest tail. During his last moments we had placed him on one of his blankets. His heavy breathing masked the sound of our tears. This happened at the worst time. My sisters and I had no idea what to do. Nothing opened till the morning. We had no place to take Tutu. Good luck trying to find a

veterinarian at 2 AM. Tutu had his mouth opened and his teeth reminded of a saber tooth tiger. He had two sharp fangs on the top and bottom of his mouth. The breathing suddenly stopped. The time came for Tututito Chiquito to pass on. Even after his death, the memories Tutu gave me, and my sisters still live on. Even though my dad had already died, his legacy will always live within my family.

## CHAPTER III

### SIR BOUNCE A LOT

A significant event occurred several years after my dad's death. It happened while my mom was coping with the loss of my father and the demands of being a single parent. This was the turning point that helped me realize I needed to help my family more and stand up for them in every way.

There is no shame in cursing a certain man. I despise him more than math. I would even resort to being friends with any number or equation so I can count the number of times I have told myself I hate him. Juan, or Jose? I am not entirely sure of his name. I avoided eye contact with him because looking at him strained my eye. He is such an eyesore, such a waste of time. He is a large, bouncy man, who sweats uncontrollably. His sweat-stained clothes hang on his skin like dish rags. Every step he makes puts a tremor on the Earth he walks on. Trees shake, and yes, his stomach jiggles some more. He tries to hide his hideous face with sunglasses and a boring Houston Astros baseball cap. A sweaty piney stench reeks from his mouth that makes you hold your breath. It's like a special concoction, cologne mixed with his foul body odor. His two front yellow teeth remind me of a rat, and at times I am tempted to put up a mousetrap with cheese to catch him. I wish to knock out his teeth and put them under some kids' pillows for the tooth fairy.

After the death of my father, my mom stayed without a man in her life for over a decade. This all changed when she met our palm tree cutter. I would never get around to doing the yard

work, so she needed someone to keep the yard nice. I guess their relationship is partly my fault, since I am lazy and rarely even took out the trash. Who in their right mind cuts palm tree hedges for a living? Supposedly an engineer, this man's bright future came to an end once at the Falfurrias checkpoint. The Border Patrol at the checkpoint pulled him over for an attempt at smuggling drugs. Normally I despise authorities and their views on narcotics, but in this story, we have an exception. I am not sure of what drugs they caught him with, but the thought of him behind bars for a long time puts a smile on my face.

One evening alone at my house I lay on the couch with the silence soothing to my ears. I turned on the T.V. and started to listen to Queen. I put "Bohemian Rhapsody" on repeat and banged my hair to catchy guitar parts. My time with Queen ended with what seemed like tremors of an earthquake, and to my disappointment, Juan walked in with my mom. The chairs and dishes in the kitchen shook while he walked to the kitchen table. I felt the couch vibrate with every footstep he made, the tiles on the floor started getting crushed by his enormous feet. I imagined the first words to come out of his mouth as "Fee-Fi-fo-fum". Sadly, I had no beanstalk to chop down, in hopes to end Jose's constant visits. He hoped to use my family's T.V. to watch the football game. The Dallas Cowboys were playing against the Patriots. Football never caught my interest, and neither did Juan using the television. Freddie Mercury's voice now tainted by Mr. Bouncy man's squeaky voice which ruined my favorite song. The kitchen and living room ended up smelling like cheap beer and sweat. If I said it smelled like a bar, that would be a compliment. No man carries the smell of disgust and sweat like my mom's friend. No bar carried the cheap beer my mom bought for him. My mom then walked in with the look of shame covering her face, knowing she did wrong in bringing that natural disaster to our house. She always did this when I would not cut the grass. I always told her, "I'll do it tomorrow", or

“it’s too hot outside.” Those two excuses usually worked, until her friend butted in and used my excuses to his advantage. Of course, my mom was blinded by loneliness and desperately seeking attention from a man her age. She fell for Mr. Bouncy.

I refused to let him use the T.V and looked at my mom with disappointment while covering my nose.

“Mom, tell your guy friend to watch it at his house”. I protested.

“Danny, let him use the T.V. He’s tired from a long day of cutting yards.”

“Does that mean he has to smell like alcohol? He reeks of sweat, too.”

“Danny, at least he cuts our yard.”

Of course, she took Mr. Bouncy’s side; it’s two against one, and I had no chance of winning this argument. I never cut the grass; so, she had no reason to side with me.

“I’m not leaving this spot. I had a long day too. Mom, your friend is taking up too much space in the kitchen, and I’m starting to feel claustrophobic from sitting on the couch. It smells like a sweaty pine tree in a bar.”

“Respect Juan. He goes out of his way to cut our grass since you never do it.” The least you can do is help around the house.”

I rested on the couch about ten feet away from where both my mom and Jose sat at the kitchen table. I completely ignored her orders. They slid past both my ears and fell to the floor. This of course upset him, which gave me slight pleasure.

“Delia, this is your house and your television. Tell Danny to let me watch the game.”

His annoying voice carried a lisp, possibly due to his teeth. I asked the bouncy man to keep his voice down. He left me deaf to the T.V. My mom then tried to convince Mr. Bouncy to go watch a movie at the theater with her.



“Let’s go watch “Sinister”, Juanito. I hear it’s scary. Danny doesn’t seem like he’s going to move.”

“No! Tell Danny to leave. Speak some sense into him before I beat some sense into him,” replied Mr. Bouncy.

Again, I purposely aggravated him some more by continuing to talk back. He asked my mom for me to show some respect and manners. She avoided the question and continued talking to him about his brother, or something boring like that. I decided to turn on my PlayStation 2 and play “Final Fantasy X,” in hopes Juan would leave. The sun went to sleep while this man stayed awake, still in the house delaying his leave. My mom kept dozing off and on while he talked to her. It was just a bunch of meaningless chatter and a totally wasted evening. I then got up and walked towards the kitchen table and gave Mr. Bouncy a taste of my mind.

“Alright, don’t you think it’s time for you to leave? You have overstayed your welcome, and your presence is starting to suffocate me.”

“Oh, what gives you the reason to say that? This ain’t your house, you little bitch.” Mr. Bouncy’s eyes looked serious with a trembling rage.

Juan did not take it smoothly and got up from the table. We both stared at each other eye to eye, the silence I yearned for earlier infested the house. The tremor of Jose getting up popped my mom’s sleep bubble.

“What are you going to do about it, Danny?”

My mom got up and told Juan to calm down and to just leave. Well, that had no effect on him.

Again, he said, “What are you going to do about it, dude?”

I stared directly at him, with the thought of punching this jerk right in the face. I know my mom didn't want him at the house anymore either. My mom yelled at me to stop, but that man had broken the off switch on me. I gave off the impression that I wanted to fight him and clenched my fist. Juan saw this signal and accepted my gesture. Again, I heard, "Stop!" My mom threw herself at Juan. He then pushed her off him, causing her to fall on the floor. The floor did not shake, but instead she stained the floor with blood. It looked like red graffiti made by a child using finger paints. I saw my mom on the floor, and went up to the man, where he yelled, "do it!"

How dare this man push my mom to the floor. I thought whatever I did at that moment carried a consequence, so it is now or never. Mr. Bouncy weighs about three hundred to four hundred pounds, so I figured punching him in the face was ineffective. Instead, I got near him and kicked him straight in the balls. It sounded like a great idea at the time, my foot bounced off the man's belly, which protected his crotch. I miscalculated and did not realize the enormous size of Mr. Bouncy's stomach. A man does not have any balls if they hurt an innocent person, and this man did not have balls, so kicking him there caused no effect. This action gave him a huge smile, showing his two front yellow teeth resembling the maniacal clown from Stephen King's *It*.

"He hit me, Delia. I now have a right to beat his small ass".

"No, Juan, don't! He didn't mean it; you're not even hurt!"

He went up to me and swung a punch at my face. He punched the glasses off me. At that point I heard a horrible screech from my mom, "Please Stop, Jose!" Well, I did not expect him to punch me, and to continue punching me after. At that moment, I forgot the feeling of pain. His fists on my face felt normal. I began to laugh since I felt more pain from doing a burpee than

getting punched by him. His fists felt like taking a shot of Jack Daniel's Whiskey. It woke me up. His fury of punches pushed me from the living room to the kitchen to where my mom laid on the floor.

"I bet my mom punches harder than you," I said in a fit of anger.

"Oh, how do you like it now Danny? You worthless piece of shit, I'll make sure you never talk back to me again", said Juan.

I jumped on the man in hopes of bringing him down. His rancid, putrid smell, that reminded me of rotten eggs, almost made me fall as well. The man made a huge THUD, making all the tile resemble a tidal wave. He stayed on the ground, while I went to pick up my mom from the floor. She bled from the back of her head thanks to the Bouncy man. The sight of blood on my mom gave me a disgusting feeling. I had never seen her like that. This all felt unreal, like some dream. Then from behind, the man punched the back of my head again, sending the glasses off my head, which I just picked up shortly after knocking him down. I fell to the ground and continued getting punched. At that moment it felt like Mr. Bouncy wanted to snap my neck. "Someone, help!" My mother yelled repeatedly hoping someone would hear her plea.

No one heard her, besides Jose and Me, which slightly embarrassed me. This is personal. I did not want anyone butting in and interrupting the conversation between Mr. Bouncy and me. Juan then started pulling my hair, I felt strands of hair being ripped out of me. This hurt more than his pathetic punches. I did not have the cushion of his fat fist against my face. After getting some hair ripped off, I went towards the kitchen table and grabbed a chair to keep him away. I felt like a lion tamer without their whip, since this stopped Mr. Bouncy's uncontrollable rage. Unfortunately, I did not own a cage big enough to contain Mr. Bouncy, and if I did, the key would be in the trash.

“Put the chair down Danny, don’t do this.”

“Leave the house, you’re stinking it up with your ugly face,” I said to Mr. Bouncy.

I put the chair down and got smacked again in the back of my head, but then I just saw black. A dirty blow by a dirty old man. The punches to my head stopped. Mr. Bouncy walked out of the house, and I locked the doors. Before locking the door, I yelled to him,

“I hope a cop finds you walking all drunk on the street! Do us all a favor and turn yourself in.”

Mr. Bouncy did not look back, he just continued to walk down the empty black road. The outside light from the neighbors’ houses lit his path into nothingness. I went back to my mom who was laying on the floor still. I helped her up from the floor and told her that Jose was gone.

“He won’t bother us anymore Mom.”

“Will you promise to cut the grass?”

“I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“You better Danny, unless you want me to find someone to cut it for us.”

I almost called the cops that night but failed to call them since I didn’t want any more drama in the house. I do not know if my mom and Mr. Bouncy still meet. I still do not cut the grass; I always put it on hold for another day. The grass somehow magically gets cut. Someone has been cutting it. I always end up finding empty beer cans in the backyard or in the garage. I know they belong to Mr. Bouncy. He loved those Natural Lights. After the incident with Mr. Bouncy, my mom has been successful at keeping us away from each other. I’m upset with the choice she made. I guess that makes us even. As of now, no earthquakes have occurred at the house.

Years later I came across a Facebook post for Weslaco Crime Stoppers. I was speaking to my mother in the living room of her house in Weslaco when I saw her looking at directly at her computer. She asked me if I knew anything about this. I had no clue. She was looking at a mugshot of Juan. He was arrested for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon

## CHAPTER IV

### DAZED AND A-MAZED

You'll never know what kind of person you'll find on a dating app. Her name's Vanessa, we had a summer fling back in 2011. I had just turned 20, she was 18, and had just graduated from high school. I found her on MyYearbook. I thought she looked cute in her profile pic, she was wearing a bikini and smiling at the beach. I saw that she liked the same music as I did, The Doors, Alesana, Chiodos and Pierce the Veil. I randomly hit her up while drunk on Vodka.

“Hey, you're very cute.”

She responded with a thank you. I replied right away and said,

“We should hang out sometime.”

“Yea, we should, but can we talk on the phone?”

“Sure,” I said.

I was hanging out with my friend during his graveyard shift at the Fairfield Inn and Suites in Weslaco. I asked him for some water, and he handed me a water bottle. He told me to chug it, and I suddenly felt a burning sensation in my throat; my tastebuds began dirty dancing. I had no idea that I had just chugged vodka, my first drunken experience. Vanessa had given me her number just after a few messages. Since all of my inhibitions had quickly vanished, I called her. She had the cutest high-pitched voice, like a mouse squeaking. She told me to take her out

since she had been trapped all day in her house. We planned a hang out and she sent me her address. The next afternoon I went to pick up Vanessa in the outskirts of Weslaco on 1015. A long country road that's usually interrupted by tractors and cows. You won't find anything out there, but taco stands and tire shops, and if you turn around you reach the border of Mexico in under five minutes, a perk of living on the tip of Texas. so close to the border.

When I arrived at her house, I saw a tiny 4'11" girl standing by a mailbox. She wore a Bob Marley T- shirt with blue short shorts. It looked like the sun had blown her thousands of intense kisses leaving her with the perfect tan. I got out of my car and opened the door for her. I heard her whisper.

“Damn, he’s actually hot.”

I got back in my car and asked her if she wanted to go to the park.

“Can we go to a park that's not in Weslaco?”

“Sure, I know of one,” I said.

“Ok, but can we get some spray paint first?” she said.

I had no idea what she had planned to do with the spray paint, but I went ahead and took her to the Walmart anyway, but I got caught up in the moment and took her anyway. We went to the Walmart in Mission and bought red and blue spray paint. That’s something normal people do, right? I had no money; my wallet hadn’t eaten for days. A hobo had more food in their stomach than my wallet. Vanessa had brought a large black Mary Poppins-like purse with her. She managed to put her phone, clothes, hair straightener and shoes in her purse. She somehow made room and put in both the red and blue cans of spray paint.

We finally made it to the nature park and not a single person was in sight. We were the only ones there; I parked my car in front of the bridge that led to the nature trail. Vanessa put the spray cans in her purse, and I told her to follow me. I held her hand and we walked under the stone bridge, we walked down the steep hill of rocks. It looked like something made by an ancient civilization, these ancient ruins looked like no one inhabited them for thousands of years. Hundreds of hieroglyphics were scribbled under the bridge. ‘Suzy hearts Robert’. ‘Lisa and James forever’. The names went on and on. She pulled out the red spray can and started shaking it. I heard the clicking from the can and she aimed it right next to “Steven loves Sharon.” She scribbled “Vanessa” with a big heart next to it, she then handed me the can and I wrote “Danny.” I threw the can on the floor, she asked if we could sit down. We sat under our graffiti. She got on top of me. Her hand held my face. I gently put my hands on her face. We made out. She started dry humping me and moaning. It sounded and felt so good. We stayed making out for about ten minutes. When the sun started setting, we decided to head back to Weslaco.

“Hey Danny, you know where Harlon Block Park is?”

“Yea, I’ve been there a couple of times.”

“Let’s go there.” she said.

“Sure thing.”

The weather in the Valley is unpredictable. One second, it’s scorching hot outside, the next minute your car is stuck in the water five feet deep. Other times it’s raining, but a couple of houses down it’s not. I always wondered if this was global warming. We even had a couple of snowy winters. Something that hadn’t happened in decades. I even heard someone was selling a Valley made snowball on eBay for a hefty price.



My car did not have a/c, so I drove with the windows down or with a blanket depending on the weather. It was raining at the park; I heard the raindrops tapping on my windows. The bright lights from the park illuminated on Vanessa. I saw raindrop shadows dripping off her body. The playgrounds were empty at the time. The yellow slide looked like a slipping slide with water running down it. The sound of crickets overpowered the rain. Everything but nature was quiet. A walking trail circled the park; I saw a couple walking their wiener dog. I parked near the exit behind an old looking tree. I think lightning had struck it. The tree looked dry and dead even though it was raining. The trunk was long and slanted It made me think of the Harlon Block picture made famous by Joe Rosenthal.

I remember going to the opening ceremony for the Harlon Block Park. This park carries a big part of Weslaco's history. My Grandpa Sanchez used to tell me stories about people from Weslaco, he included these same stories in his books. In one of my grandfather's books, "*VIPs of the Barrio*", he tells the story of Harlon Block, a young man, who enlisted in the Marines with seven Weslaco High classmates. According to the book, he was in the football team, and known to be shy and dependable to others. Three hundred and forty soldiers were killed in action in WWII from the Rio Grande Valley; Block was one of these soldiers. At Iwo Jima, a 96x56 flag was raised by six brave soldiers, one of them being Corporal Harlon Block. The flag was carried by these soldiers a hundred and fifty feet up rocky slopes. There was another flag raised before, but it had already been lowered by the time another photographer was going to take a picture. Block and the other soldiers somehow managed to make a bigger flag than the previous one. My grandpa refers to this picture as the most famous photograph ever taken. Just thinking about this makes me feel proud to be part of something so big in Weslaco.

Vanessa unbuckled her seatbelt and I followed right after her. She then told me a little about herself.

“There’s something you gotta know about me. I do what I want. I won't take shit from anyone. I'm gonna just be me. No one's bitch ass will get in the way of me.”

I tried not to laugh. I had an idealized image of who she was, but I was wrong. She sounded very ghetto from what she had just said. I had never met this type of a girl and she took me by surprise. She then started telling me about how she got high off dusters with one of her girlfriends. She blacked out and woke up next to the girl with no clothes on. She told me some guys dared her to do it. And yes, the guys were there when she blacked out.

I asked her if she wanted to go to the back seat. “Light my fire” by The Doors was playing in the background from my cheap mp3 player. The good version with the five-minute keyboard solo. I pulled up the two front windows to stop the rain from getting in my car.

“It’s hot,” she said.

In the back seat of my car Hell’s fire started playing tricks on me, Vanessa took off her shirt. I got hard in my pants and my heartbeat even harder. Vanessa looked into my eyes with a sad face.

“You're gonna hate me.”

“That's impossible,” I said

“I didn't think you'd be this cool.”

Vanessa started to cry. Ugh it's getting so hot. Is it OK if I take off my bra?

“Oh it's... Ok,” I said.

Vanessa unhooked her bra.

“There's something I need to tell you. I was so stupid. My boyfriend and I were drinking.”

“...Your boyfriend?”

“We were so fucking drunk”

“What happened?” I said.

“I'm pregnant.”

She threw herself onto me. I felt her skin pressing against mine. Her breasts fell on my chest. She breathed on my face three times. I felt her tears and sweat drip down my body. She baptized me and her unborn baby that night.

“It's horrible, Danny.”

I held her tight and told her to tell me everything.

“He beats me and locks me up in the closet. I don't wanna go back, Danny.”

“Stay with me here. I'll take care of you,” I said.

“I'm going to Austin to live with my sister and her boyfriend,” she said.

“How did you get out of his closet?”

“Andrew's mother let me out and let me leave. I walked to my mom's place.”

She said that her boyfriend always ignored her and left to go party with other girls. She found that unfair since she did nothing behind his back. Well, until she got the dating app.

Vanessa told me her mother had a lot of boyfriends. She told me that a handful of them tried to sexually harass her. Even her own father tried to have his way with her. I felt so bad for her. So much drama was forcing its way into my head. I didn't know what to do besides hold her. Yes, we barely knew each other, but it felt like I could help her. I was doing nothing with my life at that time, I had no job; I dropped out of school. Taking care of this beautiful girl sounded like the perfect idea at the time. I doubt she did this on every date.

“I'll get a job and you can live with me. It's not like I'll do this for anyone. You're different. You don't have to go back to that wife beater. I'd do anything for you.

“Danny, you talk too much.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Hey, I know of a place where we can go. Have you ever been to the Water Gardens?” she said.

“I've never heard of it.”

“Let's go.”

Vanessa wiped off her tears, put her clothes back on. She asked me to just follow her once we got there.

Around midnight, I parked my car at Valley-Ho Motel. Yes, that's its name. The motel is right in front of a tire shop called Mota's Garage on Old 83, an old beaten-up place with workers that can only speak in Spanish. We walked to the Water Gardens. It's behind Weslaco East High School. I couldn't believe the entrance was just open like that. We literally walked in with no

trouble at all. No need to climb a fence or pick a lock. I turned on my phone's flashlight.

Vanessa walked past me. I heard her say,

“Just follow me.”

“Hey, this place is so cool. Who would have known a place like this was next to my old high school?”

“You like talking don't you, Danny?”

I could tell she had been there before. The trees looked like they were copied and pasted across the garden. I heard the wind chimes in every direction. They were hung on a bunch of the trees. All the clanking sounds slowly hypnotized me as I followed Vanessa. The wind chimes were whispered secrets to each other. They knew something I didn't. It felt like we were trapped in a maze. At times the wind howled so loud it made me think a Minotaur was hidden somewhere in the Water Garden maze. I also heard water flowing down and hitting a trail of rocks. It sounded like a rippling stream you could drink from. The water flowed across the whole garden. The trail of rocks split the garden in half.

We passed by a white house. We walked towards a window and peeked inside. All the lights were off so we couldn't see a damn thing. I turned to Vanessa.

“Hey, you think anyone is sleeping in that house?”

“Danny, let's break in and find out.”

“Ha, maybe they have a bed we can use.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she said.

We walked to the front door. I tried to turn the doorknob, but it was locked. Vanessa picked up one of the rocks on the trail and aimed it at a window.

“I found the key to the window. Cover your ears,” she said.

“How ‘bout you put that down?”

Vanessa put the rock down, kissed me on the cheek and took the lead.

We continued walking for about five more minutes. We stopped in front of some tall grass. She grabbed my hand and we walked into the garden; the grass went up to my chest. We kept walking till we stood in front of some bushes. Vanessa bent down and pushed them aside. I couldn't believe my eyes. A secret chill spot stood behind the bushes. It looked man made. The tree's leaves covered the ceiling, and the bushes covered the sides. The long grass on the floor was flattened like a crop circle which allowed you to sit or lie on the floor. There were left over bags of Lay's, can of sour cream Pringles, and empty beer bottles. The remnants of the garden's previous intruders.

We both laid down on the floor. She pulled out a joint. I saw a small opening at the ceiling of the tree leaves. Smoke traveled to the sky. The moon was peeking at us. She got on top of me and started ripping off my clothes. We both were butt naked in seconds then fucking. Her moaning and grunting overpowered the sound of the wind chimes. She sounded like a Siren and slowly drew me in and hypnotized me. I tried to cover her mouth while she was on top, but she took my hand off. I was under her control. I pushed her on the floor and got on top. She told me to go harder and harder. The clouds covered the moon and it got dark. I couldn't see, but I still felt Vanessa's smooth skin. I heard the howling Minotaur again. I fucked her good night. I

woke up next to her still at the Water Gardens. I looked at her and really thought I would spend the rest of my life with this girl. I dropped her off at her mom's.

For the rest of the month, we had sex daily. It didn't matter where. At the park, my room, in the back seat of my car, at the Water Gardens. She told me she was leaving at the end of July. Well, it finally got to the end of July. I tried calling her, but she never answered. I messaged her on the dating app... She never replied.

I assumed she had already left. I thought the worst. I needed something to numb the pain of losing her. I wanted to forget. She was so beautiful. I couldn't get her face out of my head.

I went to Walmart and pocketed some Mucinex. It's a sinus pill that contains a heavy dose of dextromethorphan. I just wanted to go on a trip. Time was moving too slow. I needed something to pass the time. I took four Mucinex pills and waited for them to kick in. I ended up passing out for about four hours on my bed. When I woke up, I had 20 missed calls. And 20 angry, sad texts from Vanessa. She went to my apartment before she left, but no one answered the door, or so she said. But it's too late now. She's gone. I tried calling her back, but her mom answered. I guess it wasn't her phone. I always thought of her as the one that got away.

I've had past relationships with girls where we got close, practically married. I always ended up disappearing at the end though since commitment scared me. But with Vanessa it was different. She needed me. It was the perfect reason to grow up, take care of her and have my own family.

At the time I wanted to be there for Vanessa. I felt the urge to want to protect her. After hearing that horrible story, she told me about her baby daddy. Who in their right mind would lock a person up in the closet? I wasn't there to see for myself, but I believed what Vanessa told

me. The tears from her eyes told me the same. Andrew abused and took advantage of her. For once, it felt like I had found a purpose. What would have happened if I had answered that call? We could have had a lifetime of happiness. She could have been the one.

Two years later I searched her up on Facebook. It's crazy how time flies. I regret not stealing the diamonds from her eyes. I'm pretty sure she's with another guy. I had no trouble finding her. A little girl was smiling next to her who I assumed was her daughter. I left a message for her.

"Hey, you remember me?"

She replied right away.

"How can I not forget you?"

I replied by saying,

"How have you been?"

She left me on read at 5:30 PM.

I sent her a friend request. She declined it.

Almost a decade later I went back to that exact same nature park in Mission with another girl. Let's call her Judy. I found the bridge and wanted to walk under it. Judy didn't want to go under it.

"It's too scary. I'm gonna fall."

I told her to wait on the bridge. I walked down the same steep rock hill. The ancient ruins still stood there waiting to be discovered again. The grass grew long, it made it hard to move



around. The hieroglyphics were still preserved. I stood where Vanessa and I once made out. I looked up and read on the wall, “Vanessa hearts Danny”

## CHAPTER V

### LOS TRES DEMONIOS

I woke up in the afternoon outside my yellow apartment sitting on a chair. I looked at the time and it said 1:30 P.M. I last remembered dancing at the show. I texted Santos, “what happened,” and he replied with a “I thought you were gonna die.” He panicked and did not know what to do with me or Cruz, Santos’ friend from Brownsville, after we blacked out. According to Santos, I vomited on his brand-new MacBook while he was driving me home. Then Cruz vomited and collapsed on his own front lawn.

I have known Santos for over decade, we both took college algebra together. I first met him towards the end of my senior year in high school. We both loved and competed in video game tournaments such as “Super Smash Bros Brawl.” We were extremely competitive and made new friends from all over the state. We had the same circle of friends, but I could not tolerate his drinking habits. At the time I was not accustomed to my friends’ vices like drinking and smoking, but after a couple of months of getting exposed to the college life, I became just like them.

Santos told me that he carried me to my front door and left me on a chair. He then knocked on my door and ran off.

In 2010, before turning twenty-one, I enjoyed drinking illegally. I gave birth to a drinking addiction. My friend, Danny Santos, invited me to a show in Brownsville. I agreed to

tag along with no clue of the bands performing. He promised me a night of mindless zombie drinking.

Santos picked me up from Keystone Apartments in Weslaco. We drove to Brownsville to pick up his friend, Danny Cruz. Yes, we all share the same name and go by “Los Tres Demonios.” It took us over an hour to get to where Cruz lived. We ended up at the tip of Texas with one foot in Mexico and the other in the U.S. I saw Cruz for the first time, and he wore plastic, black glasses that matched with his black jacket. I never figured out why he wore a jacket on a hot summer day. We were in the backyard of his house which looked like a forbidden forest, trees hiding and covering everything. A dangerous sense of foreboding lingered in the air. Cruz asked if we wanted to take tequila shots. I agreed and the liquor left holes in my stomach. They stung and smelled like melted cheese on tortilla chips.

Out of nowhere a mysterious looking guy with a curly brown beard and Harry Potter glasses brought four joints outside to Cruz’s backyard. He asked if we all wanted to pregame before the show. Santos warned me not to get too *papa*, or messed up. I planned to get baked instead. We all formed a circle and summoned our inner demons through a cloud of smoke. During the ritual, my eyes turned into a scarlet red, I looked like a devil worshipper with glaring red eyes. The alcohol and bud turned my senses into a fiesta. The mysterious bearded guy disappeared in the smoke, and I never saw him again. All the coughing made me feel deaf and prevented me from thinking.

Santos drove Cruz and I to a Valero convenience store near the border of Tamaulipas. Cruz bought me two fruit punch Four Lokos. He handed me a 24 oz. can and I popped it open. The moment my lips touched the Four Lokos I felt a punch in my mouth. I tasted apples mixed with pineapples and they left my taste buds as if I had two black eyes. The drink burned my nose

with its toxic contents. It smelled like Jolly Ranchers getting drunk with the stench of Grey Goose vodka on their breath. Los Tres Demonios chugged the Four Lokos at the parking lot of the gas station. My mind drowned in alcohol, and I needed mouth to mouth. All this irresponsible drinking got me frisky for a one-night stand.

Cruz and I got in the car with Santos and left the gas station. Santos somehow magically teleported us to our destination. I do not recall driving to the venue with my friends, I was just drifting around the grounds, but I do remember arriving to Galeria 409. An event center in downtown Brownsville where all the college students flock. In the parking lot Cruz busted out an eighteen pack of Budweiser. He handed me one and it felt like I had turned into my dad. I sipped on it slowly while hearing the loud banging of drums and percussion from the show. I carried the beer bottle on my left hand, and somehow a lighted cigarette ended up on my right, with the beer bottle still on my left. I drank three beers outside.

We all walked into the venue, and I saw my friend Herby in the crowd. I mumbled some drunken gibberish to him. I walked past him and swam through a sea of girls in pretty dresses. All the alcohol wiped out my memory of what the venue looked like. The current band playing finished their last song and the next one prepared to play their set. I wandered off from Cruz and Santos and the floor started to extend itself. It looked like someone grabbed the floor and stretched it. Everyone talked so loudly inside the venue, I tried to filter out their sounds. The next band started to play and a mosh pit formed. I didn't want to mosh, so I asked random girls if they wanted to dance, but it seemed as if they all declined my invitation, or so it seemed. I really can't remember all the details, just a collage of loosely connected images.

The alcohol began to take control, so I started dancing alone to some punk ska music. Santos later told me I asked every girl at the show to dance. I broke two records that night. One, I

asked more girls to dance than I had ever done before. Second, I got declined by every girl at the show. Everything was so much of a blur that I really didn't care at the time about being rejected. I was just in the moment and living it up. My memory went blank after I started dancing.

The next afternoon I woke up on a chair. A sheriff who lived next door confronted me. He asked if I liked to party. I nodded my head in agreement. The sheriff promised not to tell my mom about my exploits. I didn't want my mom to find out I was passed out drunk outside the apartment, because she would have asked me an infinite number of questions regarding what I did the previous night. Luckily, she slept in that day because it was her day off.

I didn't see Cruz again till years later when Donald Trump got elected President. I had never forgotten the craziness of that night at the Galeria 409. Despite blacking out that night and being confronted outside of my apartment by a sheriff, I avoided getting into trouble. That made me feel invincible as if I could get away with anything with no consequences, but I was wrong. Looking back, I realized so many bad things could have happened to me that night. Luckily, they did not.

One evening I was in downtown McAllen watching a friend's band perform at Yeberia Cultura. The music was loud, and the lights were flashing when suddenly I saw Cruz. He looked the same despite the years. I was eager to catch up with my friend and talk about that night at Brownsville. I had changed so much since then and had stopped drinking recklessly, and I wondered if he had, too. We talked briefly about the good old' days and shared a few laughs. He asked if I wanted to smoke later. I accepted his offer but couldn't find him after the show finished. While everyone was walking out of the venue I saw him again, but he had already smoked that joint without me.

## CHAPTER VI

### WAKE BAKE & EGGS

#### THE PROP

In the tiny little city of Weslaco, where nothing exciting ever happens, there's this place called The Prop. It's easy to miss. It's on Mile Five ½. You make your way down the road till you see a school on the left. On your right side you'll see tree branches with Nosferatu looking fingers. It's like it's almost grabbing you and guiding you into the belly of the beast. Drive down the path and ignore the scraping from the fingerlike branches. After you pass an abandoned portable classroom on the right, park your car. The trees cast invisible shadows hiding your cars in this cop free zone. This made it a very

desirable location for my friends and I and our crazy ways. I remember stepping out of my car and smelling the dirty water from the canal and the lingering odor from old beer cans.

I first found out about this place after getting a phone call from Santos shortly after forming Los Demonios.

“Hello?”

“Hey Danny, have you been to The Prop yet?” said Santos.

“What's up cuz. No, I've never heard of it.”

“Alright, you're riding with me, Los Demonios are getting drunk with the Devil tonight.”

Sounds like a plan, let me know when you're on your way to pick me up.”

Los Demonios are a group of friends who used to get fucked up for no apparent reason. They like drinking with the devil and doing his bidding. Santos sounded excited on the phone, he always got like that when he knew he'd get drunk. I wasn't twenty-one yet, I had just turned twenty. I had just gotten back home from T-Mobile after buying the brand-new Galaxy S. I wanted a new phone to go with the new aviator glasses my grandparents had bought me. I wanted to live that white bread lifestyle after getting a fancy looking paycheck. I worked at a Chinese restaurant, Tai Tung Express.

The staff was always rude to me. They said it was because they loved me. They yelled at me in Vietnamese. 99 percent of the time I didn't know what they said, and one percent of the time I knew I was being called a dumbass. I pretty much did everything. I cleaned the tables, the floor, the bathrooms and the dishes. I cooked the rice and prepared the crab cakes, cut the vegetables and stirred the sweet and sour sauce. I had to peel the shrimp even though I'm allergic to shrimp. Whenever I got a rash, the manager would give me ten dollars out of the register to go buy Claritin. She then had me walk across the street to Walmart. The ten dollars were always deducted from my paycheck. I would get paid under the table and not by the hour. One of the perks of working there was getting three free meals every shift. Unfortunately, I never liked the breakfast there. They had shrimp and eggs every morning. The head chef would always yell at me for not touching the breakfast. I didn't complain though. I got a free lunch and dinner. I got to try out most of the food on the menu for free. Only a few staff knew about the secret menu. It was passed down to me. My favorite item on that menu was the sweet n sour chicken with General Tso's sauce. Whenever I left work to go to class I reeked of Chinese food. The whole classroom would smell it. I ended up changing in the parking lot every time before class.

That night after the phone call, Santos had picked me up. He drove us towards the outskirts of Weslaco. I wasn't familiar with that area, and it was hard to see anything because it was dark outside. I saw an empty school to my left and then all of a sudden, Santos made a sharp turn. I heard nothing but scratching and scraping on his 2004 Mitsubishi Montero. I saw long black fingers poking at the windows. He kept driving and parked behind a tree with a white and blue striped sofa in front of it. Next to the sofa lay a stump with a chess board on it. We both stepped out of the Mitsubishi, and I took my first step on the beer cans graveyard. So many different types of beer lay dead on the floor. Budweiser, Bud light, Dos Equis, Bush, Miller. Not one had a proper burial.

“Yo, what's with all these beer cans?” I said.

“Don't ask questions Danny. They're only here for decoration.”

“So are we adding to the body count tonight?”

“Oh, Danny, I'm glad you asked.”

Santos had busted out four 24-ounce watermelon Four Lokos, and if you count us that makes six locos. A Four Loko was a beer we drank at the time. It was like a combination of malt liquor and a Monster energy drink. These drinks were so powerful that in 2010 their ingredients changed, where the caffeine, taurine and guarana had to be removed. This was just five months after I bought my new Galaxy S phone.

He handed me the beer. I put my Galaxy S in my back pocket. I cracked open the beer and had my first taste of Hell. Goodbye, white bread world. Santos cracked open his brew took a big gulp and looked at his phone.

“Cris and Mike should be getting here soon. They're bringing reinforcements,” said Santos.



I've known Cris and Mike just as long as I've known Santos. We all know each other from attending the same video game tournaments.

I was sipping on my drink until I saw a big pile of white dust, ashes and bricks across from where Santos had parked.

“Hey Santos, what’s that big pile over there?”

“So, you barely noticed Cris’ house,” Santos said.

“That doesn’t look like a house. Damn, you drunk already, or what?”

“It burned down a couple of months ago. What you see now is all that’s left.”

I walked closer to observe what used to be Cris’ old house. Almost everything turned to dust. It reminded me of Pompeii. The only survivors of this catastrophe included some books and stuffed dolls. The books looked lost in time. The fire warped them, with pages stuck together and words too melted to read. The stuffed dolls had third degree burns, some still had their hair, while others only had their heads. Nothing but death lingered in the air. I imagined all the memories that burned to death along with the house. Cris must have felt horrible. The idea of losing your house is heartbreaking. He spent almost his whole life at that house. One day it's standing and the next day it's gone. I saw lights reflecting off the broken-down walls.

I turned around and saw another car show up. Two figures stepped out of the vehicle. One held a big green ice chest, and the other was holding a 40 oz. bottle of Mickey’s Malt Liquor. It must be Cris and Mike. I saw Cris put the ice chest down and walk towards Santos.

“Hey, what’s up Santos? You didn’t tell me Danny was going to be here. Now it’s a party.”

I walked up to Cris and gave him a fist bump.

“We’re partying all night. Santos wanted to show me The Prop,” I said.

“Be honest. What do you think of my house? I recently had some renovations done,” Cris said.

“It looks like an ancient volcano erupted all over it.”

“Great. That’s just the look I was looking for. Mike probably was the one who burned it down.”

Mike walked up to me and gave me a fist bump, too. He rocked some light brown leather cowboy boots with mud smeared all over them. He sported a button up red shirt. He just needed a cowboy hat to complete the western look.

“Sup, cuz?” said Mike.

“Hey, what’s up?” I said.

“Those are some nice glasses you got there.”

“Yea, I just bought them earlier today.”

“Let me wear them,” said Mike.

“Maybe later.”

We each found a place to sit between the log and sofa. Santos and Cris gathered rocks to make a circle. Mike grabbed some wood and threw it inside the circle. He then struck a match and threw it to the circle as an offering. I could smell the wood burning and feel the smoke rubbing my eyes. I stood by the circle and saw smoke cover the sky. It felt great to be part of this group. It was important at the time for me to feel that sense of belonging. Even though I took risks and couldn’t remember a lot of stuff that happened all these choices made me feel like I was living in the moment. It was filling up some of the emptiness at the time after losing my dad and getting out of a serious relationship.

Cris got up and went to open the green ice chest.

“You guys just hit the jackpot,” said Cris.

I looked over to the chest and saw Miller High Lifes. I had barely drunk half of my watermelon drink and already felt a buzz. Mike finished his 40 oz. Mickey and got a High Life as well. Santos finished his and cracked open his second one. He took a sip and said,

“Hey guys, let's pass the pipe. You down, Danny?”

“Yea, I'm down. Let's pass the pipe.”

Cris and Mike both agreed as well.

At the time I thought Santos was talking about passing a pipe filled with marijuana. So, I unknowingly agreed. The pipe was literally a metal tube above the canal behind Cris' house. That never cross my mind. At the time I was living the moment and wanted to experience the next best thing such as cross fading, which is buzzing off alcohol and being high off marijuana.

We all walked behind the house rubble and stopped in front of the pipe. The pipe looked like a thin bridge. I only saw death under the pipe. My eyes caught a glimpse of a field across the pipe. Santos went in front of everyone and walked across the pipe with ease. The Four Loko helped him keep his balance as he crossed the pipe with the drink in his hand. Cris went right after with a Miller High Life in his hand. Mike got on all fours and crawled slowly towards the other side. I did not want to risk my life and fall to my death.

“Come on Danny! Get across the pipe!” shouted Santos.”

“I thought crossing the pipe meant we were going to smoke out of a pipe.”

“No! But we can smoke once you cross the pipe. Do it!”

“I need motavation now!”

Cris busts out his pipe and a bag of weed.

“You mean this? Come and get it.”

I did what Mike did and got on all fours and slowly crawled like a puppy to the other Demonios. I made it to the other side alive. I made it just in time to complete the new rotation the others had started. After I took a hit of the pipe, I saw searchlights shine on us. Cops must have been patrolling the field. We all panicked and scurried back to the Cris' prop.

Once on the other side I started to feel the Four Lokos creep up on me.

"Here Danny, have a High Life," Cris said.

He handed me a beer. I took a few sips and noticed a tingly feeling racing up my body. It felt relaxing. I moved my head back and felt the tingly feeling go all the way up to my neck.

"Hey Danny, let me wear your glasses," said Mike.

"Ok but be careful. I just bought them.

"Sure, sure."

We kept on smoking, and I felt the smoke hit my naked eyes. I finished my Miller High Life and went to the ice chest and opened another one. Cris had 6 already and Mike had 7. Santos just finished his 3rd High life. Cris finally got the fire to start.

"Alright Mike, give me back my glasses."

"Come and get them."

I got up and walked to where Mike stood.

"Give them to me."

"Try taking them from me."

I tried to swipe them off his face, but the alcohol caught up to me and made my movements all sluggish.

"Fight me," said Mike.

I went for a punch. Mike drunkenly dodged and I tripped and fell on my ass. I felt a strong gust of wind, howling across The Prop. The fire we stood around grew fierce.

“We have angered The Prop gods, Cuz,” said Cris.

While on the floor I looked at Cris all confused wanting him to explain. Mike told me to get up off my ass. I was at the mercy of The Prop. Its hunger grew. Its stomach growled so loud it sounded like an angry volcano erupting. I could feel something taking over my body and I couldn't control it. I didn't know whether to blame the alcohol or the mystical powers of the prop that night.

“Danny get off the floor, let us finish what we started. We must please The Prop,” said Mike.

I felt the wind scratching my face. The grass caught on fire and was burning alive. Everything around me started moving in circles. Santos helped me up and pushed me towards Mike. I attempted to throw a left hook to Mike but missed again. His alcoholic-like reflexes were too much for me to handle. I tried to push Mike towards the fire as an offering, but he weighed too much. I went for another left hook, but Mike grabbed my fist this time. He started crushing it with his hands.

“Ouch!”

Mike took off my glasses and told me to come and get them. He held out his arm. I grabbed it and finally swiped the glasses off his hand. I tried to put them on, but instead I tumbled down to the floor right next to the roaring fire. My glasses flew off my head and landed into the fire. I fell on my butt with my phone breaking my fall. This where thing started to get hazy. I heard the fire crackling as if someone's bones were being snapped. I couldn't open my eyes. I felt the fire kissing my cheek. It got very hot. I heard sinister laughter all around me. A

crazy howling like a madwoman. My heart dropped and I saw a black heel from the edge of my left eye. I guess this is the end. I gave up and drifted off to sleep.

I woke up in my bed the next day. I wanted to know the time, but I couldn't find my phone. After looking all over my room, I went to the kitchen and spotted my phone on the bar. Cracks flooded my screen. I heard my phone ring, but I couldn't answer it. Next to my phone I saw my aviator glasses broken and burned. Each lens was cracked just like my phone. The black plastic looked burnt and bent. They reminded me of Cris' house. I got on my laptop and messaged Santos on Facebook. He replied right away.

“Hey, what happened?”

“You blacked out after trying to fight Mike.”

“Who won?”

“Do I really need to answer that? Did you see your phone and glasses?”

“Yea, what happened to them.”

“You fell on your butt. You then fell asleep near the fire.”

“Oh, that sucks. That was my favorite phone.”

“Do you want breakfast? It's on me,” said Santos.

“Sure, come pick me up.”

We went to Diana's Diner that afternoon for a hangover breakfast. The best breakfast in town. It's not there anymore, it's now called Richie's. Shortly before Diana's closed my family threw a birthday party for my grandma Sanchez. At her birthday party there was a botana on every table. A botana is a platter filled with fajitas, nachos and beans.

The first thing I smelled when Santos and I walked in was the coffee and breakfast. It's my favorite thing to smell at the start of the day. The spices from the salsa tickled my nostrils. I

saw the pancakes on a customer's plate, and they looked like I could just fall asleep on them. The place was packed as usual. I'm pretty sure our waitress could smell alcohol on me. I ordered the same thing as Santos. Papas a la Mexicana with tortilla chips and a bacon and egg taco. The food arrived and it smelled so good. I made two tacos out of my breakfast. I filled them up with red salsa and refried beans. I still felt the alcohol in my body. And I couldn't get that creepy howling laughter out of my head. But all that didn't matter because right then and there we were having the breakfast of champions.

About six years later Cris' family sold The Prop. Sometimes I wish I could go back. To get back that feeling of being alive and being part of a special group. I thought I could find what made me feel alive at The Prop, and I did, but it was temporary. I want to go for the long haul and find that missing piece of the puzzle of my life. I'm still searching, and I haven't given up yet.

## CHAPTER VII

### NIGHT OF THE DANCING DEAD

I can close my eyes and still see those big bright yellow lights. We had just merged onto the highway in Weslaco near the area that would always smell like sewage. I only did this to pass the red light on Texas Blvd, I never liked driving on that busy street during the five o'clock rush hour. I considered this our city's main strip. I remember going only sixty miles mph on my Ford Escape. I got behind a vintage looking green Oldsmobile. That's when it happened. It appeared as if the Oldsmobile in front of me was driving too slow and I was driving too fast. I forcefully threw my foot on the brake. It felt like second nature to me. I don't know what I was doing, I just reacted instinctively. I immediately lost control of my car, it started to turn around. I luckily avoided incoming traffic by turning the wheel the opposite way of where it was spinning. I then heard a loud pitch scream. My little sister, Rose yelled,

“I don't wanna die, Danny!”

“We're not going to die, Rose.”

I then saw a Greyhound bus driving towards us. My car had migrated into the wrong lane. My sister's screams stabbed my ears. I could see the tears falling from her terrified eyes. Her face was left pale after getting scratched by death's dagger. I felt like a horrible brother. All that



went through my head was that I wanted nothing to happen to my little sister. I saw those big bright yellow lights stare at me. They blinded me and I saw my life flash before my eyes.

“Danny! We’re gonna die! I don’t wanna die! Someone help!”

The lights drew closer. The bus honked its horn. The bus wasn’t stopping. I couldn’t hear my sister screaming any more. The horn’s melancholy dirge grew louder and louder. All the sound and light left me stunned and in shock. The bus wasn’t stopping. I braced myself for the end. I flinched and covered my face.

“I guess this is it,” I said.

I opened my eyes and to my surprise nothing had happened. The Greyhound bus stopped right in front of my car. Both the bus and my car were inches apart. The smell of burnt rubber permeated in the air. I immediately looked over to check on my sister. She was crunched up in a ball, shaking in fear.

“Are you okay, Rose?”

“Yea, I can’t believe we’re alive. What just happened?”

My sister spoke with a congested nose from all the crying. All the food she brought for me from her friend’s BBQ spilled all over the floor. The burgers looked so good. I was looking forward to eating them once we got home. They even had bacon.

Suddenly, I heard tapping on the side of my window. I looked outside and saw a cop.

“Get out of the fucking car!”

My sister looked at me and wanted to know if we were in any trouble. I got out of my car and could smell the burning rubber on the street. I looked around and saw a huge traffic jam, black skid marks that resembled the Nazca lines covered the road. The bus ended up braking so

hard its front turned a little to the side blocking the incoming traffic. I looked at the cop who was wearing sunglasses at night.

“Do you know what you just did, son?”

“No, officer, it wasn’t my fault; it was an accident.”

“Like hell it wasn’t your fault.”

Several other cops joined their angry friend.

“What kind of shit are you on, son?”

“Nothing, officer.”

“What have you drunk tonight?”

“Nothing, officer.”

“Are you on ecstasy? Lemme see those eyes.”

“I have no drugs on me, officer.”

“We’re going to search your vehicle.”

“Go ahead,” I said.

I stood there trembling, while the cops looked through my car. My sister stayed sitting in the passenger seat. I heard her ask the officer if she was going to jail. Another one of the cops guided the cars away from the accident. I heard a bunch of honking from the cars trapped in the traffic jam. It seemed like they all aimed their angry honking towards me. It slowly, but effectively, drowned out the cops’ screaming. After the search the cops approached me.

“You are so fucking lucky. I don’t want to let you go, but you’re so fucking lucky.”

I’m sorry officer. The car was going too slow. I’ll be more careful.”

“Ugh. You better fucking be careful. We’re giving you a warning just this once, you lucky son of a bitch. Now get out here; just looking at you pisses me off.”

I got in the car and asked my sister if she was ok.

“Danny, are we going to jail?”

“No, Rose, we’re going home.”

Nothing was found in my car. The police couldn’t charge me with anything. They told me that if one car had gotten into an accident, I would have been arrested on the spot. Looking back now I realized the cops treated me unfairly. They assumed I was some low life druggy. I guess they judged me because of my youth and my long hair.

Rose’s crying stopped but my heart pounding from that experience did not. I’m still haunted by this experience. Those lights are brighter than ever. The words “so fucking lucky”, echo through my head from time to time. The sound of my sister’s screams still sends shockwaves through my body. I’m so grateful nothing happened to her. I drove home trembling in fear that October 2011 day. Not because of the accident, but because I almost lost my fifteen-year-old sister’s life.

After getting home, I got a call from my friend, Anthony, a childhood friend.

“Hey, Danny, you going to Noe’s tonight?”

“I don’t know, I’ve been through one hell of a day.”

“You should go to the party, I’m gonna DJ there.”

“Maybe.”

“Is that a yes? Cuz you gotta pick up me and David.”

“Sure,” I said.

I really did not want to go, but I needed to clear my mind from the traumatizing experience.

You may think I'm an amazing brother. I'm not. I used to be a terrible brother to my sister Rose. I'd catnap our cat Tutu and hide him in the freezer. I'd call her stupid and pull her hair. I decapitated her Barbies by pulling out their heads. I'd then hang their heads on pencils. When my mom wanted to know what my sister wanted for Christmas, I wrote a list of things I wanted instead. I said she wanted a GameCube, but deep down I knew it was for me. That Christmas morning of 04' I woke up to GameCube under the tree.

I didn't even want to pick up my sister at her friend's house that fateful night. I was so selfish just wanting to hang out with my friends. She had to bribe me with hamburgers.

Ever since my dad died back in 2006, I never wanted to lose anyone again. I took for granted his existence. And when I needed him, he was already gone. I'm not sure how it happened. He either took his life by overdosing on pills or had a heart attack. That night in front of the Greyhound bus, my sister's life was teetering between life and death. I took her life for granted too and did not realize how important she was to me until we had this near-death experience. Before, I treated her like a typical older brother would treat his little sister, maybe I overdid the big brother thing a little bit. Deep down I never meant any of the rude things I said to her and regret ever saying them.

At home she went straight to her room. After that experience on the highway, Rose did not want to be around anyone for a while. She slammed her door and dove onto her bed with only sleep on her mind. I did not speak to her until the next day. I wanted to give her some space and let her be grateful for just being alive.

I called Rey, a longtime friend of mine, and asked if he wanted to go to the party. You know those parties, the ones where you go just to go. The party where you hope something

extraordinary happens. This might be the night where you score. All your friends are going. Going out beats staying home all night.

I had no costume. Noe hosted the Halloween party; we went to high school together. I had him for Computer Maintenance, I didn't talk much to him after high school. Years later in December, right before 2019, I saw Noe at David's wedding. We both went as groomsmen. He looked the same at the wedding as he did that night at the Halloween party. Anyone who went to Weslaco East and graduated between 2008-09 got an invitation to that party.

I drove my friends, Anthony, David, and Rey to the party in my shitty but reliable grey Ford Escape. I could still smell the burned rubber from the highway on my tires. While in the car David informed me about of the details about the party.

“Rumor has it that Leana's boyfriend isn't gonna be at the party.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“You need to make a move on her Danny. You needa give her a dose of Danny,” said David.

“I'll make sure she overdoses on me.”

Anthony volunteered to be the DJ at the party. He left for Dallas to go to college but came back after dropping out as a self-proclaimed DJ. Whenever it's dull, call Anthony and he'll lighten up the mood.

Noe lived out in the middle of nowhere in Weslaco, somewhere around mile nine or ten. A few miles away from The Prop. He lived in a two-story house with a huge, gated backyard. A long, thin, rocky road took you to the backyard. Trees lined up next to the fence and I remember the grass looking freshly cut. Everyone parked their cars on the grass at the end of the long thin wobbly road.

I parked my car next to a line of cars then saw a group of people carrying a guy dressed as Batman to his truck. They asked us if we could help them carry him. It wasn't even dark outside, and this guy already partied too hard.

There was a huge, tiled stage in the middle of the back yard with speakers on each side. I did not recognize anyone. Anthony went to set up his equipment at the end of the stage. David, Rey, and I walked to the middle of the stage where there was a table with drinks. That's where the magic happened. An old friend from high school, Homer, was standing in front of a big bowl of punch. He was pouring drinks for people. He gave me a cup of the jungle juice. The moment my lips touched the juice I smelled and tasted the alcohol. It tasted pretty good, like a mix between vodka, punch and pineapple juice. David and Rey got a drink right after me. The sun was going down while I felt the breeze embrace my skin and the air smelled like alcohol. Anthony finished setting up his gear and blasted some "Tonight I'm Lovin You" by Enrique Iglesias. I got another drink of the jungle juice and started feeling the music. Something about liquor and Enrique Iglesias got me jumpy.

For the remainder of the night, I forgot about what happened earlier that day with my sister, Rose. The only thing on my mind was having a good time. Even though I was drinking, I didn't think twice about giving anyone a ride, and the thought of getting a DWI didn't even cross my mind. That night I was the same horrible brother.

Anthony did a great job with the music. He kept playing hit after hit. I kept taking drink after drink. Anthony interrupted the song playing for a little announcement.

"Alright peeps, are you all having a great time?"

Everyone on the stage yelled, "Fuck Yea!"

"Imma play one of my favorite songs for y'all. Happy Halloween everyone!"

Anthony put on “Mr. Brightside” by The Killers. The crowd went crazy. Some random guy wielding a giant sword yelled,

“I fucking love you, Anthony!”

I never forgot Anthony’s response to his number one fan with a giant sword.

“Keep that shit up and I’m a jack you off with my butt cheeks.”

He still uses it today. It’s his ace in the hole for a comeback.

Anthony was dressed as a robot made up of cardboard boxes. He looked more like a cardboard version of Frosty the Snowman. Whenever Anthony put on the mask, he would try to end his sentences in beeps and boops. I think the boxes were from Office Depot. He had cut out holes for eyes and a mouth. This robot stood out from other robots you see in the media. He ran on an exotic fuel, Dos Equis. And blew smoke with the help of his unlimited supply of Camel Crush cigarettes.

While Mr. Brightside was playing, I saw Leana dancing alone. A pale, white, blonde girl. She wore a skimpy Pikachu costume. A yellow head band for the ears. She put red paint for the blushes on her cheeks. A short yellow skirt so it doesn’t get too stuffy. And a big yellow tail shaped like a lightning bolt. I’ve been playing Pokémon since the age of ten, and wow, I’ve never seen a Pikachu like her before.

I knew her since middle school. We’ve had small talks here and there. The alcohol gave me the courage to go talk to her.

“Hey, I love your costume.”

“Thank you!” Who are you supposed to be?”

“Ellen DeGeneres,” I said.

I wore a long sleeve black and purple shirt that had a hoodie. I rocked my fresh Ellen DeGeneres haircut. A short, layered haircut but with hair still covering my ears. The lesbian look really brought out the lip piercing I had. I can't believe I had gotten one. Rey had convinced me to get one with him. I remember hiding my face from my mom, I faced the other way when talking to her. I kept this up for about three days till she caught me.

“Danny, I know you got a piercing. “

“How did you know?”

“You can't hide anything from me,” she said.

I only got the piercing to impress a girl. She agreed to hang out with me if I got the piercing. Rey and I went to Octopus Ink in McAllen for the piercings. I only felt a pinch on my lip which lasted like one second. Well Lisa liked the piercing until it fell off my face after just minutes of showing her the piercing. The rest of the night she helped me look for my piercing on the road. Unfortunately, we never found it.

I think I wore my sister Rose's jeans the night of the party. I didn't care about wearing girl pants. They fit me perfectly and made a great skinny jean replacement. I've always had a clothes war with my sister. She wears my shirts and I wear her jeans. It's still an ongoing war with many casualties. I've ripped many of her socks, and she's stained many of my shirts with bleach.

I don't remember who asked who to dance, I would like to thank the liquor for that. One second, I was complimenting her costume, the next second we were both dancing. She did not want to dance with anyone else.

I got chills the moment I heard “Strobe” playing by Deadmau5. Leana and I started to dance slowly to the song. I closed my eyes and just went with the music. I had no idea what I



was doing, but it felt right. The numbing feeling from the alcohol made me forget right from wrong. I forgot I was dancing with a girl who had a boyfriend. Honestly, I did not care. We got lost in the dancing. We got lost in the jungle juice. The music kept our bodies moving. Ellen and Pikachu danced the night away. Whenever another guy tried to dance with her, she blasted them away with a thunder shock. I felt out of control. The music felt hypnotic. "Firework" by Katy Perry started to play. I had already started to sober up.

I looked around and saw everyone dancing like zombies. Other people were on the floor puking their guts out. I thought I was trapped in a Michael Jackson music video. As I broke free of the jungle juice's control, I heard some girls yelling, "Kyle is here!" Leana's Bf is here!"

Leana and I stopped dancing and she gave her bf a big hug. She left to go hang out with her girlfriends. I heard other guests at the party telling Kyle about how Leana and I danced for a long time.

I went looking for my friends. The whole crew had split up. Anthony short circuited and started to puke next to his equipment. "OMG", by Usher was playing in the background. I found David smoking a blunt with some girl I liked when I was like twelve years old. They both were by the fence far off from the party. Noe's property had a lot of land, and the fence is what divided it.

I took a hit of the joint and blew the smoke out into the night sky. Noe saw us by the trees that lined up near the fence. He told us to stop smoking, that his dad could smell it. David threw the joint over the fence, and we went to go look for Rey.

While on our way to find Rey, David got his robe caught on the fence. He pulled it out and scraped himself in the process. He ended up cutting his left nipple. It went wit his costume.

David was dressed as a gladiator. He got the typical gladiator attire from the Halloween store, Spirits. He reeked of ketchup. David used ketchup packets from McDonald's to make it look like he was bleeding. The bloody nipple made his costume look more believable.

While searching for Rey we saw more people on the floor puking. Noe asked if we could help pick up some of the people and place them in the back seat of their cars or on a bench. I crossed my fingers hoping Rey wasn't one of the party's casualties.

I had finally found Rey. He looked wasted. He was trying to hook up with the same girl all night. Her name was Taylor, and she had friend zoned him. They hung out throughout the whole party, and she told him that she had a boyfriend who lived far away. He told me this story at the party, then patted me on the shoulder. I thought, "damn, he must be going through a lot. Let me give him some space."

I later found out that the tap on the shoulder was apparently bro code for help. He ended up puking all over the side of Noe's house. I found him sitting lying down on a bench with puke on his clothes. After the party we went to Whataburger and Rey had his head down the whole time. He didn't wake up till the next day late in the afternoon. I don't remember if he wore a costume that night, but he's not the kind of guy to wear one.

The next day I got on Myspace and saw that I got a notification from Leana on my wall.

"You're a great dancer, Danny :)"

Homer left me a private message asking me what the whole deal between me and Leana and if it was true that we had danced for over two hours together. I thought to myself, wow, I barely even remember dancing that long with her. I remember that my senior year in high school I went skinny dipping with some friends. David and Leana were there. At some point during the skinny dipping the girls offered the guys to touch their breasts. All three guys including me lined

up in front of the three butt naked girls. When it was my turn, I closed my eyes and turned away. The next day Leana posted on my wall on Myspace saying,

“You’re such a gentleman. :)”

Leana was a bridesmaid at David’s wedding. She looked amazing in her green, velvet dress. We didn’t dance the night away like before. I don’t even think we said a single word to each other. She danced with her bf, Kyle, while I sat alone on the table blowing bubbles.

The next day at home I went to go check up on my sister. She was still dead asleep on her bed. I saw a picture of her next to her bed on a little table where she’s dressed as Pikachu. She was nine years old. Dark black hair, pale skin, freckles, and Pikachu’s face. I thought how awesome it was to have a sister who dressed up as one of your favorite videogame characters. That makes her cool in my book. She’s still my little sister. I threw a pillow on her head.

“Wake up Rose,” I said.”

“Get out of my room and let me sleep.”

“Whatever.”

I slammed the door closed on purpose. And it looks like things had gone back to normal.

To this day the accident with my sister still gives me chills. I still see that bright light. I still hear my sister's screams. I never want to see or hear my little sister cry again. Just the idea of hearing your sister say, “Are we going to die, Danny?” Makes me feel uneasy and makes me want to cry. Today, look back and realize how much of a shitty brother I have been. But hearing her scream and cry, and her putting all her faith in me made me realize how much she really means to me. I am so grateful that both my sister and I came out of that accident okay, and how no one was hurt. I’ll never forget that night. All that crying, screaming, and dancing. And Pikachu.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE SIMP QUEEN

I'm not sure how it happened. Either she added me, or I added her, but I do remember messaging her first.

On a hot summer day with nothing better to do I left her a message on Facebook.

“Hey, you seem cool, we should smoke and hang out some time.”

This happened around June 2018, I had just graduated with my Bachelor of Arts from UTRGV. It wasn't until two months later that she finally replied to me.

“Hey, sorry for the late reply, but you seem cool too. We should definitely hang out.”

A couple of days passed, and I went on with my life until she left me another message.

“Hey, you think you can help me? I need some money for a Lyft.”

How could I say no? Her name was Alexis, she's a mother of one child, a son. I had a weakness when it comes to helping people, especially girls I'm attracted to.

Right before I replied, she sent me several videos of herself in provocative poses.

“There's more where that came from,” she said.

“How much money for a Lyft?”

“Fifteen dollars.” she said.

“Done.”

“Hey daddy, you think you can send me another fifteen for Whataburger, I want to get a #2 with a milkshake.”

I sent her the money and she replied with a bunch of hearts.

“So, when do you want to hang out?”

“How about tomorrow, a date?” she replied.

“Sounds like a plan.”

The next day I dressed like a genuine simp. I’m not sure where the term came from, but it got popular on the internet around this time with memes and videos. Simp is short for simpleton. Anyone who let themselves get taken advantage by a person they like was considered a simp.

I wore a gray long sleeve button up shirt with a pair of fitted slacks. I wore my fancy black boot that I had bought from Clarks for one hundred dollars. I normally just wore muscle shirts and shorts, but I went the extra mile for this girl I had never met.

I got the address to pick her up and drove out all the way to Mission, Texas from Weslaco. That’s about a twenty-five-to-thirty-minute drive depending on the traffic. As soon as I got there, I saw some weird looking fellow walk out the front door. I didn't get to see his face due to it being dark outside. He left in a car parked in front of me. Right after that I saw the porch light turn on and a girl with blue hair walk out. She was wearing a white tank top with blue skinny jeans and some Vans. She had her hair up in a bun and had a jacket over her tank top. I opened the door for her.

“Thank you so much. And thanks for the other day.”

“No problem,” I said.

We went to the Duck Park in McAllen. I bought us each two twenty-four-ounce cans of Budweiser. We walked to one of the park’s benches and sat down, side by side. Across from us

there was a family who had thrown a birthday party for a young kid. A police officer drove up to a car that was parked near mine. The cop flashed his lights into the car and found a couple having sex in the backseat. Well, I think they were having sex. Either way, the cop left the couple to their own devices.

Pop! Alexis opened her beer; I did the same.

“Hey, I’m sorry I didn’t reply to you till like a month later,” said Alexis.

“It’s cool. You probably got busy with stuff.”

“No, it’s because I went to Rehab.”

“How did that happen?” I asked.

“Well, I’m currently not with my baby daddy. I was seeing another guy before going to rehab. He had a meth addiction and he got me into it too. My baby daddy’s parents found out about my new hobby, so the Child Protective Services took my baby away.”

“Don’t do that stuff and don’t associate with guys who do meth,” I said.

“He was a good guy at first. Well, they all are. This past weekend I got to see my baby Aiden. The in-laws and I took him to Peter Piper Pizza. He had so much fun.”

“How old is he?”

“He’s four years old. He’s such a big baby.”

I took my phone out of my pocket and handed it to Alexis.

“Here, put something on. You’re the DJ for now.”

We watched a Billie Elish music video on YouTube. I forgot the name of it, but Billie was wearing a yellow rain jacket throughout the whole video. For the next song I wanted to play something we could both sing along to. The first song I put was “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears.

“Oh my God I love this song. I haven’t heard it in ages,” she said.

I cleared my throat and sang the first few lyrics to the song.

“You have an amazing voice. The voice of an angel. I love it,” said Alexis.

She was clearly exaggerating and just trying to make me feel good. She had only heard me sing for a few seconds.

The next song she played was “Helena” by My Chemical Romance. This song is considered a national anthem to the goth and emo scene. We both sang our hearts out. The songs kept coming out one after the other. “Mr. Brightside” by The Killers, a song that is treasured by Millennials. A Millennial is someone who was born anywhere between 1981 to 1996. The last song we listened to was “The Final Countdown” by Europe. An upbeat 80’s song.

After a fun night at the park, she asked me if I could take her to her friend's house. This seemed kind of odd since it was past one AM and she was drunk.

We left the park and I dropped her off at her friend’s house somewhere in Mission across the street from the STC Pecan campus.

Alexis gave me a hug and said she had a great night.

“Would you want to go on another date?” I asked.

“Sure. Can you take me to Target to get some things next time?”

“Alright.”

We said our goodbyes and I left home.

## The Second Date

I got pulled over twice on the same day. So much stress just from one girl on a single day.

We were driving in the outskirts of Mission. "The boonies" as some locals would call it. Apparently, Alexis left some of her clothes at a friend's house. At the time, I saw it as me doing her a favor.

A thick black darkness surrounded my vehicle. I could not see anything in front of me. There were no lights or houses nearby. After driving for about twenty minutes, we finally saw some lights, but they were red and blue. Yes, I got pulled over. Anxiety was smothering my thoughts. So many what ifs popped up in my head. What if she had something illegal inside her bag? Alexis was not a person you would want to get pulled over with. She had a long history of mixing pills, marijuana and alcohol. And just recently meth. At the park she told me stories of how she liked mixing bar and alcohol.

I had heard some tapping on my window. I rolled it down and saw a police officer with way too much time on his hands.

"Hello officer, is there a problem?"

"Do you know why I pulled you over sir?"

"Um, no. Did I do anything wrong?"

"Yes, did you know you passed the last three stop signs?"

"Uh-oh I didn't know, officer; It's so dark out here."

"Where are you from?"

"Weslaco," I said.

"I don't know how you do things in Weslaco, but here around these parts we make a complete stop at a stop sign."

"I'm sorry officer. It won't happen again. I'm not used to driving in this area."

"What brings you out here son."



“I’m taking a friend to...”

Alexis had cut me off before I got to finish the sentence.

“He is my Lyft driver officer. He’s taking me to my friend’s house,” she said.

“Ok. What do you have in that purse of yours ma’am?”

“Oh no.... Game over. My car is getting towed and I’m ending up in jail,” I thought.

I saw the officer pointing his finger towards Alexis’ purse.

“Just make up.”

“Alright, you mind telling me what direction you’re headed? The officer said.

“No,” Alexis said.

I slapped my hand over my forehead.

“No, no, no, no... Just say where we’re going,” I thought.

“Ok, you two, I’m giving you both a warning. Make sure she gets to her destination safely. Have a nice night you two.”

The officer drove off and we continued our drive. The moment we got to Alexis’ friend’s house, she told me she was going to climb the fence. She didn’t want me to honk my horn and insisted on climbing the fence. I stayed inside my car and observed the house, it resembled a small ranch. A white fence with a bunch of dogs wandering around. There was a strong light on the house that brightened everything outside. I saw Alexis climb over the fence with ease. The big group of dogs followed her towards the front door once she landed on the other side.

Well, I waited for about fifteen to twenty minutes inside my car. Eventually, I saw Alexis walk out of the house with a guy and some clothes clutched in her hand. A tall white complected guy with a white plain muscle shirt walked beside her. As soon as she got on the fence the guy grabbed her by the butt to help give her a boost. It looked like he purposely squeezed her butt

with his hand. I didn't like that. Looking back now I realized how rude it was of her to make me wait for twenty minutes. She waved goodbye and I opened the door for her.

“Sorry I took a while. We both were looking for my clothes and we just ended up getting lost in conversation,” she said.

“So how did you forget your clothes here? And who was that guy?” I asked.

“Oh, he's my friend and it's a long story. Can we still go to Target?”

“Sure.”

Earlier that day I had promised to take her to Target and help her get stuff for the new place she was moving to. Alexis had a bad relationship with her mom. And did everything in her power to get away from her. She told me she was going to live with some friends.

The moment we walked into Target I could smell the butter and popcorn. It always smelled like that. I finally got a good look of what Alexis was wearing for our “date” night. A fitted black dress with dark red lipstick. A pair of white Adidas to match with her dress and great hair. I could tell she had straightened it. She sparkled in that outfit. She went the extra mile that night for our “date” versus the previous one we had. The moment we walked into the store I held her hand. It was soft.

We walked to the bedsheets and blankets section of the store. Alexis put a blanket, pillows and some bed sheets in the cart. We went to the cleaning supplies section next. As she looked, I put my hands around her waist and started kissing her on the head. I didn't faze her at all. Bottle after bottle she put in the cart from Pine Sol, Clorox and Fabuloso.

“What exactly are you going to clean with all that?” I asked.

Oh, my friends are letting me stay for free if I keep the place clean. So, I'm cleaning their bathroom first.”

The cart filled up to the top. All the items started adding up, and my wallet started having second thoughts. At the soap and shampoo section, Alexis asked me to buy her some vagisil. This was unexpected, but she told me she wanted to clean down there. We walked past the baby clothes and Alexis wanted to look at them for a bit.

“I want a baby,” she said

“Really?”

“Maybe I’ll have another one. It’s so cute shopping for baby clothes.”

We left the clothes section and went to the checkout.

At the register the cashier rang up all the items and the total came out to over three hundred dollars. We left Target and I asked Alexis if she wanted to go back to my place.

“Another time Danny, I don’t feel comfortable going over yet.”

“I guess. Are you hungry?”

“No, can you take me back home?” she asked.

“Are you serious? Some date this is.” I said to Alexis.

We got to her friend’s house. I counted about five guys in the house. Each of them lived there with Alexis. One guy had curly hair with his shirt off. Another guy was sitting at a table hitting a pipe with a bag of weed in front of him. One guy in the house stood out the most. He was also shirtless as well but also sported a big animal looking fur scarf. It looked like he skinned a brown bear and wore its skin as a prize. He had a six pack and long pink hair. His skinny jeans looked ridiculous. His ass looked saggy and his little red heart boxers made me want to burst into laughter. She showed me to her room, and it looked clean. The room had psychedelic posters taped on the wall and her small cat, Pepperoni, was chilling on the

bed. After about several minutes she walked me out to the front door. We said our goodbyes and she gave me a small peck on the lips. As she kissed me, I saw heart boxers staring at me.

I got into my car and drove off home. During the drive home Alexis and I were texting.

“So that was like the shortest date of my life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“Well, I thought we were going to do more things.”

“You expect me to give you something?”

“No, but I thought we could cuddle and watch a movie at my place.”

“I’m not sure if I’m ready for cuddling. You live too far away.”

“The drive doesn’t matter.”

“No.”

“You keep asking me for help and I help you. I spent close to three hundred dollars just for you today. That’s not including the other days I helped you.”

“So, you do want something in return.” she replied.

“You have the wrong idea. I just want more passion between us.”

I knew she was manipulating me. I didn’t want to believe it at first. That date made me feel like crap. She ended up giving me all the wrong feelings.

We ended up text messaging the whole drive back to Weslaco. I was so stressed out. I couldn’t keep my eyes on the road. I knew I was swerving, but I couldn’t take my eyes off my phone. I was only a few minutes from home until I saw a bright color behind me. I had just passed a red light. Within seconds, a Weslaco PD car for all I know jumped out of the bushes and pulled me over. I parked my car in front of Weslaco High School since the light I passed was

right next to it. Luckily for me no students were on the road at that time. The officer got out of his car and knocked on my window.

“Hello officer, I know what happened. I’m sorry. I’ve just had a horrible day. Worst day of my life.”

“What happened sir?”

“I just got back from a date with this girl and, oh boy, has it been a ride.”

“Wait, are you Boots?” asked the Cop.

“Yes, are you Gabriel?”

“The guys are always talking about you. I’ve heard so much about you, Boots.”

“This has just been the worst day.”

“I’ll let you off with a warning, just keep your eyes on the road.”

“Thank you so much Gabriel, you have a great night.”

“You too, Boots.”

What a small world. I never met Gabriel in person but he’s friends with some close friends of mine. We were all in this big group chat I made called “Trapstreet Thotties”. It’s just a bunch of local Weslaco guys who I went to school with. New people keep adding others to the chat. Everybody knows everybody here.

When I got home, I messaged Alexis again.

“I got pulled over again.”

“What, why?” said Alexis.

“You’re giving me a headache. Never have I ever been pulled over twice on the same day. I can’t keep helping you like this.”

“You never needed to help me,” she replied.

“But I want to.”

“I can’t believe you’re so gullible. You still haven’t noticed? I’ve been using you. I don’t regret anything I’ve done. I got what I wanted. I don’t need you anymore.”

I didn’t even bother replying to that message. I just left her on read.

The next day I told my friends in the Trapstreet Thotties group chat what happened. They gave me a new nickname after hearing my story, “Mr. \$300 guy aka The SimpKing. They haven’t let me live it down and always bring it up still to this day.

“Hey, Boots, will you give me \$300?”

I’ll play along and say things like,

“Get in line “or “Don’t tempt me.”

About a month later, I got a Facebook message from Alexis while at the gym.

“Hey, you think you can give me a ride? I’ll give you gas money.”

I can’t believe she had the audacity to message me after what happened. I just deleted the message and never replied to her. To this day, I don’t know if she ever got that ride. I don’t ever plan on giving her another ride either.

This incident really hit me hard. At the time I was taking a poetry class in my grad class at UTRGV. This was my attempt at a ghazal poem. A ghazal poem is where you follow certain rules and rhyme with couplets. I vented and wrote how she made me feel used. She made me realize that there are some people out there that only use people to get what they want. I was blinded because I thought I was helping her. It just didn’t feel right and felt like I was helping her make things worse with her life.

Starknight

I'm driving nowhere in circles tonight.

My blood shot eyes shimmered bright tonight.

Windows down... the breeze in my hair.

I thought she fell for me like a star Knight.

No one knows about our secret affair.

We held hands, broke promises one night.

Our lips did the talking, we did not care.

I sang to her...she to me that night.

In the back seat both in our underwear.

We made love a crime just that night.

Two fugitives in a secret love lair.

Killing time and fucking great in the night.

She sold my heart, became a billionaire.

When I drive I think of her every night.

Everyone please send Danny a prayer.

Remember him when you're out tonight.

Hey, I promise you this ain't no nightmare.

Beware of the heartstealer. She's only out at night.

Things just kept getting worse. I could not pay my phone bill, so it was disconnected. The Wi-Fi was also out at my house. I had my finals due for my fiction class UTRGV. I went to the Burger King in Weslaco. It was only a few minutes from Vanessa's house. The restaurant consisted of me and a bunch of winter Texans. They would leave their homes in the North and travel to the South where it was warm. I connected to the Wi-Fi and emailed my mom about the situation.

"Go to your grandma's house. There's lunch," she said.

"Ok, but does she have sandwich stuff?"

(Recently, I saw this email and it made me sad, since it was one of the last times, I saw my grandmother.)

I did go to my grandmother's house after I finished my finals at Burger King. My grandmother would always come through for me. She always knew what to say. I could already picture her comforting me and asking me how my day was. I could say anything to her. She was like a second mother to me. At my grandparents' house I told my grandma about what happened with Alexis. She said everything always happens for a reason.

The only good thing that came out of this experience was Alexis' suggestion for me to become a Lyft driver. I eventually did become a Lyft driver. I applied online and filled out the forms, got my car insurance and bought new tires. It didn't take long for me to get hired. It was



one of the best decisions I ever made. I would get notifications on my phone from people who needed a ride. I wanted to work with something that had flexible hours, a competitive work wage and the opportunity to meet new people. They shared their interesting stories with me, and at times it felt like I was in some MTV reality show, or a therapist. Some of these stories had such an impact on me that they eventually ended up in my essays.

This whole time I played the role of Alexis' personal Lyft driver, but instead I paid for her ride. I thought working as a Lyft driver would give me the opportunity to make extra money, since I normally would give my friends free rides

## CHAPTER IX

### CASSETTE TAPE 6

#### Mixtape

##### A-side

Just leaving this here for you,  
Cause I'm always daydreaming  
Im always singing  
If my life was a song  
You'd be the chorus to my dreams.

I remember that cassette tape.  
How could I ever forget,  
I was that little Mexican who tried to sing like Jack Skellington.

I promise

*this ain't no dream*

As a child

I loved to sing

As an adult

my voice will make your ears ring.

I remember that cassette tape.

How could I ever forget,

I was that little Mexican who tried to sing like Jack Skellington.

I promise

*this ain't no dream*

## Prologue

I originally wrote this story as a tribute to my grandmother with the hopes of showing it to her one day. I never expected her to leave us anytime soon.

### Christmas on a School Day

I had a knack for pretending to be sick. My mom would fall for it every time. She'd just leave me at her parents' house on the way to work.

But you, the one who always called me her little rock star, saw through my fake tummy aches and make-believe fevers. I would make my voice sound like chicharras buzzing in a thunderstorm, raspy, but covered in a blanket of saliva. One sick day you took me to the Valley Vista Mall in Harlingen. I rode shotgun in your white and maroon Oldsmobile car. (Today that fossilized car has found a new home behind Chavez Bros Auto Service in the little town of Weslaco.) The mall would always smell of popcorn and butter. I smelled it the moment we walked into the mall. We passed by the video game store, Babbage's, which would now be called GameStop. You wanted to look around the mall; I just wanted to go to that video game store. I don't really remember all the details of our time at the mall, but I do remember our time at Babbage's. The small store had two rows of three shelves, each shelf had different games. I walked to the shelf with the Gameboy games. I told you that I always wanted to play a Mario game.

"I don't have a Gameboy though Grandma," I said.

"Get one, my little rock star."

We went to the cashier with a black Gameboy pocket and Super Mario Land. It felt like Christmas, but on a school day. I was the happiest six-year-old boy in Harlingen that day in

1998. The moment we walked out my tummy started to rumble. Sharp pains began stabbing my insides. I really wasn't faking it this time.

“You want Wendy's?” she asked.

You pulled out all the stops that day. You got me a cheeseburger kid's meal with a frosty. The kid's meal bag was decorated in bright purple and blue colors with pictures from the cartoon “Tiny Toon Adventures.”

Before I started school, whenever I visited you, I'd always cry when it was time for me to leave. One time my dad threw me on his shoulder because I refused to leave. Whenever I stayed at your house it felt more like home than being at home. You even gave me my own room. The room that was always hot. That room had no fan, and no air vents. Whenever I stayed the night, I ended up staring at the VCR and getting lost into the display of the green digital numbers. They'd slowly hypnotize me to sleep. I'd lay my head on that Ziggy pillow and fall fast to sleep.

### The Cassette

Sometime in 2018, I went to my grandpa and grandma Sanchez's house, their pink house was surrounded and towered by humongous palm trees. I parked my raggedy Ford Escape on the side of their house, opened the pink metal gate and walked into their backyard.

My grandfather took a lot of pride in knowing the names of all the plants and trees in the backyard. The treehouse that my grandfather had built for my sister, Rose, still stood there. Back in 2008, Hurricane Dolly destroyed most of the treehouse. The only thing remaining from the treehouse was the wooden floor. We continued to play in it even though it was falling apart.

An old mystique tree held onto the broken tree house. Hundreds if not thousands of long seed pods covered the emerald, green grass. My grandpa had put a lot of hard work into that

yard. He would gather wood from the mesquite tree in the backyard. There was a wooden fence that separated the back alleyway and my grandparent's backyard. Near the fence he built fire pit with stones forming a circle around it. He would keep the fire going by throwing in mesquite wood. My family would sit around the fire and listen to the stories from my grandfather. I remember the smokey smell of the burning wood and the crackling sound of the embers burning my eyes. The fire would relax me, the heat from the flames would envelope me with a warm feeling of joy.

I walked up the steps and knocked on the back door. You opened the door.

"Hi Grandma," I said.

You were wearing a black and pink warm up suit with white Reebok tennis shoes and short ankle socks. Your brown curly hair always would make you look younger You always kept up with the trends. I don't know any other Grandma who texted and used Facebook regularly. You never acted your age.

I smelled the oil from the refried beans you had just made. Right next to the stove I saw a molcajete with crushed peppers from your emerald, green garden. The pepper's vapor lingered in the air and stung me in the eyes. Next to the molcajete I saw the rolling pin that she would use to prepare the tortillas. You greeted me with a smile offered me some refried bean tacos.

After an amazing meal you told me about how you found a cassette of me singing and you playing the piano. Back when I was six, you'd let me sing while you played the piano. We played Christmas music together. Jingle Bells, Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer, Joy to the World, Silent Night, and even Amazing Grace. You still have that same piano today, a huge wooden brown piano. You keep it in the living room. I can still smell the burnt fragrances of the little incense burner in the shape of a wooden stove that you kept on top of the piano. It smelled

like a cross between being in a church and being splashed with holy water on a hot summer day. The piano looked expensive, and I regret stomping on those three pedals that were below the piano as a kid. On the far right of the piano the first key got stuck. Each key looked like an old page from the Bible. The keys felt like I was touching a skeleton's fingers; they reminded me of the organ made from bones from the film "The Goonies". When I'd bang on the keys dust would come out. My grandma decided to take piano lessons in her 70s. This was something you had always wanted to do. You made me believe it's never too late to learn anything new. It was your dream since you were a little girl to have a piano in your house. Luckily, Grandpa bought one for you in an auction.

In the cassette, I'm singing Silent Night. My voice sounded so high; some may confuse me for a girl. Something about the pitch of my voice. A child's voice and its innocence struck me in the heart. I heard your soft voice behind mine, you sound the same as you do today. I can't believe I had just heard that. A part of me that was lost in time found its way back into my ears. Tears slowly tiptoed down my cheek onto the velvet-colored carpet. You reminded me what I loved. Not just you but singing. I never realized how much of a musical influence you became in my life until I heard that tape. I'm still that little kid. What I would give to sit next to you and sing Christmas songs again. I have no musical talent whatsoever, but you play the piano and I'd sing along with you. We'll sit on the wooden bench you've had since before I can remember. Who cares if it's not Christmas?

"Sleep in heavenly peace." The tape ended.

"Your hair is so long Danny; you really do look like a rock star."

"Thanks. Grandma."

After that day you showed me the cassette, I wanted to keep on singing in honor of you.

Late nights getting lost in Weslaco.

Driving in circles...with nowhere in sight. I hear Hallelujah play. Bang! My eyes shoot watery lasers. I sang my lungs out thinking about you.

I want to hear the cassette again.

*And it's not a cry that you hear at night/ It's not somebody who's seen the light/ It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah*

- Leonard Cohen,

*Hallelujah*



2019

I kept thinking about that cassette tape, and how I wanted to hear it again. A year had passed since you shared that tape with me.

I was driving around Tierra Santa. It was past midnight with no cars in sight. I remember listening to “Total Eclipse of the Heart. I thought about grandpa and how he started showing signs of Dementia.

“Turn Around”

He’s not the same person anymore. Slowly he started to forget me. I wasn’t the first person he’d forget. I could still see my mom’s tears crying inside my head.

“Danny how can someone you’ve known all your life forget you?” she asked.

I remained silent.

“My dad wants to go walking to see his mom,” she said.

The image of my great-grandmother, Mama Maria, found its way into my head. She lived with my grandpa’s sister, Chela. She would just sit her days away on an old rocking chair. She passed away back in 2005 when I was a teenager.

“Turn around bright eyes” The song ended; I wiped the tears off my eyes with my arm. I turned around and drove my car down 18<sup>th</sup> street. I liked to drive down that road because there were no cars on it. I was just driving in circles with no real destination. I needed an escape. I wanted to vent, and the only thing I could think of that could help was singing. I was twenty-eight at the time and my singing wasn’t the best. People would tell me I sounded like a cross between a cat dying and a mime who’s gone deaf.

“Part of your World” from the Little Mermaid starts to play from my playlist. That song would always get me. The chorus of the song turned my eyes into two waterfalls. I tried to find

my voice from up above. It reminded me of a Michael Jackson video I found on YouTube called, “Living With Michael Jackson” (2003)” In the video he’s asked how he came up with the song “Billie Jean.” Michael stops beatboxing for a second and says, “from above.” That had hit me in my feels. The Little Mermaid song was hitting its climax:

“When's it my turn? / Wouldn't I love / Love to explore that shore above/  
Out of the sea / Wish I could be/ Part of that world...”

The crying had helped me reach higher notes. I was able to find my voice from up above. I wipe the tears off my face and rewind the last thirty seconds of the song.

April 14th, 2019

Several months later after my late-night drive on 18<sup>th</sup> street, I put on some black jeans with a pink shirt that said “Heighten”. I drove my new car, a Toyota Prius, to your house. It was your birthday. I walked in the back door and saw my mom, both my sisters, and my aunt and uncle. I got there just in time to sing happy birthday. You finally got to hear me sing again. I noticed your hair had gotten longer. I guess you never had time to cut it after being at that hospital with my grandpa. For the last several months you did whatever it took to stay by your husband’s side. Even if it meant faking having Dementia. Grandpa went to Weslaco Rehab Hospital which coincidentally on 18<sup>th</sup> street. You were not allowed to stay the night with him, and you did not want to be home alone without Grandpa.

When I think of true love, I think of you and Grandpa. You were married for over sixty years. You thought the only way to be with him was to be admitted. Grandpa doesn’t remember me. He doesn’t like me anymore, he would now tell me in a foul tone, “what are you doing here?”

“Happy Birthday to you”.

We finished singing to you and I saw yellow tulips on the table with its delicious neighbor, the birthday cake. You gave me a hug and said to me, “You’re still my rockstar.”

I asked you about the cassette tape and you said you needed more time to look for it, you also told me how hard it had become to deal with Grandpa. He could no longer perform daily tasks by himself. At the party you thought it was 1987, but we all had to correct you and you just laughed. All I could think about was finding that cassette tape. I wanted you to remember us singing together just in case you started to forget. I know that music brings back memories of people with Dementia.

I went to your house after class a few days after your birthday. I wanted to know if you had found the cassette tape. I parked on the side of your house. I called you but no answer. I stepped out of my Prius and walked into the pink gate, went up the three steps and knocked on your back door. I looked through the little window above the door and saw a picture with three huge red letters spelling J.O.Y. No one answered the door. I saw my grandpa’s car outside, but I guess you all were busy. I left back to my car and passed by your bathroom window. I saw someone peeking out the window.

Later that day at home I asked my mom if she knew where you were.

“You’re Grandma wasn’t faking it, Danny.”

“What do you mean Mom?”

“The doctor diagnosed her with early stages of Dementia.”

## B- Side

I remember that cassette tape.

How could I ever forget,

I was that little Mexican who tried to sing like Jack Skellington.

I promise

*this ain't no dream*

As a child

I loved to sing

As an adult

my voice will make your ears ring.

I promise

*this ain't no dream*

## Three Years Later

It's now 2021, over two years have passed since I found out about the cassette tape. My grandma never did find it. Many things have happened in these past two years. Both my grandma and grandpa Sanchez are not here anymore. I lost my grandma first. It happened around September of 2019 shortly after I wrote about going by in April the same year.

I am so grateful for Mother's Day that year. Every year some of my cousins get together on Mother's Day and sing "Las Mananitas" to the moms of the family. Normally, I skip these kinds of things but this time I wanted to sing to my grandma. My cousin, Matt messaged me on Facebook if I wanted to sing "Las Mananitas" that night with him and his brothers. I agreed and met up with them at four am on Mother's Day. We started at Grandma's house first. My uncle, Jose, was there with his little Ukulele. He started first and we followed along. The whole song is in Spanish, and my Spanish wasn't the best. The song's title, "Las Mananitas", means you sing to them before the day begins. Early before the day began me, my cousins and uncle each played our hearts out.

I did not know at the time, but that was going to be the last time I would ever see my grandmother. I regretted visiting her during the summer. If only I had one day just so I could talk to her. I still have the bracelet she gave me for Christmas. I wore it to her funeral. It's a green string bracelet with my name written on a small piece of wood wrapped around the string. Just like my dad, I did not get to see the last moments of my grandma.

In her last moments my mom had called me to come to the hospital.

"Your grandma is in critical condition. Come see her."

"She's fine Mom. Grandma's the healthiest person I know. Nothing ever happens to her."

About several hours later, I got another call from my mom.

“She’s gone, Danny. Your grandma did not survive her surgery.”

It did not take long before I started crying. I had never felt that way before.

I was a pallbearer and it felt like I was the only one crying. I did not care about the number of tears that fell from my eyes. I never felt something like that before. This funeral taught me to cherish the time you have with people and to make memories. I felt horrible after her death because I did not see her for several months prior to her death. I literally lived down the road from her and I never took five minutes out of my life to see her after Mother’s Day. That stuck with me all throughout the funeral. She was fine one second and the next second she passed on. She was at the hospital for a surgery, she’s had plenty of them before. Well, the surgery did not go well, and she died. At the hospital things just felt unreal. I kept getting lost in the long hallways. It was cold and dead.

While seeing the people bury her body in the ground, I could not stop the tears from falling. I kept hoping for her to hop out of the casket and be ok. I wanted some kind of miracle to happen. She will forever live in my memories. She taught me a lot and inspired me in many things such as music, religion and love.

My grandfather passed away a year later after my grandma. Unlike my grandmother, I got to see him in his last moments. I got to say my final goodbye to him. My mom and aunt were by his side. He was lying on his bed with an IV in him. He was half awake and half asleep. I could not tell if he was in pain. Earlier that day I had gotten a call from my mom. She was in tears.

“Danny, your grandpa is in his last moments, go to Lee’s pharmacy and get him his medicine.”

I had just gotten out of Gold's gym in Mission. Luckily for me I was close to a Lee's Pharmacy. When I got the medicine from the pharmacy, I saw that it was morphine.

Later that night after I saw my grandpa, I took my sisters home with me. They had been at his house longer than I had. The gloomy atmosphere was too much for them. A couple hours later I got another call from my mom.

“Your grandpa is not here with us anymore.”

I spent so much time and effort trying to find the mixtape, and to this day I do not know where it is. My family and I have still have not cleared out my grandparents' things from their house, because it is just too painful. Hopefully soon I will come across that cassette tape again, so I can listen to your voice once more. Even if I don't find the cassette tape the memoires I of you are enough and will last a lifetime.

## CHAPTER X

### BRO, DO YOU EVEN LYFT?

\*First, make sure to take a nap before turning on the app. You don't want to be falling asleep on the road.

\*Bring grocery store bag or trash can for passengers to barf in.

(I keep my bags inside the pouch behind the front seats.)

\*Always wear a mask when you have a passenger in the car.

\*Provide masks for passengers.

\*Have all types of phone chargers available

\*Don't forget to greet every passenger that walks into the car.

\*Make sure to make small talk with passengers.

\*Say things like: "How's your night been?", "Long night?", "Hello, how are you?"

\*Never text and drive with a passenger on board.

\*Don't just give out your number. Hand customers your personal business card.

\*Never make a deal with a passenger until they have paid you up front.

\*Lyft does not allow Lyft drivers or passengers to carry a gun. So, carry a pocketknife instead.

\*Always lie about how much you make while doing Lyft. Say something like "I make enough to have breakfast on my table...every other day."



\*Always carry an aux cord.

\*Listen to podcasts while driving.

\*Throw karaoke sessions with the passengers.

\*Don't give out too much information about yourself. (There's a lot of envious people out there that just want to sabotage.)

\*\*\*\*

"It's easy. I've done like a hundred rides in a week," I said.

"Alright, I'll try it," said Rey.

Lyft was offering eight hundred dollars to anyone who referred a Lyft driver. I had been trying to get my friend, Rey, to apply to Lyft that night. He had just gotten out of a long-term relationship with his girlfriend. So, he was looking to make some extra cash in hopes of distracting himself.

"I know everything about Lyft. So just take my advice and you'll be making cash in no time," I said.

"Any pretty girls?" said Rey.

"Of course. You pick up pretty girls, drunk girls, pretty, drunk girls."

"Wow, have you ever done anything with them?"

My whole beach adventure with Liana popped into my head for a second.

"I pretty much got paid to sleep with a girl."

"Dude, that sounds like a pretty good gig you got there." Rey said.

"I hope you're listening to everything I've been telling you. Here's a pen so you can jot this all down."

"Thank you, kind sir."

Smoke gushed out of Rey's mouth, and his mind was wiped for a brief period. The haunting thoughts of his ex were covered up in the smoke. His tanned face was red just like his eyes. He started coughing his lungs out.

“Will you split the eight hundred dollars with me?” Rey asked.

“Sure, I don't mind doing that. The money can go to cards.”

For some reason, trading cards had been growing in popularity, specifically Pokémon cards. They were selling like hotcakes. You would go to your local store like Walmart or Target, and you would see people who had waited in line for hours just to get trading cards. The Pokémon franchise first exploded back in 1999 in the USA. It started with a video game, for the Gameboy and expanded into a cartoon tv show and trading card game.

Due to the recent ongoing global pandemic people had been panic buying. In April 2020, when Covid-19 first started in the U. S, people were panic buying. You would go to a store and all you would see were aisles and aisles of empty shelves. And for some reason toilet paper was in the high demand.

Driving for Lyft was a risky experience to undertake during a tumultuous period in our history.

A year had passed since the pandemic had started, it was April 2021, and people were still panic buying. But instead of toilet paper it was trading cards. Back in 2020, online personality Logan Paul bought the Pokémon card, Charizard, for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The online article “Gamerant” mentioned how Logan Paul bought Charizard from a cast member of the show “Pawn Stars”. I felt like this bizarre act by Logan Paul helped add fuel to the Pokémon card craze.

In an online article in *USA Today*, Scooby Axson shared that Logan Paul wore his rare Charizard card around his neck during his entrance for the fight with Mayweather. Axson further added that “Paul's entrance may have been the best part of the fight, which went the full scheduled eight rounds and ended without a single fighter hitting the canvas.”

Both Rey and I made an agreement to both save up money with Lyft to buy Pokémon cards.

We went to the Walmart in Weslaco. The aisle that was supposed to be carrying the cards was a graveyard. An older man pushing a cart filled with empty cardboard and plastic approached Rey and I while we looked at the empty aisle.

“You boys looking for them Pokémon cards?” The older man asked.

“Yea, people have been going crazy buying them everywhere,” I said.

“Oh, I see. Are these the cards you’re looking for?”

The older man worked for the Coca-Cola company and was restocking the drinks before approaching me and Rey. He walked towards the “Magic the Gathering” cards and lifted a cardboard box holding some of the cards on the top aisle. The man grabbed 5 packs of Vivid Voltage that were hidden under the cardboard box. Vivid Voltage was the latest set from the Pokémon trading card game at the time. He lifted the cardboard and plastic from the cart and hid all the card he stole under them

“Well, see you boys later. Good luck finding cards,” said the man.

The older man pushed his cart and made a clean getaway.

“That man totally just robbed Pokémon cards from Walmart,” said Rey.

“It sure does look like that,” I said.

The only type of trading cards you could find were “Magic the Gathering’ cards. No one ever bought those. Magic the Gathering is a trading card game that has been around since the early 90’s.

We drove to every Walmart, GameStop and Target in the Rio Grande Valley and only found Pokémon cards in one store. We were lucky to find four tins of the set “Shining Fates” at a GameStop in Harlingen. Each of us bought two tins.

You might think we’re crazy for driving all over in hopes to buy cards for a children's card game, but we were not the only ones. There were people who flipped their money over social media with their unopened Pokémon cards; I spotted the very same tins we bought on Facebook. The tins were thirty dollars each. But people on Facebook were selling the tins for fifty and sixty dollars. I contemplated doing the same thing, but instead I would post my items for sell on eBay. 2021 was the year where Pokémon cards would sell like toilet paper.

While on our way home on the expressway Rey asked me where exactly I drove while I would drive for Lyft.

“Well, there are specific routes I like to take while I’m driving,” I said.

\*Stick to the main roads. Don’t take the back roads.

\*I would turn on the app at home and leave it on while I was getting for a night of driving.

\*You can turn the app on and play a game at home till you get a notification.

\*While on the way back home make sure to leave the app on and take any ride that pops up.

\*You can make it a challenge and see if you can make it back home without getting a notification.

\*First you can’t just stay waiting in one city. I like to go to Edinburg and get off at Trenton. Take Trenton till you get to 10th street in McAllen. I usually take 10th street until it hits Business

83. Trenton has a lot of business. There's this big parking lot I like to park off Trenton. It's right where the underpass is. You'll see an Academy and Taco Palenque there.

\*\*\*\*\*Taking breaks is important. Don't drive for too long. Park for like thirty minutes. I have "safe zones" for when I want to take a break. One of these "safe zones" is the big parking lot I just mentioned off Trenton. Another one is "Whataburger". This burger joint is open 24/7 every day. Whenever I'm getting tired or need a break I'll always park at a "Whataburger". My favorite "Whataburger" to park at is the one off Business 83 near Bicentennial Blvd.

\*If you take Business 83 you can hit downtown McAllen. Weekend nights and even some weekday nights can get wild.

"There were so many things I wish I could unsee from downtown McAllen, I said."

"What kind of things?" said Rey while laughing at what I said.

"Well, where do I start?"

I made an exit off Texas on the expressway in Weslaco. I merged on to the frontage road and made my way home.

"There was this one girl I picked up at Suerte on Nolana in McAllen. I got to the bar and was waiting parked outside of the front door. Well, I sat in my car listening to the new "Gorillaz album "Sound Machine". I looked out the driver's window and saw a girl making out with a guy. This girl was your typical downtown McAllen tacuache chaser. It looked like it took her several hours to do her make-up. She wore a black dress with heels for knives for backstabbing you. After listening to "The Pink Phantom" several times, the girl finally walked towards my car.

I rolled down my window.

"Aly?" I asked.

"Yes. Danny"?

“Yes. I’m your Lyft driver.”

After conducting the Lyft driver’s ritual, I let her in my car.

“A Lyft driver ritual?” said Rey.

“Yes. You must always follow this.”

“Well your ritual sounds stupid. Why not open the door for her?”

I stopped at the red light off Texas and 8th street in Weslaco. The one light where the Valero and laundry cleaner were at. The same light that always forgot what green was. The same red light where I once made out with a girl.

\*You never open the door for a stranger. You have no idea who you’re letting inside of your car. So instead, you slightly open your window and ask, “Who’s your Lyft driver?” I never let the person in my car until I hear my name and get their name.”

\* Once the passenger is in the car, you immediately ask how their night or day has been. You can get a good first impression about the person depending on how they respond.

\*If the passenger doesn’t seem like the talkative type, you turn on the radio.

\*You should take a jacket with you so you can mess with the A/C to the passenger’s liking. It can get very cold if a passenger wants you to lower the A/C.

\* Passengers will sometimes ask the driver to take them to get food or to the bathroom without adding it to their Lyft stop. It’s at the driver’s discretion if they decide to stop or charge extra.

“Oh. That makes a lot of sense,” said Rey.

Finally, the light had turned green, and I continued the story.

\*\*\*\*

“He sure knew how to kiss. And for once I kissed a guy who didn’t have bad breath,”  
said Aly.

\*\*\*\*\*

I remember this girl was being loud and annoying. She did not want to stop talking about the guy she had just kissed. To make things worse she had gotten a phone call.

“Guess who called her?” I asked.

“Idk,” said Rey.

“It was her boyfriend.”

“Ha. Dang. So she made out with some random guy behind her boyfriend’s back.” said  
Rey.

\*\*\*\*\*

She answered her phone.

“Hey baby. I’m on my way to the “Flying Walrus”. Sorry. I could not find a Lyft sooner.  
I’ll see you right now. Love ya.”

“So, long night?” I said to Aly.

“Oh yes. I just hate this whole social distancing thing. I can’t believe these bars are following the rules with having a certain capacity. It’s survival of the fittest. If you can’t make it out in the real world, then just stay home and social distance. It’s the people who are easy targets to this dumb virus that are making our lives miserable. I just wish things went back to the way they were. You get me?” Aly asked.

“Yea, this pandemic is dumb. But don’t be putting the blame on others. Yea, I get you. The people who are at risk are making our lives more difficult. But I have grandparents who are

at risk. So is my mom. Even I am. I have asthma. I care deeply for my family and would do nothing to ever put them in danger. So, I'm not sure where I stand in this pandemic. But it sure does suck. I don't know what I'm doing here. I need money to survive and so far, this virus hasn't killed me yet." I said.

I saw Aly look at me through the rear-view mirror. Her face gave off a disgusted expression. Her pink blush made her look like an evil clown. I'm scared of clowns.

"Oh. You're a Biden supporter. Danny don't lie to me. Did you vote for Biden?"

"Yes, I did. How can you tell?"

"Well, you sound like you actually believe this virus is a big deal just like all them Biden supporters. Also, you're wearing a mask. I can't believe you're wearing that stupid thing. They don't even work."

"Even if they don't work. It's protocol to wear them. I don't want you reporting me to Lyft and saying that I wasn't wearing a mask."

"Don't worry hun, I would never rat you out. So come on, take it off. Let me see your face."

"I'm still going to keep it on."

"It's ok hun, I won't make you take it off. But can I touch your muscles? They're so big."

We got to her destination at downtown McAllen. People were running and yelling loudly outside. Groups of people swarmed around my car and asked me to give them a ride. I saw the little Mexican man who would sell roses. He goes from person to person asking if you want to buy a special someone a rose. There was the homeless white bearded man who would sleep on the bench off Bicentennial and Chicago.



Aly got out of my car and opened the front door to the front seat. She started touching my arms and chest. She put her hands inside my muscle shirt and started feeling me around. I heard her breathing heavily. I didn't want her to stop.

"I'm sorry, Danny, I'll stop. This must be freaking you out. Thank you though. Here this is for you."

Aly got out of my car and left me a Forty Dollar tip in cash. I'm such a man whore.

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"Wow, dood that's some story you got there. Are you gonna write a book about it?" asked Rey.

"Sure."

We were almost at my house when Rey asked if we could stop by the GameStop in Weslaco. While on the way there Rey asked me if I ever had any regulars with Lyft.

"Yes, I did. This past summer I was helping a family take their children to school. They lived way out in Mission near Sharyland. The first time I went to pick up this family it was a brother and two sisters. They looked like they were around 16-20 years old. The oldest sister, Maggie, thanked me for picking them up."

"Thank you so much, Sir, for picking us up. We've been looking for a Lyft for hours. We had a driver pull up to our driveway. But the moment he saw us he drove off," said Maggie.

"That's horrible. I'd never do anything like that to you guys. Well, I'm here now. Where am I taking you all?" I asked.

"We're going to Walmart to get some groceries," said Maggie.

I dropped the family off at Walmart and before they got out, Maggie asked if I would be able to pick them up.

“Sure. No problem. Here’s my number. Call me when you guys are ready. I need to take a break anyway.”

So, I parked my car at the Whataburger parking lot next to the Walmart off Shary. I left the Lyft app on and closed my eyes.

Ding...Ding... Ding... Ding... Ding.

The sound of an alarm went off. It woke me up and made me swallow the drool hanging from my mouth. I looked out the window and the sun was going down. It was probably around 7:30 pm. My phone kept getting notification after notification for Lyft. I wanted to accept the rides, but I did not want to let those kids down. So, I turned the app off and waited for their call. After about forty-five minutes later, Maggie finally called me to pick them up. I drove my car to the front of Walmart and saw the family waiting outside. I got out of my car and helped them load up all their groceries.

“Thank you for waiting for us, sir. I like your hair.” said Maggie.

At the time my hair was down to my shoulders. I had hippie hair.

“Thanks. Yea, I was just resting. I've been driving all day.”

“Sir, do you know any places that are hiring right now? I need a job,” said Maggie.

“Yea I know Suerte is hiring so is the IHOP near your house.”

“I’ve tried all those places already. They are not hiring. Well, they didn’t hire me. I hate it here. I just want to go back home,” said Maggie.

“Where are you all from?”

“We’re from Nigeria,” said the youngest sister.

“Nigeria? That’s very far. Things must be different here,” I said.

“Yes, they are. What is chicken popcorn?” asked the youngest sister.

“Are you for real? “

“Yes.” said all the children.

“It’s fried chicken shaped like popcorn,” I said.

“Oh wow. Does it taste like popcorn?” asked Maggie.

“Haha no, it tastes like chicken.”

\*\*\*\*

“Dood they never had chicken popcorn before? That can’t be for real,” said Rey.

“I’m being serious. I would not lie about something like this.”

“Well, are you still picking them up?”

“Not anymore. I tried to help them as much as I could, but it was really taxing on me.”

“What do you mean?” asked Rey.

“Well, the family lived out in Mission and I live in Weslaco. I would go pick up Maggie every other day to take her to work. Or I’d pick up the brothers and sisters and take them to their relatives’ house. It was hard to say no. I did not know how to say no. I said yes, every time. I could not take their money. I know they needed it. Maggie worked a shitty job at Jimmy’s Egg. The price for the ride was more than what she made in a single shift. I’d sometimes just ask for five dollars.”

“Do they still call you?”

“Not anymore. I would stay up all night driving. Then I’d get a call around nine am as I was getting home, and it would be Maggie calling me. My sleep schedule was getting destroyed. I needed better sleep. After several months I told Maggie that I needed to fix my schedule and I couldn’t help her anymore.”

“So, you made like no money off them?” said Rey.

“Not really but helping them felt good.”

“Not helping them must have felt good, too”. said Rey.

We got to GameStop and got out of my car. We looked for Pokémon cards but only found others like us looking for them too. We left the store empty handed. While in my car Rey asked me if anything else happened to me while driving for Lyft. I told him the story of his “tocayo”

“Rey, I met a guy who had the same name as you.”

“Was he as good looking as me?”

“He’s taller than you,” I said.

“What’s so special about him?”

“This guy, Ray, is a built man. He was about 6’7.”

It was in the summertime around June when Covid was peaking back in 2020. I dug out of my hole and needed to make a living. Restaurants slowly started to open, and the Valley nightlife exploded. I felt sick. Social distancing was taking the life out of me. I needed to go out. I saw Lyft as an escape, and a way to meet new people. It felt like I was being unhealthy by rotting away at home, rather than risking my life with working out and making money. One morning I turned on the Lyft driver app and got on the road. It was a busy day. People were thanking me for being on the road. A lot of places had just opened in the Valley at fifty percent capacity. So, some people started going out. People told me they didn’t think they’d find a Lyft driver during this pandemic. There was this myth going around on social media about a curfew. If I remember correctly people were supposed to be indoors by 11 p.m. If you were caught out on the road cops would pull you over. This myth caused a panic with people who

partied almost every night. While I was doing Lyft around this time the roads were dead. No one was out at night except essential workers.

He was waiting at a storage warehouse off the expressway right before you take the Pharr exit. I accidentally passed the storage and had to drive around. Once I got to the passenger, he stood there staring at me. I pulled down my, felt the wind hit face and initiated the ritual.

“Ray?” I said.

“Danny”? asked the man.

We both said yes, and I let him in my car. The first thing he said was,

“You’re the first Lyft driver here in the Valley who hasn’t driven off at the first sight of me.”

“What do you mean”?

“Well, Danny. Look at me. I’m a tall black man. I thought you passed the storage just now because you saw me.”

“Oh that? No. I just missed the turn. I hate making turns off the Frontage Road.

“I’m starting to like you, Danny”.

“You say that to all your Lyft drivers, Ray.”

“No, because they always drive off.”

There was a silence for a moment. Ray broke it by talking about his daughter.

“I’m visiting down here from Minneapolis to see my daughter. My baby mama is here from the Valley. So that’s why I’m here.”

“How are things over there?”

“Oh, things are shit over there. Right now, you go outside and there’s protests in every corner. I ain’t taking my daughter over there. It’s safer down here.”

“How old is your daughter?”

“She turns four today.”

“What a great way to surprise her. She’s going to be happy to see you,” I said.

“Danny, I just don’t know what to say to her.”

“What do you mean?”

“We live in a world where we can’t leave our house without wearing a mask. We can’t even go to the movies. What do you do when your daughter thinks life has always been like this? She wakes up in the morning thinking we live in a society where people wear masks on a daily basis, and we stay at home all day social distancing. Danny, you don’t know how bad I want to take my daughter to the movies for her birthday. She thinks school has always been done over a Zoom call.”

I never saw things like that before until Ray had said those words to me. Kids are now going to be born in a world where we might have to wear masks for the rest of our lives.

I dropped off Ray at his baby mama’s house and before he got out of my car I said to him,

“Your daughter is lucky to have a dad like you.”

“Thank you, Danny. I’ll make sure to leave you a tip after I see my princess.”

“Hey Ray, you know what your name means in Spanish?”

“No. What?”

“It means King.”

Ray left a smile, grabbed his bags and waved goodbye.

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“Damn there’s some messed up people out there.” said Rey.

“Yea, I hate this whole pandemic. Nothing good has come out of it. You know Lyft promised me supplies so I can work during this pandemic?”

“What did you get?” said Rey.

“Nothing good. Lyft has not sent me one thing useful.”

In the span of this whole pandemic the only thing Lyft has ever done for me was to suspend my account.

“How did you get your account suspended?” asked Rey.

“Well, it was just temporary, but I was framed. A past passenger of mine accused me of being under the influence of alcohol and marijuana.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Again, back with what I told you earlier. Never give out too much information about yourself. There’s a lot of bitter people out there that only want to see people burn for their own amusement.”

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Aziz Bah, a Lyft driver and organizing director for the Independent Drivers Guild from New York City, wrote an article about the impact the Coronavirus had on the Lyft driver community. In this article he explains how the pandemic forced people to stay at home which would save lives. However, essential drivers “can’t virtually take someone to the airport.” Lyft drivers have had a difficult time adjusting to the pandemic and finding work. The lockdown affected businesses leading them to go out of business. This included rideshare drivers. How will drivers be able to pay for their car’s insurance and car payments while there’s a lockdown taking place? Bah conducted a survey of two hundred forty rideshare drivers in New York City. The survey informed Bah that “25% of drivers surveyed had a member of their household who had

COVID-19 symptoms and 11% of drivers had a family member who tested positive. 48% of the drivers did not have access to health care. 66% of drivers said they did not have access to personal protective equipment. Drivers basically were working with fear while letting strangers into their cars.

I basically risked my life and well-being for my job, but I'd say it was all worth it. I'm still going strong at it today. I would get on the road with nothing but a mask and my will to make money, risking my life with every mile I drove in the middle of a global pandemic.

Daniel Howley, a technology editor for Yahoo finance, wrote an article explaining how Lyft would provide its drivers with personal protection equipment. According to Lyft, their goal is to provide 60,000 shields to drivers. Us unemployed drivers also had the option to buy these shields online from Lyft. Sadly, the shields were always sold out. And Lyft never provided me even with a mask or sanitation. This was scary at a time when we did not even have any vaccines available.

So, you're probably wondering if I ever got any Pokémon cards of value? Thanks to Lyft, Rey and I made enough to buy valuable cards and, we were able to save a little money in case we ever got stuck in a pandemic again.

In 2021, several vaccines became available, Pfizer, Johnson and Johnson, and Moderna. The pandemic was a traumatic and psychologically draining experience. But I made it and I got to meet some very interesting characters along the way.



## CHAPTER XI

### LA TOXICA

#### Late That October Night

I was laying on the hotel bed looking at my phone, while Ana was passed out on the other bed. She fell asleep with a half empty bottle of wine in her hand. The bottle spilled on the white bed sheet and resembled a puddle of blood. The room reeked of sugar and alcohol. On the floor her red panties were twisted around two empty wine bottles. I felt so alone and bored. I contemplated leaving but I decided to wait it out. I got up and grabbed a pen and paper from the drawer next to the bed. I drew stars until they filled up the entire page.

The yellow lines withered away lost in time to the warped road. I was driving on Hutto Road in Donna, Texas. I felt every bump and crack on the road. I swerved left and right like the sober driver I was, probably avoiding only ten percent of the bumps. My Prius had formed a connection to my heart, and both could only take so much damage. I heard a loud thud and felt my car rock back and forth. I hit my head on the roof of my car and glasses flew off my face.

Earlier that night I turned on the Lyft app and drove towards McAllen. While I was listening to a gaming podcast a notification popped up on my phone:

*Ana 17 minutes away.*

I accepted. I got on highway 281 and followed the GPS towards Ana. It felt like an opportunity to do a good deed. This girl probably needed a ride for an emergency. The ride to pick up was fourteen miles away and the drop off was two miles. I thought the passenger would tip me well for the trouble I went through to pick her up. I had nothing else better to do.

### On the Expressway

“I’ll pay you to keep driving,” she said.

I was almost thirty years old and covid was still around. The PlayStation 5 was a month away from its official release. I thought that by doing this I would get closer to a new TV. The 65in LG CX. It supports hdmi 2.1. This lets you play games in 4k @120hz.

I followed the GPS and ended up at a Valero gas station in Donna. Before Ana got down, she asked how old I was.

“Thirty,” I said.

“No way you look twenty-one”. Do you have kids? Are you in a relationship?”

“No kids and I’m single.”

“I’m forty and have two kids. Take off that mask let me see your face.” she said.

I took off my mask and saw an older looking lady staring me in the eyes. Her eyes tried to swallow me alive in their painful darkness. Her thorny sharp vibes poked at me. I felt them trying to pull me in. I resisted and put my mask back on. I heard the seat belt unbuckle then the back car door slammed.

After about five minutes I heard the car door open. Ana was carrying two six packs of wine. I don’t remember the brand but that was the first time I saw someone buying wine from a gas station.

“Just keep driving, she said.”

She did not want me to stop. I left the gas station and started driving towards Harlingen on the expressway. She started talking about how she was getting a divorce.

“I’m not living with my husband, but we’re still married. He kicked me out after one night of me drinking. Covid did not help. That stupid pandemic kept me and my family hostage. They got tired of my drunken antics. I guess one night I went too far. My drinking scared my three children. My husband did not want me anywhere near them.”

I was driving past Mercedes on the freeway when I noticed the smell of alcohol had permeated the air. Ana had started drinking in the backseat of my car.

“You can park somewhere so you don’t have to be driving,” Ana said.

I don’t mind driving, I said.”

I heard a zipping sound. She reached into her purse and grabbed some money. She then began to fumble with the contents of her purse. Suddenly money poured onto my lap.

“Come on and park somewhere. I’ll still pay you for talking to me.,” she said.

I turned the car around and drove back towards Donna to find some place to park. The town where Sarah’s from.

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I met Sarah on Facebook, she added me. I sent Sarah an old 80’s song. She sent me a nude. I sent her a gym pick. She sent me a video of her touching herself. In the video I noticed she was wearing a wedding ring.

It started with likes to hearts then ended with us sexting each other.

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I ended up parking at a Whataburger in Donna, I heard her purse unzip again. She threw two twenties on the empty passenger seat.

“November 6, 2012 was the day I caught him talking to another girl on the phone. The same day I started my wine binge. After that, my marriage went to shit,” said Ana.

I tried my best to pay attention to her story. I acted like I cared.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Do you like the beach?” she asked.

“Yea I do. Why?”

“Let’s go. I’ll pay 200 dollars. It’ll just be for the night.”

I took a moment to think.

“Sure. But just the beach and we’re come back right after,” I said.

“OK. Do this for me please? I really need this. Please give this to me.”

“No problem, I’ll just be doing my job.”

While on the way to the beach Ana wanted to listen to music. I opened YouTube and handed her my iPhone. She put on a song called “Toxica”. That song burned a hole into my ears. Ana only listened to that one song. She started dancing. She started touching me all over my face and shoulders. I asked her to sit down. She did not listen. She then let herself into the front seat as I was driving. She stumbled to the front while spilling some of her wine on my seat. She got back up and acted like nothing happened. She then tried putting her hand down my shorts. I started swerving on the road and asked her to please stop.

“Pull over at the side of the road,” she said.

“Why?”

“Let me touch you.”

I told her we were not stopping till we get to the beach. She calmed down after that and passed out to Toxica playing in the background.

We stayed at a hotel that had a trail to the shore. While on the trail Ana asked for some music. I had left my phone in the room. So, we went back to the room. She pushed me on to the bed. My back fell on the soft cushion, and she jumped on top of me. Her head slowly moved closer to mine. The smell of wine came from her breath. It mixed with the smell of cigarettes from the room. I moved to the side, and she kissed me on the cheek. She missed my lips. I was thinking of Sarah. It felt like I'd betray her if I kissed Ana. While on top she begged me to give it to her. That awful breath turned me off. I freed myself from her grasp. I looked at her lying on the bed and she asked me why I didn't have a girlfriend.

I told her about Sarah and how things were complicated. Ana did not like that. I got the feeling she felt unwanted. Ana's husband didn't want her, I didn't either. Ana took off her panties and pulled me towards her.

"I'm going to get something from my car," I said.

"Don't go. Where are you going?" she asked.

I went to my car to get some condoms in the glove compartment. I only did this because I didn't want an accident to happen between us. I did not want to risk being a rather. I went back into the cigarette smelling room and approached the drunken wife. I got on top of her and showed her a condom.

"No. Don't put that on. It's not like I always do this. You can trust me. Nothing will happen," she said.

"I don't feel comfortable doing it without a condom."

"You're no fun. It's whatever you want to do," she said

"This is what I want to do. I'm just doing my job."

I had to dry hump her for a while till I found any arousal. I thought of Sarah and the 65in tv. I thought about the awesome sex we would talk about. I thought about having a baby with Sarah.

A week ago, Sarah texted me how she wanted me. She mentioned how she was watching murder documentaries.

“Don’t be scared of me though lol, I can be a little toxic,” she said.

Murder me if you can. Be as toxic as you want.”

“Let’s do it then,” she said.

“Where do you want me to cum?”

“In my mouth.”

“That’s boring,” I said.

“Then cum inside of me.”

“Would you let me?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I want to cum inside of you. Just keep going or tell me to keep going.”

“I want you daddy.”

“I want you too, baby.”

“I want my cum all inside of you.”

“I want you to keep your dick inside when you do. I don’t like protection.”

“I want to feel you all inside. Ride me while I touch your clit.”

“Give me your baby. Idc.” she said.

“Would you want a boy or girl?” I asked.

“A girl. I already thought of a name for her.”

“What’s the name?”

“Tokyo.”

“Tokyo will be a beautiful baby,” I said.

At the hotel I finally got aroused and put the condom on all thanks to my fantasies of Sarah.

“Ay te queiro mucho,” Ana said.

Ana tried to kiss me, but I still moved my lips away from hers. I felt her breath trying to choke me. I just wanted this to be quick. I didn't even try.

“Ay que rico.”

I was getting closer and closer.

“Where do you want me to come?”

“Cojame. Cojame. Cojame.”

She looked at me with a serious face. She grabbed both of my cheeks with each of her hands. I looked at the white wall in front of me. As soon as I was getting close, I pulled out with the condom on still on. I got off the bed and went to flush the condom down the toilet.

“Where are you going babe?”

She started calling me babe. I wanted to gag. I decided to play along. I saw it as like she’s paying me for all this. I’m just doing my job.

“Come lay down with me babe,” she said.

I thought if I played my cards right, she’d pay me even more money. I put my shorts back on and lay next to her. She started kissing me on the cheek. I pulled myself away. I could tell she wanted a round two. I just wanted my TV already.

“Do you think my family will forgive me?” asked Ana.

“Yes, your kids will never stop loving you.”

“I’m going to hell,” she said.

“Well before that you still have time to change. You need to stop drinking.”

“I can’t. It makes all the pain go away.”

“There’s no need to live every day like it’s your last day to live,” I said.

“I talked to my youngest over the phone a month ago. I miss her so much. She told me she wanted me to stop drinking. She said this to me as I was sipping on some wine. Even when I go to work, I’m sipping on wine.”

“Where do you work?” I asked.

I think Ana said she worked with something in the oil rigs. She said she did everything at home over the phone. Apparently, it paid great money. She wanted to know about the type of girls I was talking to. I told her more about Sarah, and she fell asleep instantly. I heard her snoring as I got to the part about me wanting to have a baby with Sarah. I got away from Ana and went to lay down on the other bed.

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About a month ago I woke to a phone call from Sarah. She told me she had something to tell me. I thought she was going to say she had a baby or had been catfishing me.

“The thing is I don’t know if you’ll remain talking to me, because some people have issues with things like this, which I don’t blame them. You know shit just happens. Mistakes are made and I made several of them.” she said.

“Nothing will change what I feel and think about you,” I said.



“I’m married. I’m technically not living with my husband right now. It’s been a whole month. I’ve been married for three years. You probably don’t want nothing to do with me anymore.”

“This does not change anything. I don’t care if you’re married.”

“Rene would hit me and manipulate me. He made me delete my Facebook. And did not trust any of my friends.”

“How can you marry a guy like that?” I asked.

“I was young and dumb. He proposed to me after a month of going out. He offered me a place to live. I mainly did it just to escape my family.”

“Did you want to have a baby with him?”

“Ew. No. That guy is a loser. I don’t know why I stayed with him for three years. That’s three years gone. But you’re different. Before we started talking, I did not want a baby. But with you I want one.”

“I’m flattered. Is this what you say to every new guy you talk to?” I asked.

“Believe me. I don’t talk to many guys. I dated my husband in high school. We broke up after graduation. Two years later we started dating for a month and he proposed to me.”

Sarah and I had planned to meet and have the baby soon. She was having trust issues with me. She had left red flags left and right. We may have been rushing things. I knew I wanted a baby with her though. It would have gotten me off my butt and find purpose. I didn’t care if she wanted to be a single baby mama. I doubt she was catfishing me. She looked beautiful in her pictures. A 5’1 girl with a double d chest. Her toxic personality didn’t matter if we we’re creating something beautiful together.

Towards the end of the summer of 2020 things went to shit after I gave Sarah my Facebook password. It was only to show her how serious I was about her. She gave me hers too, but I didn't look at it. She took the time to go through all my messages. I did not delete anything. Maybe I should have. But there was nothing for me to hide. She found a bachelor party group chat of mine. A bachelor party that was from over two years ago. In the chat my friends were saying how all the strippers were all over me. I don't know who named the chat, but it had the name "Tittie Committee".

"Lol Danny, you curled up the second you got attention. And you got all the attention," Cris said.

"Girls have never treated me that nicely before. Usually, they just want my money," I said.

"What happens at the titty bar stays at the titty bar," David said.

"I think I fell in love like five times there," I said.

Sarah found this conversation and took back everything we had planned. She said I'm just like the rest of the guys.

"Wtf did you do with the strippers?" she asked.

"It's not what you think."

"Just go ahead and give girls your money. I had the wrong idea about you. You should have not given me your password."

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At the island I heard Ana wake up. I asked her if she still wanted to go to the shore.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"It's already 6am."

“We have to go back already before daddy wakes up.”

We left the room and went walking back to the beach from the trail. She asked me to put some music on. I was already tired of that “Toxica” song. I put the first song I saw on YouTube by Linkin Park. “New Divide”. The song played as we followed the bridge to the sand. She grabbed my arm and put her head on it, I think she had trouble walking from all that wine she drank earlier. We sat in front of the bridge and stared out at the water. I smelled the sand and the water; I smelled the wine on her breath. I heard the waves crashing on the shore. Even though I had a horrible night, the view at that moment was beautiful. I saw the sun rising at the furthest end of the ocean. A neon looking orange line traced across the ends of the water and it slowly rose. I tried to drown out everything that happened earlier with the beautiful view. Ana rested her head on my shoulder. The wind scratched me on my arms. It felt cold. I felt the breeze go through my muscle shirt and shorts. As the sun got brighter and rose higher, we saw some man riding a unicycle across the beach. I’m not going to lie but he was riding it like a professional.

“When’s your birthday”? Ana asked.

“July 8<sup>th</sup>, what about you?”

“Mine is on December 21st. You’re a water and I’m a fire. We’re not compatible.”

I may know nothing about astrological signs but us not being compatible sounds like a good sign to me.

We stood sitting there till the sun covered the sky. I pictured myself swimming out in the water like a Cancer. And she just stood staring at me soaking under the sun like a Sagittarius.

After a while we both got up and headed back to my car. In my car she put “Toxica” on again then she grabbed my hand. Once we got to Harlingen, she told me more about her family.

“Don’t worry, babe, I’ll pay you. I make a lot of money. My dad also makes a lot of money. Promise me you won’t tell anyone?”

“Ok. I promise,” I said.

“Well, my dad used to be a part of the cartel. He would deal with all types of drugs in Mexico. This is why we have a lot of land and live in a nice house.”

We were getting closer to Donna. It’s almost all over.

“So hey, are you going to pay me?” I asked.

“Oh yea, sure. How much did I owe you?”

“You said two hundred,” I said.

She let go of my hand and stopped calling me babe. I think then she realized I was only here for business. It looked like Ana did not remember offering me two hundred dollars. I took her to a Bank of America in Alamo off the expressway. I stopped next to the ATM machine. She got out of my car and tried to get money out. Shortly after, she went back in my car.

“Um... the bank is not accepting my card. Daddy must have seen me pay for the hotel and canceled my card.”

“So how are you going to pay me?”

“Take me home and I’ll use my tablet to send you money through Cash App.”

I got off Hutto road and turned on the forgotten street name. I parked outside her house where three dogs in the back yard barked at me. We walked in through the back of her house, and she asked me to sit on the living room couch. She had a nice house. I saw many photos of her and her family. I thought she must have been telling me the truth. She brought me her tablet and asked me to put however much money she owes me. I put two hundred dollars.

“You sure? Is that all I owe you?” she asked.

“Yea, you promised me two hundred last night.”

We said our last goodbyes and I waited for that money for several days. She never sent me the money. I felt so used after that. I still made one hundred dollars for the ride from all the money she threw at me. I was only two hundred dollars short.

I look back at this event and get disgusted about what I did. I got easy money and I did a girl a favor. I learned my lesson. Next time I do a favor like that for a person, I need to make sure to ask for the money up front before going to the destination. It could have been worse. Ana could have stolen from me. What started off as a slow October night ended up being one wild unforgettable one.

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A few days after the incident with Ana at the beach, Sarah texted me for the last time.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she asked.

I was playing video games to get my mind off of her and the money Ana owed me.

“I’m just playing some Star Wars game. How are you?” I asked.

She replied within several minutes.

“I’m doing good. I’m lying down with my dogs.”

I replied right away asking how many dogs she was with. She never replied after that.

The next day she deleted her Facebook account. I haven't heard from her since. I moved on since the

## . CHAPTER XII

### TOSS A COIN TO YOUR LYFTER

In late May of 2021, I got a Lyft notification for a “Keyla.” I already wanted to call it a night. “One more ride shouldn't hurt”, I thought. The GPS had taken me to some gated community in Edinburg. I parked my car in front of the destination and waited for the passenger.

I saw a short girl with her hair up in a bun walking towards my car and I lowered the window down.

“Ride for Keyla?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I unlocked the door and she got in the back seat of my car.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“It’s Danny.”

“Do you usually pick up crazies doing this?” she asked

“Oh, all the time. You get used to it.”

Suddenly, I heard her phone ring.

“My ex-boyfriend keeps calling me. It gets so annoying. He punched me on the nose a couple of months ago. I look hideous,” she said.

“No, you don’t.” “Don’t worry. My mom promised me that I’ll get surgery done on my nose soon.

“Your nose looks fine to me,” I said.

“Why did your ex punch you? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“He gets jealous because guys would message me on Instagram or text me sometimes. And I wouldn’t even reply to most of them. He would get my phone and look through the messages. He’d beat me for every guy in my inbox,” she said.

“That’s horrible. Did you get a restraining order on him?” I asked.

“Yes, but that doesn’t even change anything. He still calls me and tries to see me.”

“Block his number then.”

“You don’t think I’ve tried that. He’ll just use another number,” she said.

I heard her phone ring again.

“Ugh, hold on. Let me just get this over with real quick. You know what? I’ll put him on speaker.”

Keyla answered her phone, and I heard a guy crying.

“Baby, I’m sorry. Take me back. I’m nothing without you. If you don’t take me back, I don’t know what I’ll do to myself.”

I saw Keyla roll her eyes back.

“Goodbye, Juan.”

Keyla hung up her phone.

“I’m so sorry for that. What’s your name?”

“It’s Danny.”

“Daddy?”

“No, Danny.”

“Oh ok, how old are you?”

“I’m thirty years old.”

“What- no way. You don’t look that age. I turn twenty-three next month,” she said.

The drive wasn’t that far from where I picked up Keyla. When we got to her house I parked in front of her mailbox. I don’t remember the exact location of her house or the street name. I do recall Keyla living near Dove Street in McAllen. I remember her street having the name of bird since all the streets near Dove are named after a bird. It was also close to the Gold’s Gym on Dove. I sometimes would go there to work out.

“Alright, well, we’re here,” I said.

I went to my phone and put that I dropped off Keyla on the Lyft app.

“Do you have any plans right now?” she asked.

“No, I’m pretty much done for the night.”

I grabbed my phone from the mount and signed out of the Lyft app.

“So, what’s your name?”

“It’s Danny, I told you already.”

I turned around and finally got a good look at Keyla. She was wearing tiny red shorts and a white T-shirt with Baylor written on it in red letters. She had taken off her sandals and was barefoot in my backseat. She had long blonde hair which she pulled up in a bun. There was nothing even wrong with her nose. I thought she looked beautiful.

“I’m sorry,” she said.



I saw her dig into her purse, and she pulled out a tobacco cartridge. The battery for the cart had a “Rick and Morty” design on it. She took a quick drag and blew the smoke on my face. She may have cast some brujeria on me after blowing that smoke.

“Hey, do you want to hit this?” she asked.

“Sure.”

I normally don’t smoke that kind of stuff, but I was feeling the moment. I grabbed the cart from her and took a small drag. Smoke filled up my car and I passed it back to her.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“It’s 5:00 am.”

“Ugh. I have to go to work in two hours.”

“Seven till when?” I asked.

“I’m out at twelve P.M. It’s at a coffee shop my uncle owns. My family lets me work there for extra cash.”

“That’s nothing; you’ll be out before you know it.”

“You’re so cool.” she said.

“Thanks. You know we should hang out again sometime. I’ll take you out on a Lyft adventure.”

I had promised myself I wouldn’t fall into this pattern again, but I have weakness for pretty girls. I was living in the moment, and I let my guard down.

“I’d love that. Let’s go to the beach. Pick me up after I get out,” she said.

“Alright sure, just let me know when you’re ready.”

“Hey, what’s your name?”

“It’s Danny. You already forgot?”

“No, I didn’t.”

I took my seat belt off so I could turn around and talk to her better.

Keyla told me about how she was living in China for six months with her sister.

Apparently, she’s used to traveling around the world.

“Hey, do you have an Instagram?” she asked.

“Yea I do.”

We exchanged contacts and then she started to show me her Instagram pictures. She looked gorgeous in her pictures. I thought this girl was like a celebrity or a model.

Keyla pointed at a picture of her and a guy in a helicopter.

“That’s me and my ex. He took me to Chicago, and we rode around the city in a helicopter during the night. It was amazing.”

She then pointed at another picture of her in a fancy white sports car on the roof of a skyscraper. It looked like she was on the set of a music video.

“The white car in the picture belonged to my ex.”

She then showed me all the pictures of her traveling around the world from China to Greece then to Japan. After seeing her pictures, it seemed like she lived a life of luxury. I then looked outside my window and noticed she lived in a two-story house. A light brown brick house with trees surrounding the front yard. I thought that she must be rich or come from a rich family. I also saw a bunch of religious posts and bible quotes on her Instagram. I can’t remember the exact quotes, but I thought she came from a Christian family.

I realized I hadn’t met people like this before because I grew up in Weslaco, a small city where nothing exciting ever happened. Before I worked for Lyft, I hardly ever traveled far from my hometown. I stayed close to home and socialized mainly with my high school friends. But

now I was exposed to different types of people with different backgrounds. My lack of experience with this led me to make bad decisions. I did not know what I was getting myself into.

“Do you want kids?” she asked.

“Yes, one day with the right person.”

“I absolutely love children. I’m always around my little nieces. They’re so cute.

“My sister is going to have a baby soon so I’m going to be an uncle,” I said.

“Congratulations, that’s amazing. I really want kids. I want to be a mom already.”

“I want to be a teacher first though. Once I become a teacher, I’ll make a steady income so I can start a family.”

“My mom is a teacher here in McAllen. She works at a private school. And I know she can get you a job,” she said.

“Really?”

“Yes, silly.”

“I’d like that then.”

“Here hit this again,” she said.

She got closer to me from the back seat, and I got closer to her from the front.

I passed the cart back to her. She got even closer.

“What’s my name?” I asked.

Keyla and I ended up face to face breathing on each other.

“Danny,” she said.

I felt her warm breath in every syllable caress my face. At the same time, we both went in for a kiss. I put my right hand on her cheek, and she wrapped her arms around my neck. The breathing started to intensify.

“Should I go to the back?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I didn't not even bother getting out of my car, I just leaped to the backseat from the front. I got right next to her, and she put her arms around me again and we started kissing more. I felt her wet tongue go in my mouth. I then started to bite her bottom lip.

“Should I take off my shorts?” she said.

“If you want.”

Keyla quickly took her shorts and underwear off.

“Do I take mine off too? I asked.

“Yes.”

The moment I took my shorts off she bent down and used her mouth. It felt amazing. She then picked up her head and got on top of me. She started moaning and breathing hard. I put my hands under her shirt and felt her breasts. She took apart her hair bun and I saw all her hair fall to her shoulders. She had beautiful golden locks.

“What's my name?”

“Danny,” she said.

It felt so good. Passion filled up my car. My windows got all foggy. You could not see anything that was happening inside my car. Both of us started sweating. I grabbed her butt and helped her move up and down. She started to move faster.

“I'm going to cum,” I said.

“She looked at me and kept riding.”

I felt my climax starting and she was riding me still. She then stopped and slowly got off. It looked like she was thinking if she should get off or not. She laid on my lap and said she wanted me.

Keyla looked at the clock and saw the time.

“I got to go,” she said.

“I’ll message you in the morning,” I said.

“Ok. I’ll let you know about the beach.”

She got out of my car, and we said our goodbyes. I could still smell her perfume in my car, it smelled like berries and apples. She made me feel desired for a moment. The small time we spent in my car gave me a rush and I felt alive. I wanted to feel this again, so I thought seeing her would make it happen. We both wanted children and it felt like we had a deep connection even though we did not know each other very well. It’s like she knew what I wanted to hear. When she told me that her mom could get me a job as a teacher, I thought maybe it was a sign. I had experienced major difficulties in trying to get my teacher certification, so this seemed like a great opportunity for me. For a moment, I could see my future and it felt like someone was trying to help me. Having unprotected sex was something I did not take lightly. I was just too caught up in the moment to think logically.

After I woke up the next day, I could still smell her perfume all over my body. I messaged her on Instagram “good morning” and asked if she made it into work.

“Yes lol.” she replied.

“Ok cool. Let me know when you want to go on that Lyft adventure.”

She did not reply to my message.

A month had passed and still no message from Keyla. I had some anxiety after that. I thought she is trying trap me and get child support. Maybe I had gotten her pregnant? I asked friends about it, and I got the same response every time.

“It’s just a one-night stand, bro.”

I started thinking if she did get pregnant, I’d have to take responsibility and be there for her. I have had friends who told me stories of how their baby daddy or husband would bail on them. I was not going to be that kind of person.

I heard my phone vibrate while in the shower. I peeked out of the shower and saw that Keyla had messaged me again. I instantly thought that she missed her period. In the message Keyla was asking for a ride to San Antonio. I did not reply right away. I needed time to think it over. After about fifteen minutes later Keyla called me through Instagram.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she asked.

I made something up on the spot.

“Oh, I’m just checking to see if my car is able to drive.”

“So, can you take me?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“What do you mean you don’t know? It’ll be fun.”

“I need to change my oil. I also need to check my tires. What if something were to happen to us? I don’t want to get you stranded in the middle of nowhere. Plus, it’s one AM.”

“We’ll be fine. It’s just San Antonio. It’s a win-win for both of us. You go and drop me off and you can drive and make a lot of money.”

“Why do you need to go to San Antonio?” I asked.

“Well, I have bad news.”

Uh-oh my heart stopped. This is it. I'm going to be a dad I thought.

I got in a horrible car accident," she said.

"Are you ok?" I asked somewhat relieved.

"Yes, thank God, but my car isn't. You see, I was going to Fiesta Texas for my birthday.

I was going to meet up with my cousins there. So will you take me?"

"I don't know. I need time to think."

"There's no time. You've had enough time to think. I'll make it worth your while. We can go on a date. And I'll pay you for the ride. But it would be nice if you give me a friend discount."

"Ok. I'll be there in like thirty minutes. Be ready," I said.

"Thank you so much. Message me when you're near."

I grabbed a bag and threw some clothes in it. I got my toothbrush, toothpaste and deodorant and threw them in the bag.

She was very persuasive and did not take no for an answer. I did not know what I was doing. This girl literally ignored me for about a month and now I'm taking her to San Antonio. I parked outside where she was staying and called her. She said she'd be right out.

I thought of what was going to happen in San Antonio. Maybe she would want me to just stay with her. I thought of going to Fiesta Texas with her. The image of making out on a slow ride popped in my head. We'd be up miles in the sky both feeling the adrenaline from the ride and each other.

I saw a red car go in the driveway. A girl and guy stepped out of the car, the girl was carrying a bouquet of roses, which I thought maybe were for Keyla. I saw the front door of the

house open; Keyla walked out and ignored the two people. She had a big bag around her arm. I opened the door for her.

“Hey, long time no see,” I said.

“Hey, I’m sorry I didn’t reply to you. It’s not like I wasn’t thinking about you. I wanted to message you, but I’ve been so busy. I haven’t even been going or hanging out with friends,” she said.

“It’s ok. We’re going on an adventure now.”

“Ok. Let’s go,” I said.

“So, who were those people from the red car?”

“Oh, that girl was my friend. She brought me roses for my birthday and wanted me to stay at her house. We’re not talking to each other anymore.”

That sounded like some drama I did not want to get involved in.

While on the road I asked her to put a song on.

“No, you put something on,” she said.

“Ok.”

I went on YouTube from my phone and put some synthwave on. It’s like a mix between 80’s sounding music and instrumental. It’s heavy on the synthesizer sound. I didn’t put it too loud just in case we were going to talk.

“Hey, can I come over to your house next time? We can maybe watch a movie.”

“Sure, we can smoke, cuddle and watch movies,” I said.

“I’d like that. You should come visit me at my new job.”

“Yea, I’ll see you. Where do you work?” I asked.



“I work at Yard House. It’s at La Plaza Mall in McAllen. I work on the weekends.

Speaking of work, I thought today sucked. I got my period today.”

I felt a load off my shoulders, but deep inside I admit I was a little disappointed. At least I knew then she wasn’t pregnant.

After driving for a little over an hour we got to the checkpoint. The urge to sing came up and I wanted to sing in front of Keyla. I wanted to be cheesy, so I put “Make a Man Out of You”, from the Disney film “Mulan”.

“Have you heard of this song?” I asked.

“No, what is it?”

Oh no...red flag; she’s not a woman of culture. Either way, I still was going to sing my heart out. After that I put on some N’sync, Muse and Linkin Park. She did not recognize any of the songs.

The singing gave me a rush and it made me feel alive. I turned to my side and saw Keyla passed out cold. I’m not sure how long she listened to my performance. I put some more synthwave back on and kept my eyes on the road.

About an hour away from San Antonio, Keyla woke up. She started telling me how she liked to live in the moment.

“I can’t stand people who just want to stay home and watch movies. I don’t like to think. I like to move and go places. I just go for it. While I was in China, I did not have a car. So, I would hitchhike rides from strangers. Everyone was so nice there. You need to take risks. Do you like taking risks?”

I’m one of those people who just wants to cuddle and watch movies all day. Another red flag I got from Keyla. She doesn’t even know what she’s talking about, she keeps contradicting

herself. One second, she invites herself to watch movies. The next second she tells me she hates going to guys' houses to watch movies.

I thought about turning back, but we were only about an hour away from San Antonio.

“Yea I like taking risks. Why do you think I’m here?” I asked.

We got to San Antonio around six am. I had to piss so bad, but for some reason every gas station would not let me in their store. A cop approached while I was parked at a Valero gas station.

“Hello Officer, do you know where I can go to the bathroom? There’s not a Whataburger in sight and every gas station is closed from the inside,” I said.

“Nope, I’m sorry. I can’t help you there. You can’t be here. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

I ended up holding it in.

We left and headed to Keyla’s cousin’s house. I did not know what would happen next.

Am I just going to go home empty handed with no money? Will I get to stay with Keyla?

These questions filled my head while seconds away from the house. My heart started beating fast. This moment had built itself up for four hours. I really wanted to hold Keyla again.

“We’re here.”

“Thank you so much. This means so much to me. I promise I’ll make it up to you. I mean it. What’s your cash app?” she asked.

“We can talk about that later,” I said.

Keyla went in for a small peck on my lips. Nothing like what we had done before.

“Hey, can I have another kiss?” I asked.

I thought I was being funny, but it just looked awkward. Then she probably gave me the worst kiss I've ever received. And that was it. She left.

I had no idea what to do. I did not want to drive back to the Rio Grande Valley. My eyes did not want to stay open. I was hoping Keyla might invite me to stay the night with her, but she didn't. I did not want to spend money for a hotel room.

As I was leaving San Antonio the urge to go to the bathroom kicked in again, but ten times worse. I barely made it to a Truck stop outside of San Antonio. I needed to take a quick nap. I didn't think my eyes had enough energy to stay awake. I locked my doors in the parking lot of the gas station and put my seat back. I passed out for about three hours. The sun stabbed me with its rays. They burned. I felt my body drenched in sweat. I went to my trunk and put some deodorant on. I left Keyla a message saying "hey" with several hearts.

I decided to take another risk. I was going to wait for Keyla and just do Lyft in San Antonio until I knew she was okay. I wanted to make sure she found a ride back to the Valley. I did care for her and did not want to be responsible if anything happened to her. Plus, she had promised we would spend some time together and I held on to this notion. I kept thinking about driving back, I wasn't sure what to do. So, I decided to just wait. I also saw this as an opportunity to make money.

I got back on the freeway, turned on the Lyft app and headed to the direction of San Antonio.

The business and traffic in San Antonio was different compared to the Rio Grande Valley. On Expressway 281, a traffic jam happens every thirty minutes. Good luck getting somewhere in McAllen to Mission in under thirty minutes during traffic hours. The construction there was so bad. Never get on 281 with one bar of gas. The highway brought together

neighboring cities in the Valley. Starting at Brownsville, the Southern tip of Texas, and stretching out across all the cities in the Valley. The road extends all through the United States all the way up to North Dakota. Every other exit on Highway 281 is closed. I always get claustrophobic when driving cramped in places. I hate driving when there are only two lanes and hardly any breathing room on the sides. Not once have I seen an actual person working out on the freeway. I'd be a liar if I said there was any progress. As I'm writing this, 281 is still under construction. It doesn't matter which direction you're driving. You are not dodging that traffic jam. My guess is they're building more lanes and another merger. I won't even go to McAllen until after midnight. Please stay away from the expressway if you're driving past Pharr, Mission, or McAllen if you're ever in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. I consider these cities "traffic danger zones." The construction might not even be done during my lifetime. It's worse than the Spring break traffic South Padre Island would get on its bridge.

In San Antonio I was driving during rush hour, but the extra lanes made driving on the expressway a breeze. Now, I didn't need to worry about getting stuck in traffic with a passenger. The traffic in San Antonio was always moving unlike the Valley where it stalled. I could see Expressway 281 becoming like San Antonio's freeways in the near future.

I continued driving all day till the evening, and still nothing from Keyla. I thought I had gotten played. Maybe she used me, and I dropped her off at her ex's house.

I took another nap. My eyes had gotten weak. I parked at a Whataburger, locked my doors, put my seat back and passed out. My phone was dying, and I needed to leave my car on to keep my phone alive. I ended up turning my phone off to save power. I napped for several hours before waking up in a puddle of sweat again. I needed food in my stomach. I had nothing to eat that day. I wanted to shower, too.

I turned on my phone and I had two text messages from Keyla.

“Hey, I’m sorry, I forgot to reply. I’m barely going to Fiesta Texas,” she said.

“It’s ok. I’m actually here in SA right now. Were you going to need a ride back?”

“OMG, you’re still here. You’re crazy. Yes, I need a ride, I’m leaving tomorrow but late.

But I might want to go home tonight, but really late.”

“Actually, I think I might just go home. I want to sleep, and I don’t want to get a room,” I said.

She did not reply. I did a few more Lyfts waiting for a reply, but nothing. At least I made good money while in San Antonio, but the money did not matter at all to me. I waited and waited, but no reply. So, I ended up going back home.

The drive back nearly killed me. My eyes did not want to stay up. I kept calling friends to help me stay up. The road got blurry. I started to see multiple yellow lines on the road, I kept swerving to the side. The loud roar noise it made helped keep me awake. I slapped myself on the cheek a couple of times too.

A month had passed since I took Keyla to San Antonio. I still had not heard from her. I left her a message asking about our date and telling her how my birthday was coming up.

“Really? My niece's birthday is that day. She'll be five. I'll try my best to see if we can hang that day. I promise,” she said.

That text message got my hopes up shortly. Well, she did not message me on my birthday, nor did I see her. A few days after my birthday she left me another text.

“Hey, I've honestly been really busy and just going through a lot. I’m not trying to ignore you whatsoever, so I apologize. I will send you the money like I promised. I haven’t forgotten.” And I’m going to Europe with my family for a couple of weeks. So, I’ll be gone,’ she said.

“Ok, what about our date?” I asked.

“I’m kind of talking to someone right now. So, we can hang out, but you know.”

“Wow, so much for our date.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“The date you promised me,” I said.

“I never promised you anything.”

“You did not even pay me for the ride.

“I’ll pay you as soon as I get the money,” she said

“Whatever, I knew you were playing me.”

“No, I’m not, I’m a girl of my word.”

“Yup just like you promised me a date,” I said.

“Stop.”

“You know what? I did not want to tell you, but one of the reasons why I stayed talking to you was because of the night I first picked you up. After what had happened, the thought of something happening stayed in my head. I wanted to keep in touch just in case you got pregnant.

“What are you talking about?”

“Wow, you don’t remember that either?” I asked.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

“We had unprotected sex in my car.”

“No, we did not. Don’t say stuff like that,” she said.

“Yes, we did.”

“This conversation is stopping right here. When I get the money, I’ll pay you.”

Keyla never did pay me back. She never paid me for the ride to the San Antonio either.

Lesson learned, always ask for your money up front if you're doing a Lyft under the table. You have to make things happen for yourself. You can't trust people you don't know very well. Trusting someone takes time to build. You can't force someone to like you

It was a horrible incident, but I was able to make the most money I had ever made in Lyft in one day, 300 dollars, but I still didn't feel like a winner.

I put my hands on the wheel and kept driving. I kept going forward no looking back.

## CHAPTER XIII

### SANTA MARIA JUANA

Old 83 used to be the original expressway. Old 83, or Business 83 as some called it, goes from Harlingen all the way to Penitas, Texas. The distance between Mission and Penitas was fifty-three miles, and Old 83 extended across the whole country up until you got to North Dakota, where it became Manitoba 83 at the Canadian border. I've only been to Penitas a few times because of Lyft. There's not much out there but empty roads.

Old 83 is like the back side of the Valley, yet you take the back door to every city you pass. The only downside for taking this road was the chance of getting stuck at a red light. I always thought that if you combined all the cities from the Rio Grande Valley, you'd get one big major city like Austin or San Antonio. I find it remarkable that you can access many cities by just taking Old 83 or exiting off Highway 281. Sadly, the construction made traveling around the Valley a hassle during the day. I would use it when the traffic was bad on highway 281.

It was the hottest night in September of 2010, I drove down Midway Road with my friend Maria. Once at the stop sign, I put down the windows and connected the auxiliary cord to my phone. I switched between The Doors and The Strokes. I remember banging my head to the long keyboard solo in "Light My Fire".



I drove like a maniac just to avoid all the bumps. The worn-out road reminded me of the stretch marks on my hips, long lines in the shapes of lightning bolts. The white paint that separated the road from incoming traffic withered away, nothing but pure blackness drowned out the brightness from the stars. I could not even see the trees or telephone poles that lined the street. There was a house with a light on and a dog that would bark at any passing car. I heard the fence rattle and the dog barking the moment I passed by the house. My nose was burned from the putrid sewer air. It would make me think of old, soggy baby diapers. The smell made me feel nauseated. Its noxious fumes gave me a slight gag reflex. I held my breath and clenched my thumb and index finger on my nose to cover my nostrils. I turned to Maria who mimicked my hypochondriac actions. She turned her head towards me and started laughing at how ridiculous we looked.

As I was about to laugh, I took my eyes off the road and looked at Maria. She wore a thin purple long sleeve shirt. Every bump on the road made her chest jiggle up and down. Her faded blue jeans were torn on each knee, and she had her fake blonde hair in a ponytail. I wanted to dig my fingers in and caress it slowly. Not even her strong Yves Saint Laurent Black Opium perfume could masque that pungent sewer smell. I bet she thought I looked like a bum. She hadn't commented on the pink muscle shirt I was wearing. I found it on the floor of my room before taking off to the spot. My navy-blue shorts barely touched above my knees. I bet she thought I looked like some surfer dude from California. I wondered if she noticed that I was wearing sandals. I bought my black flip flops at Walmart for five dollars. The putrid smell had finally worn off when we reached the end of the road.

There was an open piece of land about the size of a football field with a maze of tall sugar cane on the left, and a gray totem tower on the right. It was my friend Rey who had told

me about the spot. He said no one would ever go out there. I parked by the stone totem pole. I think it was a pipe for the sewage. Around the floor of the tower stood a graveyard of Natural Light and Budweiser cans, which formed a circle. A rusted metal staircase wrapped around the totem.

Rey told me that if you go past the field, you'll get to a wooded area packed with trees. He went wandering there alone one day and found animal skeletons lying on the floor. They were in a red circle drawn with blood. If any crazed cultist came running after Maria and me, I would beat them with the baseball bat I had in the trunk of my Escape.

Maria stepped out of my car and walked up the snake-like staircase before I even got to turn off my Escape. I grabbed my backpack and caught up to Maria. I followed her shadow up the stairs. Once up on top of the gray tower I sat next to Maria at the end of the staircase. Our legs and feet both dangled about 12 feet in the air. I opened my bag and grabbed a Dasani water bottle. There was a small sheet of foil paper wrapped around where the bottlecap was supposed to be. I poked some holes on foil with a toothpick. I snatched a lighter from my pocket and made a hole for the mouth and an even smaller hole as a breather to trap the smoke in the bottle.

In the front pocket of my bag, I snatched the sack of Marijuana. I grabbed a little over a gram and laid it out on a notebook I pulled out of my bag. I felt the wind scratch my left cheek with its cat paws; goosebumps scattered across both my arms. Both Maria and I grinded the herb with our hands; our fingers occasionally touched. The urge to grab her hand crept closer the longer we grinded. I was not sure if I should go any further because I felt like she was out of my league, and for sure she had a boyfriend. I felt like I had a connection with her that I had never experienced before.

I heard Pink Floyd coming out from my pocket. I pulled my phone out and raised the volume to “Money”. I grabbed a small amount of bud and placed it on the foil. Maria handed me the lighter. The bottle filled with a thick white smoke. I blew the smoke into Maria’s face. I passed her the bottle. I placed more bud on the foil for her. She took a hit and blew the smoke into my face. She told me about her job. She worked in Dillard’s at La Plaza Mall in McAllen, but it was her day off.

“How many days do you have off? I asked.

“Only two.”

“Random days?”

“Yes.” she said.

“What if I go to your store looking for a dress?”

“For your mom?”

“No, for me...yes, of course my mom,” I said.

“Are you going to school, Danny?”

“Yea, I just started, I want to be an English teacher.”

“Danny, I don’t wanna smoke out of the bottle anymore.”

I pulled out a grape flavored blunt wrap from my bag. I didn’t know how to roll, so Maria offered to roll the blunt. While she was rolling, I rested my back on the floor of the staircase with my arms behind my head. I turned my head to the wooded area and saw nothing but black. Maria got a lighter out of her Gucci purse and lit the blunt up.

When I got up Maria passed the blunt to me. I breathed it in like an inhaler and blew the smoke into the night sky. She sat under the stars, under their spotlight. I pulled out two Topo Chicos from my bag and opened them with the bottle opener I had on my keychain. I passed one

to Maria. "Cheers". The moment my lips touched the cold glass bottle I felt a tingle race through my entire body. The sparkling water sizzled down my throat.

A black car appeared on the field; it drove to the left side of the field near the tall sugar cane. I was pretty sure couples drove to the field just to have sex. I grabbed the plastic bottle from my bag again and took another hit. As I blew the smoke into the night, the image of Maria sitting in her yellow Mustang appeared in my head. She was in her car parked in front of the office of my apartments in Weslaco. She begged me to do her homework. It was a research project involving the legalization of marijuana. I tried my best to listen to her, but I could not keep my eyes off her chest. Maria was wearing a blue baseball shirt that was a little too tight for her. Her chest bulged and rested on the wheel.

"I'll do anything," she said.

Those three words echoed in my head as I stared at Maria looking up at the stars on the tower. The smoke dissolved into the sky.

I put the water bottle down and looked at the bag of weed lying lifeless on the floor of the staircase. Maria gave me twenty grams of marijuana as payment for doing her paper. She even invited me to smoke with her. That's why I was there with here at the spot. I didn't want anything from her, but she insisted on paying me for doing her homework. Looking back now, I could have kissed her, yet I was too shy at time and in awe of her. She was also my best friend's sister.

It was getting late, and Maria said she had to go home before her boyfriend got upset.

Our peaceful time ended abruptly.

I packed up my stuff up and took one last look of the black car from above the tower. The lights were turned off, I saw nothing but smoke ooze out of the car. Even in the dark I could see

that thick white smoke floating in the air. A strong gust of wind howled at us. I felt another cat paw on my left cheek.

I followed Maria down the spiral staircase. I walked towards the passenger side of my Escape and opened the door for her. She passed by me, and I got a whiff of her perfume again. I smelled strawberries and lemonade sunbathing while drinking martinis on the beach. I closed the door for her then opened my door and sat in the driver's seat.

I pulled down the windows and started my car. I made a donut with my car and drove out of the field back onto Midway Road. I turned on my lights and stared blankly into the darkness. I felt like Alex Delarge from *A Clockwork Orange*, high off "milk plus", milk laced with drugs, driving with his merry men in search of some "ultra-violence

The wind became fierce, and it looked like the trees were being pulled out by Nature herself. The leaves on each branch danced barbarically to the air guitar strings of the wind. All the houses we passed had their front lights off. It looked as if no one had lived in those houses for years.

I saw the one red stoplight flash in front of me. I tapped on the break with my right foot and the red light illuminated brightly on the both of us. I turned to my left and saw a small blue house with foil paper covering all the windows. A worn-out chest press machine lay wasting in front of the brown wooden door. Some raggedy looking white cat was sleeping next to the dead workout machine.

As we waited for the light to turn green, we were forced to smell the stench of the sewage. Both of us pinched our noses with our fingers.

The rest of the drive felt like a curse since we got only green lights. I was hoping to catch every red light so I could spend more time with her and maybe even kiss her.

She lived on the North side of Weslaco while I lived on the south. Luckily, this was not a problem.

In the past, Weslaco was separated by the train tracks. My grandfather Sanchez would tell me this story all the time. In the story, the South side of the tracks would represent the White side. While the North side represented the Mexican side. In the past after dark, you couldn't cross the Mexican side of the tracks. Maria lived on the North side while I lived on the South side.

I crossed the North side earlier that night to pick up Maria. Now I'm crossing back to take her home. She lived on 210 Toritos Street. I parked my car in front of her house near the driveway and thought about how we were going to say goodbye. I imagined her giving me a kiss on the cheek or a hug. She thanked me for doing her homework and stepped out of my car. I was changing my gear to reverse, when Maria popped her head in my car.

"Hey, do you want to smoke a little more before you leave?"

"Um, sure," I said.

I put my car in park. I grabbed my bag from the backseat.

"Hey Danny, I'll be right back. I'm gonna get a pipe."

"Ok, take your time, no rush," I said.

Maria stepped out of the car, and I watched her walk down the sidewalk to her front door. The moment she stepped foot on her yard the light sensor from her garage flashed on her. I saw yellow, pink and orange flowers lining the sidewalk. It was a beautiful yard. In front of the house there were tall Aloe Vera plants, swaying left and right due to the wind.

I got the bag of weed out of my bag and started grinding on a notebook. My fingers got all powdery from the plant, some pieces got stuck inside my nails. I sat waiting in my car for

several minutes. I could smell barbeque from the house down the street. The smell of chicken fajitas and sausage gave me the munchies and made my stomach growl.

I saw Maria walking back to my car with a little puppy under her arm. I opened the door for her.

“Here, hold this,” she said.

She handed me the dog, and she searched her pocket and busted out her corn cob pipe.

“Danny, his name is Sherlock.”

“Who, the dog?”

“No, the pipe,” she said.

Maria saw the grinded up weed on my notebook and packed a bowl for herself. Her dog started whimpering like a seal.

“Just put him down.”

“Did I hurt him?” I asked.

No, his name is Bruno.”

I put him down in the backseat of my car. I took a good look at Bruno, and he was no bigger than a chihuahua. His fur was a mix between blonde and orange. He was wearing a red and blue tiny sailor outfit. Bruno looked like he was ready to join me on a voyage across the Valley with nothing but my car and the road in front of us.

Maria passed me Sherlock. I put my lips on the piece which was still wet from Maria’s saliva. I thought that was the closest I would ever get to kissing her. As I was about to inhale, I heard Maria say “NOO!”

The dirty, wet diaper smell came back but with a slight twist. This time it had a spicy peppery smell to it. The smell literally stung my nostrils.

“I’m so sorry, Danny. I’ll be right back to clean it up.”

“It’s ok,” I said.

Maria came back with a paper towel and picked up the poop that was on the floor in the backseat of my car. She threw it away in the trash can that stood in front of her driveway. She took Bruno back inside her house.

We smoked for a few more minutes until I heard a ring tone. Maria grabbed her phone out of her pocket and answered.

I figured that was her boyfriend that called her. I wasn’t sure if she had until she got that phone call. She hung up the phone and said she had to go. She opened the door herself. She slammed it softly. She put her head into the passenger side window.

"Thanks for doing my paper."

"Yea, no problem," I said.

"What are you gonna do right now?" she asked.

"Probably just head home and play video games," I said.

We said our goodbyes and I watched her walk to the front door.

I stopped to put gas at the Valero on 1015 and Old 83. The gas station was a couple of minutes away from The Water Gardens. I pumped five bucks in and started my car. I blasted on a song that sent musical bullets to my ears. The song was “Our Time is Running Out” by Muse. During the chorus I found power from the bottom of my lungs and screamed as loud as I could. I drove out of Valero, but I irresponsibly was drunk with emotion and drove over a curve. I furiously stepped on the gas, but my car was stuck. “Fuck” I yelled. Luckily some guys pumping gas got together and lifted my car off the curve. I said thank you like five times and drove back home with nothing but a pathetic sack of weed.



About a decade later, during the month of October, I went with both of Maria's brothers to her new home. It's on some street in the middle of nowhere, way out in some forgettable town named La Feria.

Earlier that year I had messaged Maria on Facebook. We had kept in touch through the years. I sent her a message that said,

“Happy Mother's Day to the most beautiful mom in the world.”

She had moved to a new house shortly after Mother's Day and I thought I'd never see her again. She wasn't married but had an on and off again boyfriend. I thought that if she moved out, she would settle down and get married to her boyfriend. Her brother, David, invited me to their mom's birthday party. She used to live in a little house off Airport Drive and Llano Grande in Weslaco.

She got pregnant at a young age so her family gave her a house they would rent out. But she'd always run away to Toritos street to her brother's house whenever her baby daddy and son were asleep.

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Back in 2017 on my twenty-seventh birthday, David invited me to Maria's old house on Llano Grande for a barbeque. When I got there Maria had dropped some chicken on the floor. Her baby daddy got pissed off and cussed her out.

“Make yourself useful and clean it up,” he said.

Her brothers and I just stood there silent. I had no idea what to do. I wanted to say something. I regret not helping her pick up the chicken. Maria began to cry a bit. We were gathered around the front door with the barbeque pit in front of the three steps leading to the

front door. Maria fled inside the house with the dirty chicken. I heard yelling inside the house. I was surprised no one did anything.

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Maria's new house was bigger compared to her old one. I was outside her house with her boyfriend, Roger, and her two brothers. Roger opened another Natural Light and started saying how Maria's such a bad parent. He took a sip of beer then placed it on the glass table. He said that Maria would wake up his son too late for school. He couldn't wake him up since he worked for a soda company, and he had to be at work before five am.

"She has to wake up Fernando one hour before school so he can get an appetite for breakfast. Instead, she wakes him up ten minutes before school," he said.

It hurt me to see him treat her so badly. If I was her husband, I wouldn't do any of that to her. I'd show her all my love and take care of her. We'd treat each other as equals and wouldn't put each other down.

Roger opened the ice chest and grabbed another beer. While he sipped on it, I thought of the time I gave Maria a back massage in front of both of her brothers. I was over at David and Anthony's house on Toritos Street while they were high on a drug, I forgot which one. I took the role as their trip sitter. The brothers were outside hitting a bong in the shape of a lamp. I heard a knock on the door and answered it. I saw Maria standing in front of the door. I let Maria into the house and said that her brothers were high on some drug.

We both sat at the dining room table. Fernando left his coloring box on the table with some paper for drawing. Maria grabbed the orange-colored pencil and started drawing dicks. We both started laughing and I gave one of her dicks a pair of arms and legs. She drew the face, and I gave the dick a hat. Our laughter had filled up the dining room. Her brothers heard and walked

inside from the back door next to the dining room table. Maria started complaining about how her body was sore. I asked her if she has been going to the gym.

“She doesn’t even work out. She’s just wearing those workout clothes for show,” David said.

Maria was wearing black leggings with a gray sports tank top. She had her hair up in a bun. David had a barbell inside the living room with forty-five pounds on each side. David suggested for her to do some deadlifts. A deadlift is an exercise where the person lifts a bar from the ground using their legs instead of their back.

“Ay David, I haven’t done those since I was in soccer.”

“Do them you fatty,” he said.

She didn't look fat. For being a mom and working a full-time job she looked pretty damn fine. Maria went to the living room and bent down to lift the bar. She lowered her hips and arched her back. She lifted the bar with her legs from the ground and slowly lowered it to the ground. As she was doing reps, I couldn’t keep my eyes off her hips. I was surprised at how good her form was. David saw me checking her out. I did not care. I wanted him to know I had the hots for his sister. After doing fifteen reps Maria was breathing heavily.

“I feel even more sore now. Give me a massage David,” she said.

“No, get one from Danny instead,” he said.

“Give me one Danny,” she said.

I grabbed a chair from the dining room and took it to the middle of the living room. Maria sat on the chair and both of her brothers sat on the couch in front of the chair. I put my hands on her shoulders and started rubbing them gently. Anthony was weirded out and went back outside to smoke out of the genie bong.

“How does it feel?” I asked.

“Harder Danny!”

“Like this?” I asked.

Yes.” Don’t stop,” she said.

“Ok. Tell me when to stop.”

I was massaging her shoulders roughly. Her skin felt so smooth. I wanted to dig my teeth on her neck and leave her a hickey. I moved my hands toward her neck and heard her moan

“Ah”.

I started to get aroused. David turned on the tv and put some Linkin Park on. He put on my favorite song from them.

“Here’s your song Danny. Sing it for us.”

The song “Shadow of the Day” started playing. I did not want to sing. All my attention was with Maria’s massage. If only we were alone in a room. I’d make a move on her. I’d make her feel alive again. We’d have a pillow fight and give our hearts a pounding. I’d let her handcuff me, then place me under arrest. Win or lose, we’d put our problems aside. We’d knock each other’s problems out of sight and make it look like an accident.

“You don’t have to massage me if you don’t want Danny,” she said.

“I want to. Do you want me to stop?” I asked.

“No.”

About ten minutes had passed, I got lost in the moment and did not realize David had rolled up a blunt. He got up from the couch and headed to the back door.

“Alright guys, let's smoke this outside.”

I did not want to stop. But this moment ended as fast as it started.

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Roger put his beer down and started criticizing Maria some more.

“Maria sleeps while I’m at work and takes my son late to school most of the time. How is that good parenting?” asked Roger.

No one said anything. I kept quiet as Roger, David and Anthony kept drinking.

“She gets mad at me for being hard on her, but is it really my fault I care for my son?”

I wanted to smack that guy on the face, but his mom and sister were inside the house with Maria and her mom. Maria’s mom walked to the backyard where we were all sitting and was holding a bottle of wine. I saw her walk towards me with the bottle.

‘Danny here have some wine,’ Maria’s mom said.

“No, it’s ok.”

“Please, it's my birthday.”

Maria’s mom has a strong Mexican accent. I could not say no to her. She poured me a glass of red wine. It had a bitter taste and just left my mouth dry. After the wine I started to feel the humid air outside. And the annoying chicharras buzzing irritated my ears. Everyone sprayed Off on themselves. The smell of insect repellent filled up my nose. I’m sure this is how every barbecue is in the Valley.

Maria walked outside from the back door and said dinner was ready. We all went inside and gathered around the table. My plate had chicken, fajitas, potato salad and beans. Her son sat in front of me, and he didn’t want to get off his phone. I brought up how I didn’t have a phone \*until I was seventeen years old. Fernando didn’t want to believe me. He had this habit of grabbing your phone and looked for all the games you had downloaded. I’m pretty sure that’s

how he saw what I sent his mom on Facebook. Earlier that day we were jumping on the trampoline in the backyard. We both tried to do backflips but failed.

“My dad saw what you sent my mom,” said Fernando.

“What?” I asked.

“He thinks you love her.”

I tried my best to brush off what Fernando had said to me on the trampoline.

Maria’s mom wanted her to sit next to me at the table. Roger sat next to his mom and sister. Both David and Anthony were drunk. They were being loud and speaking vulgarly in front of their mom. After dinner we all cleaned up after ourselves and Maria brought out her mom’s birthday cake. We sang happy birthday, and I took pictures of the family. Both of Maria’s and Roger’s families were sitting separately. I was in the middle just taking their pictures. I filled up on some cake until I couldn’t take another bite. The birthday girl left after opening her presents.

Roger’s mom and sister took Fernando to their house which was across the street from his house. A lot of his family lived on that same street. I bet Maria felt trapped surrounded by his family. You have to drive almost twenty minutes to get to their house. It seemed like Roger’s family was always watching her.

Maria brought out her vape pen and asked if we wanted to smoke. David already wanted to leave. But Maria did not want us to leave. She told us how Roger’s family didn’t let her do anything. They would make her stay trapped inside the house.

“Please stay, guys. I never get to spend time with you guys,” she said.

“It’s already late and I’m sleepy. Let’s go, Danny,” said David.

She passed Anthony the vape pen and again, we all were laughing loud and joking. Maria seemed like she did not want to be left alone with her baby daddy. She looked scared like if Roger was going hurt her. She kept offering her brothers drinks. I refused since I offered to be the designated driver. Roger walked in and ruined all the fun we were having.

“Why are you all smoking inside my house? Go do that outside.”

Maria got up and walked towards the back door.

I got up with her brothers and went to the back yard. Roger followed after us too. We sat around the table in the back and continued smoking. Roger opened another beer from the ice chest.

“Danny, I saw what you sent Maria,” said Roger.

My body froze. I felt lightning jolts travel down my body. It felt like I had to go to the bathroom.

“You didn’t think I’d see it?” said Roger.

“Stop! Don’t tell Danny anything,” said Maria.

“No, I’m going to say something,” said Roger.

“You think you can come here to my house and disrespect me? Do you know how messed up that is? My son started asking questions and telling everyone what you sent Maria,” said Roger.

“Please stop Roger,” said Maria.

Maria started crying.

“Shut up. I need to do this,” said Roger.

Maria got up and stormed inside the house and slammed the door. Silence sat with us around the table. No one said anything. David and Anthony were so drunk I don't even think they were paying attention to anything that had happened.

Maria came back from the house and sat down around us. I passed her the pen. Roger told me that if I had problems with what he said for us to go inside and settle it like men. He wanted to fight me. I kept clenching both side handles of the chair tight. I wanted to go at him. I wanted to punch that smug face of his.

"If you want Maria, let's go fight for her inside the house where no one can bother us. I can't promise if I'll fight fair but I'm going to defend my family," said Roger.

Roger got up and waited to see if I was going to follow him. I stayed sitting down. All I did was stay silent. I'm sure he wanted to kill me. I was taking kickboxing and jiu jitsu classes for half a year already. So, I felt like I was ready to defend myself if he started anything. I started breathing heavily.

The time when Maria and I were alone behind her car popped up in my head. This happened two years before Maria moved to her new house, I was helping Maria load up the trunk of her car after coming back from the beach with her and her brothers.

"What would you do Danny if I closed the trunk on your fingers?" she asked.

"Probably scream and cry real loud. Why?" I asked.

"Ha ha. You wouldn't hit me, would you?" she asked.

"I'd never hit you."

"That's good Danny," she said.

Roger grabbed another beer from the ice chest and sat back down.



“If you ever do any shit like that again I’m going to find you and we’re going to settle this like men,” said Roger.

I couldn’t do anything. I just stood frozen there. Even if I did, Roger’s family was in front of the house watching near the porch. I felt like I was trapped in an enemy's territory. Eventually only two words came out of my mouth for the rest of the night.

“I understand.”

After those words came out of my mouth, I felt degraded. I had no idea what to do next.

Roger did not respond, and he just went back to drinking. Nobody said anything.

We said our goodbyes and Roger followed us to my car. Maria stayed behind. He said how Maria’s going to get what’s coming to her. And David told him to what you have to do. I could not believe Maria’s brother said that.

We got in my car, and I started the engine.

“What did you tell my sister?” asked David.

“Nothing bad. I don’t think so,” I said.

“Well, whatever you said really opened Roger’s eyes. You’ve changed him.”

While driving back I thought about how I must have scared Roger with what I sent Maria. He was taking her for granted. He didn’t know what he had until there was a possibility that he could lose it. One week after I sent her the Mother's Day message, they moved from Weslaco to La Feria.

A few months later at the end of October, I messaged Maria on Facebook again. It said,

“Happy Birthday to you and keep looking like you always do.”

I hope her boyfriend saw it. I wanted him to see it. She never replied to my message. I gave up hope of ever being with her. The birthday message was my way of telling her goodbye.

Even though we never got together, the moments I spent with her will always mean a lot to me. In the days ahead, when I drove miles and miles with Lyft, I still saw her face smiling back at me. I never knew if she cared for me or not, but we shared so many sweet moments together, and that was special enough.

I learned that relationships were messy and sometimes didn't follow any rules. Nothing was perfect. I thought she was the one. Perhaps I was wrong for loving Maria. She had a family. I did not want to come between a mom and her family. Eventually she married Roger and got pregnant again. I hope she lived the happiest life with the people she loved the most. I saw her randomly at get togethers with friends, but it all seemed so distant and far away.

Sometimes when I drove Lyft late at night, I would get a notification and wonder if it could possibly be Maria, needing my help. Maybe it wouldn't be her, but it would be someone else that needed help with a desperately needed ride, or a shoulder to lean on...and that is why I continued driving for Lyft for months to come.

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