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Saint Rico
 of the
Margaritas

A Novelish Thing

by Al Sim

**SYNOPSIS**

For only the second time in his life full of women, Rico Lupe, a middle-aged bar owner in an old village at the edge of a fast-growing metropolis in the American Southwest, has fallen in love. Unfortunately the woman who owns him heart and soul is half his age and understandably reluctant. Bearing witness to this unanticipated crisis is Rico’s best friend of many years, Chuy Sandoval, a self-employed adobe worker. Together and apart, working hard to keep their humor and dignity more-or-less intact, these two friends struggle to support the great weight that our mortality can bring to bear upon the vulnerable human soul.

**PUBLICATION CREDITS**

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following publications in which material included in this book first appeared in different form:

*Chiricú*, “No Mix”

*Concho River Review*, “A Little More Pity”

*Glimmer Train Stories*, “Soledad”

*Lynx Eye*, “Chuy’s Truck”

*Projected Letters*, “La Estupidez de Cosas”

*South Dakota Review*, “The Collie”

*The Greensboro Review*, “Menthol and Smoke”

*The Tonopah Review*, “Cancelado”

## Soledad

### 1

A dog barked, brakes squealed, cottonwoods rustled overhead. Children screamed on the playground over at the village school. What the outside world had to say on this afternoon drifted in through the open windows mounted low along the front wall and joined the tread of the proprietor’s footsteps, the clatter and creak made by his wheeled bucket of galvanized steel, and the splash-and-swish of his mop spreading soapy water across his burnt-red tile floor. But none of these sounds that could be heard within his barroom entered his awareness. All of these sounds his ears were trained to ignore. So they could remain primed to detect ones that mattered.

Like the sound his ears heard now—

Tires crunching gravel out at the edge of his parking lot.

The mop stopped and his head came up.

Probably just someone turning around.

He listened for another moment.

Nothing told him he was mistaken.

He returned to his work. Lifted the mop into the bucket, sloshed it around in the soapy water, lifted it again and lowered it into the wringer. When he pushed the lever the squeaking from the mechanism and the splash of the water cascading down into the bucket below masked the sound of a car door smacking shut outside. He pulled the mop from the wringer and returned it to the bucket, soaking it again in the soapy water. Now the sloshing of the mop head inside the bucket prevented him from hearing the footsteps that crossed his parking lot.

He was pushing his mop across his tiles when he was startled by someone banging on his black metal door. He stopped and listened. His ears filled up with the sounds he had been ignoring. He heard the squeal from up the lane of the diesel truck’s brakes when another barking dog darted in front of it.

But nothing more came from his visitor.

He called out—

“Not open yet.”

He listened for a response and hoped his voice had carried outside. When no response came he decided whoever it was must have given up and was going away. But as he bent back over his work the banging came again.

“Shit.”

Being interrupted while he was mopping could mean footsteps messing up his clean floor. He didn’t like that. He liked the entire thing spotless at the start of the business day.

He returned the mop to the bucket and leaned its handle against the wringer.

The banging came a third time. He called out—

“All right already.”

He skirted around the damp area and was relieved to find the tiles in front of the door were already dry. Maybe he could get this over with without making any more work for himself.

### 2

He raised a hand to block the glare of the midday sun. He squinted down at a small woman in sunglasses with large oval lenses. She had a black canvas bag slung over her shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said. “We’re not open yet.”

A small fine hand pushed her sunglasses up and settled them atop gleaming black hair that was tied back in a ponytail. The glasses had hidden large dark almond-shaped eyes set far apart in a broad heart-shaped face. The face was especially large for the small woman who presented it. Then the small woman spoke in a voice so big it pushed him back onto his heels—

“I’m looking for Rico Lupe?”

He needed a moment to recover.

“In regards to…?” he said.

“*You’re* Rico Lupe, right?”

Her big voice rocked him again. A stray strand of her black hair caught the light as it danced in a twisting current of air. When the strand settled down across her nose she pulled it away. With his eyes still on her face he became aware of the curves beneath her sheer pale blouse.

Maybe I’m whoever you want me to be.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m Rico Lupe.”

A tight smile creased her lips. This time when the loose strand of hair drifted across her nose she left it there. Her eyes held Rico’s before they slid down his face and seemed to settle on his throat.

“Please come in,” Rico said.

He moved aside and the woman hesitated before she flashed a smile and stepped forward. She stopped just over the threshold and examined the big room. She started with the mop and bucket then ran her eyes along the row of upside-down stools on top of the bar and was looking at the tables and chairs stacked in the corner when Rico said—

“Excuse me. I have to close the door.”

Her head spun around.

“Oh! I’m sorry.”

She stepped out of the way and Rico let the door swing shut. Then the small woman followed Rico across the big room to the bar. He took down the first stool and gestured at the round wooden seat.

“Please,” he said. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Ah… sure. Please. A glass of water would be great.”

Rico moved behind the bar and took two glasses from a shelf. The small woman slipped her black canvas bag off her shoulder and settled it on the bar. While Rico filled the glasses with ice and water his guest mounted the stool Rico had lowered for her and removed her sunglasses from atop her head. She was slipping the sunglasses into her purse when Rico put her water down in front of her. The ice clinked within it. She smiled at him and said—

“Thank you.”

Then drank deeply.

Rico studied her while he gulped his own water down. The small woman’s big voice sounded older than she looked. Rico guessed she was in her late twenties. As his eyes recovered from the blast of sun at the door and his vision readjusted to the diffused light inside his barroom her heart-shaped dark-eyed face came into better focus—and he felt he had seen that face before. He put his glass down and frowned at the woman, then put his hands on the bartop and leaned against them.

“You look familiar,” Rico said.

### 3

The room was still and quiet. Only the sound of the ceaseless insects came buzzing in through the open windows. The woman did not speak or move till that stray strand of hair came loose again and fell across an eye and a cheek. Then a small fine hand reached up and pushed the lock back and tucked it behind an ear.

“You knew my mother,” she said. “We look a lot alike.”

She studied Rico’s face.

“She was close to my age when you knew her. A little younger.”

Rico felt his chest tighten.

“Your mother’s name?” Rico said.

His voice came out hoarse. He cleared his throat and reached for his water.

“Alma Galván,” the woman said.

Rico’s glass stopped on its way to his lips.

Why did I even ask? Could it be anyone else?

Rico drank and put his glass back down. He looked at his glass and his hand still holding it. The he nodded at the woman. She nodded in return. Then the woman inhaled deeply and sat up taller as her back straightened to fill her lungs. When her breasts lifted and strained against her sheer blouse Rico raised his water glass again and hid behind it. Heat went across the back of his neck and shoulders. The woman reached for her glass and emptied it. Rico and his guest put their glasses down in unison.

“And your name is?” Rico said.

The small woman with the familiar face lifted her delicate chin.

“Soledad.”

The force of her voice struck Rico again. He looked down at her upturned heart-shaped face and her wide dark almond-shaped eyes.

“You look very much like your mother.”

He noted that her powerful voice disturbed the resemblance. If instead that voice had been soft and rounded like her mother’s Rico might have guessed who his visitor had to be. But that voice kept punching him and leaving him a little disoriented.

A crease formed down the middle of Soledad’s forehead. Her lips tightened and paled. She seemed about to speak. Then that impression passed and she only nodded. Rico nodded in return.

Then they frowned at each other across the bar.

“So tell me why you’re here,” Rico said.

Soledad’s eyes searched Rico’s face. Then she reached for her bag and pulled it close. She unzippered a flat pocket along one side and brought out a small manila envelope. From the envelope came a photograph.

Soledad handed the photograph to Rico.

In the image he was a little leaner than he was now. Same black hair, a little longer and a little shaggier. Same broad shoulders. He stood with his feet set wide apart. Planted solid on the earth. He held his arms folded tight against his chest. Behind him was his long red convertible. The same 1965 Chevrolet Impala SS that was parked in his garage out behind his bar. Other cars had come and gone but this one remained constant.

“There’s a date on the back,” Soledad said.

Rico turned the photo over. A woman’s curving blue scrawl said *Rico Lupe, Los Huertos, July 17 1968*.

“I was born the following April,” Soledad said.

Rico nodded automatically. What his guest just said hadn’t registered. His mind was back in the past. He turned the photograph over again and frowned at his younger self. Then for an instant Rico felt like he was spinning. What Soledad had told him finally connected.

He carefully placed the photograph on the bar. Looked down at it and opened his mouth to speak. Then closed his mouth again. Told himself maybe he had misunderstood.

Finally Rico managed to say—

“And why exactly are you here?”

Soledad leaned forward and peered up at him. The small woman’s wide dark eyes settled on Rico’s chin.

“I’m looking for my father,” she said.

### 4

The back of Rico’s neck was hot and damp. He turned to one side and leaned a hip against the bar. The moment captured in the photograph returned to him. And with it unexpectedly came rushing in all the feelings from the time in his life when he and Alma Galván reached their end. He let those feelings wash over him. Like a crashing wave you find yourself caught in. Better not to fight. When the wave is past you can stand up again.

He turned back toward his guest. Put his eyes back on the photograph. Then cleared his throat before he said—

“I’m sorry—when were you born?”

“April of sixty-nine.”

Soledad reached out and touched a corner of the image.

“Nine months after the photograph was taken,” she said.

Rico’s hands came up on the bar. He kept his eyes down on the photograph.

“Alma and I had been broken up for a while. When she took that.”

“How long is a while?”

“Three or four months. She came around to say goodbye. Before she left for California.”

“Were there any…”

Her voice trailed off. Rico looked at Soledad and felt light-headed. She raised a hand and waved it in the air.

“…encores?”

Rico frowned. Soledad’s hand floated down and landed on the bar.

“I’m sorry?” Rico said.

“You know. One more time for old times’ sake?”

Rico’s eyebrows went up.

“Ah.”

I have never been so done as when I was done with Alma Galván.

He shook his head.

“No. She came by and told me she was leaving and that was it.”

Soledad put on the same tight smile that she offered at the door.

“Okay. That sounds pretty definitive.”

Both pairs of eyes went down to the photograph.

“I take it things didn’t end well,” Soledad said.

They looked up and their eyes met.

“No,” Rico said. “It didn’t.”

The wide dark almond-shaped eyes staring back at him blinked.

“With Alma it never did,” the big voice said.

Something in those words felt wrong. Rico looked down and put his eyes on the photograph. He probed at the words she had used but was too distracted and disconcerted to sort out what troubled him.

He gestured at the photograph.

“That was the first time we had seen each other since we split.”

With his face still lowered Rico angled his eyes up at Soledad.

“So you thought I was your father?”

A small hand flew up in the air and fluttered around.

“Yeah. Maybe. I guess I did.”

She smiled and nodded.

“Yeah. I did.”

She kept smiling and stopped nodding.

“But that was before I met you.”

She shook her head.

“Not after.”

Rico raised his head, turned it to one side, and squinted at Soledad.

“Why’s that?” Rico said.

A smile flickered on her lips and she nodded again.

“I don’t know. You just don’t—feel like blood.”

She leaned her head to one side.

“I don’t know how else to put it.”

Her smile returned. Her head remained tilted over.

Rico watched his guest for a moment before he nodded.

“Okay. I think I know what you mean.”

Her smile became lopsided. Soledad straightened her head. An eyebrow crept up. Her powerful voice came with some smoke in it—

“So I don’t feel like blood either?”

That wasn’t what Rico meant. And he was pretty sure she knew that.

He pushed himself away from the bar. Stood upright and folded his arms across his chest.

“Nope,” Rico said. “You sure don’t.”

Soledad laughed. A loud sharp bark. She looked away down the bar. Lowered her head and ran a hand along the edge of the bartop.

“This is weird,” she said.

What did you expect?

“Well. Yeah. It’s… interesting.”

Her hand stopped. She snorted.

“You can say *that* again.”

Soledad barked out another explosive laugh.

Rico hoped she would stop doing that.

### 5

He got his wish. Soledad did not repeat her punishing laugh. Instead she sat quietly with her eyes down on the bar.

Rico considered the questions that brought his guest here. Questions she must have first put to her mother. Which meant the answers her mother provided failed to satisfy. Or she wouldn’t have put those questions to him.

He wondered if he was the first potential father she had confronted. Judging by how rough this was going he guessed probably so. Then he wondered how many other potential fathers there might be.

A few moments passed while he had these thoughts. Meanwhile for Rico the silence between them had grown awkward. He broke it by asking—

“Where are you from?”

“California.”

A few seconds later Soledad added—

“Berkeley.”

“Did you come all this way just to see me?”

She shook her head.

“I had a conference here.”

Rico assumed that was an academic conference. That like her mother Soledad was a professor. Which reminded Rico that Alma told him, when she came here to take the photograph that was now sitting before him on the bar, that with her masters completed she was relocating to Berkeley for her doctorate.

“Did you grow up there?” Rico said.

Soledad nodded.

Rico waited for her to add something more. She didn’t.

“Your mother said she was going there. That last time I saw her.”

The stray strand of hair came loose again and settled across her cheek. Her hand went up and brushed it aside. Her eyes remained cast down.

“So you were born there?” Rico said. “In Berkeley?”

Soledad nodded.

“And what about your mother? Did she get her PhD? Like she planned?”

Soledad nodded again.

“And then she stayed,” Rico said. “In Berkeley.”

This finally prodded Soledad into providing unsolicited information—

“Alma taught at UC. Tenured. Full professor.”

Rico noted that Soledad had again referred to her mother by name. Not mother or mom or madre or mamá. He was unsurprised that Alma was the kind of mother whose daughter called her Alma. To Rico that was not a good kind of mother.

And then he noticed something else about those same two statements—

With Alma it never did.

Alma taught at UC.

They were both in the past tense. He felt stupid for not catching that before. When it happened the first time.

Alma had been such a force. Rico had a hard time comprehending that she could be dead. But that would explain why Soledad was here asking again the questions her mother must have already answered.

He waited for her to continue. Hoping and half-expecting that now she would inform him of her mother’s death. After putting her career in the past.

Instead she leaned over the bartop and pointed at the photograph.

“Nice ride,” she said.

Rico forced a smile.

Okay. She needs some more time. I can give her that.

### 6

Rico tapped a corner of the photograph.

“I remember when your mother took that picture.”

He pointed toward the door and what was beyond it.

“It was right outside. Back when this was Don Pepe’s place.”

Soledad glanced up at Rico, then looked over shoulder toward the parking lot. She sat half twisted around for a few moments, despite not being able to see much of what was past the front wall. Just the little that was visible through the three low broad windows.

When she turned forward again she spun the photograph around, so that the image was facing her. Rico watched her study the photograph and wondered what she could be looking for that she hadn’t seen already.

And then Soledad ran a finger under one eye. Long years behind the bar had trained Rico to catch this gesture. He moved away while Soledad reached for her purse and began digging around in it. He returned with a roll of paper towels and held them out across the bar.

“How’s this?”

Soledad nodded quickly and pushed her purse away. Rico peeled a towel off and handed it over . Soledad took it, wiped her face dry, and blew her nose.

“Sorry,” she said.

“It’s all right.”

Soledad blew her nose a second time. Then sat looking at the crumpled and dampened wad of paper in her hands. She looked at Rico and he extended a hand with his palm open and facing up.

She gently placed the soiled towel in his hand.

“Sorry,” she said again.

Rico leaned back and tossed the wadded paper into the trash under the bar. Then he watched Soledad climb down off her stool.

“May I use your bathroom?” she said.

“Of course.”

Rico gestured across the barroom at the restroom doors. He watched Soledad reach for her purse then turn and start away. His eyes slid down to the sway of her hips then skipped over to the windows when she turned to glance back at him. He kept his eyes on the dirt outside in his parking lot while he waited for Soledad to disappear behind the door marked “Ladies / Damas”.

When the door was closed behind her Rico brought his gaze back inside. He looked down at the bar and saw Soledad’s empty water glass. He moved the photograph and its envelope out of the way, moved the two glasses to the drainboard next to the sink beneath the bar, and used a bar mop to wipe the dampened surface dry. He drank what remained of his own water, refilled both glasses, returned them to their positions on the bartop, and was drying his hands on the bar mop when Soledad came out of the bathroom. Coming across the barroom with her purse under her arm she looked strikingly like her mother. Rico averted his eyes and tossed the bar mop into the sink.

“Tell me what happened to Alma,” Rico said.

### 7

Soledad stopped and stood up straight. She was about ten feet from where she had been seated. She made a show of looking puzzled. Then opened her eyes wide.

“What do you mean? Why—”

Rico frowned and shook his head. For a moment Soledad was motionless. Then she lowered her head and made her legs move again. She returned her purse to the bartop and climbed back up on her stool. She leaned forward onto her elbows and stared at a spot in the center of Rico’s chest.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

You damn well know you didn’t.

Rico studied the little taste of cleavage exposed at the neckline of her blouse. And saw that she dressed like her mother. Slacks instead of skirts. A general impression of restraint. But always some hint of provocation.

He decided not to answer her question.

Soledad pulled herself away from the bar and sat up straight. She lowered her eyes and crossed her wrists in her lap. She rolled her shoulders forward. Her arms pushed against her breasts and her breasts pushed against each other. As she raised her eyes she drew a long deep breath and her breasts rose and were squeezed tighter. Her nipples hardened and dimpled the fabric of her blouse.

Rico kept his eyes on Soledad’s outsized heart-shaped face and pretended he didn’t notice her surging bosom.

Her breasts retreated when her breath fell away.

“She had lung cancer,” Soledad said.

She inhaled audibly and sighed loudly. Creating a second if less significant surge of her bosom.

“She died a few months ago.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Her dark eyes found Rico’s.

“Thank you.”

Her eyes fell away. She reached for her glass and pushed her arm against her breasts. The impressions of her nipples darkened.

“Thanks for the refill.”

Her voice had darkened too. By reflex more than intent Rico almost offered his guest something stronger than ice water. And he almost felt guilty for not doing so. Almost but not quite. Because Rico suspected Soledad expected it of him. And while Alma Galván’s daughter was manipulating her bosom and making dusky eyes across his bar, Rico resolved to defeat her expectations.

Soledad lifted her glass to her lips and drank. Rico brought his hands up onto the bar. He leaned forward as she angled her eyes up at his. Her tight smile appeared again, that thin line across her lips. Then she blinked. Slowly and languidly her long eyelashes swept through the air.

Then she punched Rico with her big voice again—

“I still forget she’s dead.”

A dull ball of ache formed in the center of his chest.

### 8

Soledad looked down at the bar. When her eyes found the old photograph off to one side where Rico had moved it she angled her head in that direction. Then she slowly and deliberately reached for the image and its envelope and placed them atop her purse.

Her eyes remained on the photograph while her hands retreated into her lap. When she glanced up at Rico he saw a coldness in her eyes that cooled the back of his neck. He had first seen that iciness in her mother’s eyes. And since then with a few other women. Volatile women, each and every one of them. Something bad always followed that chilling look.

Soledad pointed at the photograph of Rico and his car.

“There was a story she used to tell. There was a red convertible in it. So I assume that story was about you?”

Rico pushed away from the bar and stood upright and crossed his arms.

“Give me a hint.”

Soledad narrowed her eyes and turned her head a little to one side.

“La Herida?”

Rico’s neck felt chilled again. La Herida (“The Wound”) was a bend over a deep arroyo along the road to Los Pilares. An old woman referred to as La Solterona (“The Spinster”) was said to appear in the middle of the road at the sharpest point of the curve during the dark of the night and cause drivers to swerve and plunge over the edge to their deaths.

“Really,” Rico said.

Those wide dark eyes weren’t narrowed anymore.

Soledad lowered her face and her eyes to the photograph. The coldness on Rico’s neck turned to heat that ran down across his shoulders and along the backs of his arms. Soledad tapped a fingernail on the bartop—once, twice, three times. Then her face came up and she showed Rico a smile that was small and compressed. Like behind it something nasty hid inside her mouth.

Her big voice punched at him—

“Did she ever tell you what she saw down there?”

Rico unfolded his arms and put his hands back on the bar. He took a long slow breath and said—

“Down where?”

Even though he knew.

Her smile grew a little. Before she squeezed it down tight again.

“Down in the arroyo. At La Herida.”

Rico could still feel his old anger.

They were on the road up to Los Pilares. As they swept around the bend over the deep arroyo in his long red car—Alma screamed. Her shriek hit him so hard and so suddenly and so unexpectedly that he jerked the steering wheel away from the banshee beside him—Alma sat on the outside toward the curve and the deep gash in the earth beyond it—and by trying to escape from the horrible sound she was making Rico almost plowed into a pickup truck coming the other way.

Then Alma wouldn’t say why she screamed. She almost got them both killed and then refused to tell him why.

And now here was her daughter. Bringing all that up again.

Rico smiled at Soledad.

A bland bartender’s smile that said nothing.

She wants to take a piece of me.

Like mother like daughter.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Rico said.

Soledad pushed her eyebrows up and made her dark eyes wide. Another tight little smile puckered her mouth.

“You don’t remember La Herida?”

“I’ve been there. What of it?”

“You don’t remember what happened there?”

Rico looked away, down his long bar, away from Soledad and away from La Herida and away from Alma and away from his past. He wanted to be back out on his burnt-red tile floor moving his mop across it and getting ready for the day’s business. He wanted this intruder seated across from him bring old bad memories of the worst love he ever had to have never arrived.

He turned back and stared down hard at the small woman seated across from him. A woman he both didn’t know and knew too well.

“Is there something you want to tell me? If there is, let’s have it.”

Her widened eyes slowly narrowed. Rico could just barely see each pupil, a round void at the center of a glistening purple-black iris. She blinked once, then twice. Her big voice came out low and cool—

“She saw your car down in that arroyo.”

### 9

He envisioned it in lurid colors. Like an image from an old movie poster. His long red car upside down and all banged up on the yellow dirt at the bottom of the arroyo below La Herida. The black silhouette of a witch up at the rim.

But why did that witch long young and sexy and not old and decrepit?

Her voice remained low and cool. A scalpel instead of a hammer—

“She described your car. All smashed up.”

Rico pushed a grin up onto his face.

“Freaky.”

Wide dark eyes flickered. Rico and Soledad stared at each other across the bar. And across everything that separated them. Rico’s eyes burned but he did not look away.

Finally Soledad lowered her eyes down to the photograph of Rico leaning against his car. Her voice wasn’t low and cool anymore. It came out higher and louder and a little twitchy—

“Every time she told that story, I always asked her who she was with. And she would say, the exact same thing every time—‘a man I was seeing’. And then I’d ask her if that man was my father.”

Softer eyes turned up at Rico. Probing but not staring.

They found nothing in his blank face.

They returned to the photograph.

“And she would never answer. She would never say anything.”

And now, like Alma before him, into the silence that he was certain Soledad wanted him to fill—Rico also said nothing. If what Soledad had just said was to be believed. And her mother had responded to her question, which clearly deserved an answer, with nothing but silence.

But why should he believe that was true? He didn’t know this woman. He only knew her mother. And if Alma was the one sitting at his bar telling him this story he would know whether it was true or a lie it was being told to solicit his pity. And knowing that made feeling sympathy for Soledad impossible.

But one thing she said Rico did know was true—the story about his car. About Alma seeing it wrecked. He knew because it fit. It fit with Alma and with him and with their time together.

Soledad sat up and began to straighten her back. Rico saw what was coming and turned his head away. He faced sideways down the bar where the rise and fall of her breasts would not confront him. But he saw their shape and motion in his mind anyway. Saw her nipples harden and strain at the fabric of her blouse. All while her big voice punched through the air and at him—

“After a while I took her silence for yes. Which was natural, right? I wanted a father.”

Rico turned back to Soledad. He raised his head up high and looked down at her over his cheekbones. Those large wide-apart eyes blinked up at him—once, twice, three times. Those dark almond-shaped eyes were wide open and glimmering as her small fine hand came out over the bar and pointed at the photograph.

“So when I found this. And saw that red car.”

Another thin smile puckered her lips. Then her face became immobile.

A moment passed. Another followed.

Then Soledad blinked at Rico.

A moment later Rico blinked back.

They were like two lizards.

“I’m sorry,” Rico’s voice said.

His face said he didn’t care.

### 10

Rico watched Soledad lift the old faded photograph, then cant her head while she examined it once again. He was not convinced this examination was not for show. When it was concluded she carefully slid it back inside the manila envelope it arrived in. She was about to return the envelope and its contents to the zippered pocket on her purse when Rico said—

“You still want that?”

Soledad looked up at him. Her face was empty.

Rico gave her a cold smile.

“You still want my picture? Even without me being your father?”

“It was my mother’s.”

Rico gestured at the hidden image.

“It’s a picture of me. What do you want with it?”

Soledad stared. A frown came and went.

She looked down at the envelope in her hand. Then lowered it onto the bar and pushed it toward Rico.

He left it there.

“Thanks,” Rico said.

Soledad nodded. Then turned her wrist so she could see her watch.

“Time for you to go?” Rico said.

He did not intend for a note of hope to rise in the middle of what he said. But the note rose and his guest noticed. When Soledad glanced up at Rico he saw something new in her expression—a quick tremor of doubt.

Which was something he had never seen in the face of her mother.

“I have a plane to catch,” Soledad said.

She slipped down off her stool. She nodded once at Rico.

“Thank you.”

Her tone was almost apologetic.

Rico made a little bow.

“Of course.”

While Soledad lifted her black canvas bag and slung it over her shoulder Rico went around the end of the bar and started toward the door. Soledad arrived there just behind and waited while he pulled the door open. Rico moved to the side and held the door out of the way by letting it press against his back. And presented a wide-open exit to his guest.

Soledad stepped forward and stopped in front of Rico. She stood looking out the doorway into the parking lot beyond. Then she turned slowly toward Rico and slowly raised her face and slowly brought her eyes up to his. Now they stood facing each other only a few inches apart.

Rico looked down into that heart-shaped upturned face, disconcertingly both familiar and new, into those wide dark fathomless eyes—and as a man who had known many women Rico knew that Soledad wanted to be kissed.

Just as sexy as her mother. Maybe just as crazy.

But somehow not nearly as interesting.

He tried to smile but only a tight line appeared. Almost a straight line from corner-to-corner across his lips.

Or maybe I’m just old.

“Goodbye,” Rico said.

Her face clouded over. Her eyes searched his.

Then Soledad lowered her head and turned it sideways. She looked back out the open door into the parking lot. For a moment she remained immobile. Then she turned back to Rico, hopped up onto her toes, thrust her breasts against his ribcage, and brushed a kiss across the corner of his chin.

### 11

She had her mother’s walk. One foot placed directly before the other. When she had completed her sashay across Rico’s parking lot and had arrived beside her rented car, she slipped her sunglasses from her purse and onto her face, stood with that sizable face pointed in his direction, her eyes hidden behind the large oval lenses. Then she offered a saucy little wave.

Rico dipped his chin in reply. As she opened the car door he turned back into his bar. The big metal door swung shut behind him. He heard the car door smack shut behind Soledad. He grimaced at the stacked tables and chairs pushed into the corner of the big room and the line of upside-down stools stretched across the bartop.

Soledad started her engine and exited his parking lot. He followed the sound of her departure down Los Huertos Road toward the city of Tijeras and its airport and an airliner that would return her to California. Where he hoped she would remain for the remainder of her natural days.

Rico looked at his mop standing in its gray bucket of gray water and the bitterness he still felt toward the mother of the young woman who had just come and gone seemed to sour him down to his blood. A feeling that brought behind it a sharp pang of unbearable shame. Which rippled out into a dark hollow sense of permanent loss. A feeling that something essential to any hope of achieving happiness—and maybe even to his salvation since he could think of nothing else to call it—had finally and permanently eluded him.

He crossed the big room and moved behind the bar. Went along beside the line of upturned stools. Took a whiskey bottle and a shot glass from the back bar. Returned to the clear space at the end where he had lowered a stool for Soledad. Placed the bottle and glass on the bar beside the manila envelope that waited there. Frowned at these three objects arranged before him. Then lifted the bottle, unscrewed its cap, and watched with disgust as his practiced hand failed him. Liquor splashed onto the bartop before it found the glass. He set the bottle down and raised his drink. Held it aloft and watched the liquor turn amber when light came seeping through it.

“To Alma Galván. May she rest in peace.”

He studied his drink for a few seconds more. Then threw his head back and tossed the liquor down. He exhaled as the whiskey burnt through him. He put the shot glass beside the whiskey bottle, crouched down below the bartop, and rummaged around on the shelves underneath.

He came up with a heavy glass ashtray the size of a dinner plate and a box of wooden matches. He put the ash tray on the bartop, placed the envelope inside of it, splashed some whiskey on the manila paper, then lit a match and dropped it in. A second later the alcohol ignited. The sharp sulphureous smell of the ignited match was replaced by the tang of the flaming alcohol then the dry wooden scent of burning paper and finally the industrial stench of the incinerated photograph.

The last scent persisted. It wafted across the big room and out through the open windows. Rico stood behind his bar bent over the cooling ashes and did his best to send his foreboding away after the smoke that carried the stink of the old photograph across the village and out into the world.

## A Little More Pity

### 1

Chuy was surprised to see the Anglo woman crouched down tending her flowers. She was never out this early. He savored the peace of his early hours out alone beneath the pale sky. Working in the diffused light of the rising sun that still glowed from behind the Jitomate Mountains. He didn’t care to share it with anyone. And especially not with her.

He averted his eyes when she looked his way. Then drove off the gravel onto the earth and across her yard and backed into position beside the hole that was still growing in the old wall so that he could toss the crumbling bricks he pulled down into the bed of his truck.

The Anglo woman called to him when he stepped out into the morning he was being forced to share with her—

“Hola, Chuy. How are you today?”

“Muy bien, señora.”

Chuy raised a hand and nodded her direction.

“Gracias.”

Then he turned to face the wall.

Chuy had learned not to ask how she was in return. The one time he made that mistake the Anglo woman came over and ate up half an hour with her answer. While she spoke she stepped closer and Chuy backed away. He was pinned against his truck when she finished. Now he worried she might come over even though he was ignoring her. She had done that before. But this morning she returned her attention to her flowers. And kept it there.

Chuy was working in front of the house and off to one side, on the stretch of wall facing the road. The gate where the driveway entered was to his right and the house was behind him. He had been pulling down crumbling adobes for about fifteen minutes when he felt eyes on his back. Then sighed out his relief when the Anglo woman’s footsteps clattered away from him along the brick walkway that led to her house. He nodded when he heard the big heavy front door creak and thump closed behind her. He said quietly—

“Thank God for small miracles.”

### 2

He spent the next three hours taking down what he hoped were the last of the soft crumbling bricks in this bad section of the old wall. He used a hand broom to sweep the dirt and dust from the exposed surfaces, cleaning them off for closer inspection. Then he stopped and had some water.

He knew something unwanted was about to happen when he heard the front door moan open behind him. The sound of that heavy carved wooden door always reminded him of old horror movies. When the innocent victims are entering the haunted house. Or the ancient tomb releases its phalanx of demons. But this time the sound was more than an amusing curiosity. This time it lacked irony. This time it seemed truly ominous.

He listened to the Anglo woman’s footsteps approach him on the brick path. She stopped and everything around him was quiet and still. The only sounds were at a distance. The hum of traffic. A dog barking.

Chuy prayed for her to turn around and go back inside. He grimaced when she called out. She pitched her voice high and made it sing-song—

“Chuy, could you come inside for a moment?”

Through the gap he had made in the wall he could see a fat cottonwood. He stared at the huge old tree. The rough bark enveloping the immense girth.

*Shit*, Chuy wanted to say.

He wanted to say it many times and very loudly. He wanted to shout it at the old tree. He closed his eyes when the Anglo woman called out to him again, louder this time, with more urgency—

“Chuy? Could you come here?”

He opened his eyes and the cottonwood was still there and still ignoring him. He sighed before he turned around.

The Anglo woman stood in front of her graceful old adobe home, half in the shadows, with a bright shaft of sunlight on her brown hair and the side of her pale face. She had changed her clothing. Before she wore blue jeans and a long-sleeved cotton shirt. Now she wore a sheer off-white cotton dress that clung to her breasts and her hips.

“¿Señora?” Chuy said.

She gestured to him, made a reeling motion with her hand, then tossed her head toward the house.

“Come on inside. There’s something I want to show you.”

Dust from the wall clouded his vision. He blinked a few times. Then nodded at his employer. He took off his gloves and tossed them to the ground. He made his way slowly across the yard, slapping dust off his torso and thighs as he went. He looked up as he approached the house. The Anglo woman was gone. The big door stood ajar. He went along the brick walkway and pushed the door open and stepped inside. The adobe walls were reddish-brown. The floor was made from glazed bricks the color of dried blood.

Chuy saw no clue to where she had gone.

“¿Señora?” he called out.

“Down the hall to your right. First door on the left.”

He turned and hesitated. Then went slowly down the wide hallway. There was a row of tall narrow windows on his right. Sunlight carved shadows through the interior. On his left the door to the first room stood open. He paused just before it. At this angle all he could see within was cool darkness.

When he took another step there she was. Standing beside a high bed made of hand-worked yellow pine. She pulled the cotton dress over her head and was naked. Chuy’s arms and legs jumped and his heart jolted and began to pound. He looked away and felt sick when the Anglo woman said—

“What’s the matter, Chuy? Don’t like what you see?”

Dark spots swam before him. He worried he might faint. He darted his eyes over and confirmed she was indeed completely nude.

Her voice grated along his spine—

“I won’t bite.”

He closed his eyes. For an interminable moment he was paralyzed. He even stopped breathing. Then he sucked in a lungful of air. He opened his eyes and they were drawn toward her by sudden movement. She had snatched up the sheer dress and now held it against her nakedness.

“Please go,” the Anglo woman said.

### 3

Chuy rocked from one foot to the other as he made his escape. He wanted his footsteps to be silent on the blood-red bricks. He eased the front door shut behind him and crept across the yard in movements that were careful and measured. He stood over his gloves staring down at them before he picked them up and brushed the dust from the leather and pulled them back onto his hands.

Then he resumed staring through the gap he had made in the old wall at the fat giant cottonwood that stood beyond it. He was still staring when the front door emitted another long haunted moan. He listened to the Anglo woman approach him. He tensed as she drew near.

He turned to face her when she stopped about three feet behind him. She was wearing the off-white cotton dress again. And was still naked beneath it. He wished she had added some underwear. She had her arms crossed under her breasts lifting them upward. He glanced down and saw the darker circles of her areolae jutting toward him and felt heat on his neck as he turned away.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He put his eyes on her face and tried to ignore everything below her neck. Her pale blue eyes were wet and red-rimmed. He couldn’t stand it and looked away again. She sniffled before she spoke.

“I had no right to do that to you.”

You’re goddamn right you didn’t.

He kept his face turned away.

For a moment she was quiet. Just another solitary sniffle.

Then she spoke in a torn rush. Her words all jumbled together. He couldn’t make sense of what she said as it spilled toward him. He sorted it out inside his head after she was done and had begun sobbing—

I’m just so lonely! It’s so hard! I can’t stand it!

She was gasping and yelping with her hands over her face.

If she said anything more it was lost in all that mess.

### 4

Chuy sat on the ground beneath one of the ancient cottonwoods. He leaned against the broad trunk and put his head back and looked up through the long twisting branches. A breeze stirred and the leaves fluttered like butterfly wings. For an instant he doubted what had happened. The Anglo woman calling him inside. Into her house built by his people before her people even knew this place existed. Where she stood naked before him.

Some things are so real they just seem unreal. What punctured his disbelief was remembering her out here blubbering at him. That was exactly the right amount of real.

Chuy snorted and shook his head.

“What a pain in the ass.”

He wanted to pack up and go. Leave the wall torn apart and let someone else deal with both messes. Neither of which were his. He didn’t build the crappy section of the wall that was falling apart. And he didn’t make that rich Anglo lady so damned crazy.

But quitting a job was never good. Word could get around and people didn’t hire someone who might quit on them. Especially not the rich people here in Las Haciendas. They wanted to believe they got the best of everything. No quitters for them. He pictured the Anglo woman going around telling people how that lowlife Chuy Sandoval from up in Los Huertos had up and quit on her. How they would all agree it was so hard to find good help these days.

Picturing her doing that made him wonder what she was doing now. Inside her house all alone. He hoped she wasn’t doing anything stupid. Like booze and pills or her head in the oven. And whatever else she was up to could she please for all that was holy take a moment to change into something decent. Just in case she decided to make another appearance.

Which she just might. And with no apologies. This time it could be in anger.

Because she wanted him gone.

And if she fired him she would lie about him.

Because she would feel like she had to explain. To the guy she hired to finish the wall. To the woman who cleaned her house. To friends and to neighbors. To anyone who knew she had hired someone to fix her wall. Some of whom might ask how the job was going. So she would spread lies.

And in these situations Chuy knew the truth was often turned upside-down.

She might say he was the one who made a pass at her.

“Shit,” Chuy said. “Shit shit shit.”

He took a deep breath. Filled his lungs and felt the rough cottonwood bark cut into his back. The oxygen and the jolt of pain helped him calm down. He took a second deep breath and another look at his situation. Told himself he needed to stop panicking and assuming the worst.

The Anglo woman didn’t seem mean or vengeful. Just lonely and sad.

And she *really* wanted her wall fixed. Some big-deal party she was planning where everything had to be perfect. A neighbor had told her Chuy was the best and she wanted it done right and she wanted it done fast. She offered him extra to bump his other jobs and rush this one. A *lot* extra. More extra than he had ever received on any other job.

Despite what had happened he really doubted she was going to fire him.

And he definitely wasn’t going to quit.

“Shit,” Chuy said.

Then he got back to work.

### 5

This long strange trying day had grown hotter than he expected. Now the shadows from the lowering sun were too deep for his tired eyes. He stood before the gap he had opened in the old adobe wall and stared down at his tools scattered across the ground. He wanted to leave his tools as they were and go. But in the morning he might find spots of rust on the steel or worse his tools could be gone. So as was his habit at the end of each day he set himself to gathering his things back into his truck. When he was done he smacked the dust from his shirt and jeans, climbed in behind the wheel, and drove through the wooden gate in the old mud wall and went down the long dirt drive to the boulevard.

Chuy found the wide paved road waiting empty. He turned right and drove north through the pastures and estates of Las Haciendas de Tijeras, waited at the traffic light where the boulevard ended, then turned left and went west and crossed the river. Past the bridge he turned north again and entered Los Huertos del Río Huérfano, the old farming village where his family had lived for six generations he could count and at least a few more before that. He knew three centuries had passed since the first Sandoval came north out of Mexico City. Exactly when they settled in Los Huertos he wasn’t sure.

While he drove the setting sun painted colors on the sky and across the great valley. In the east the towering stone faces of the Jitomate Mountains went from the ripe tomato red for which they were named to a burnished rust and finally a deep russet.

Chuy had every intention of going straight home. And immediately telling Terésa what had happened with the Anglo woman. But when he made the turn onto Carril Espinoso and started past Rico’s bar the powerful pull of cold beer seized control of his truck and forced it into the empty parking lot and stopped it beside the black metal door. Beyond which Chuy found his old friend alone in the big room.

The barkeep put a frosted mug in front of Chuy as he was sliding onto his favorite stool at the end of the bar beside the cash register. Rico watched from across the bar as Chuy settled onto his seat and lifted his mug and sipped his beer and licked the foam from his upper lip.

When he had returned his mug to the bar Chuy sighed deeply.

“Rico,” Chuy said. “I have a problem.”

Rico shook his head.

“No. That’s impossible. You have never had any problems. Not a single one. That’s what makes you who you are—a man without problems. The only problem you have suffered with is how much you can’t stand how others fail to deal with their problems.”

“Go ahead. Mock me in my time of grief.”

Rico poked his chin across the bar.

“So what’s your problem then?”

Chuy told Rico about the rich Anglo lady he was working for down in Las Haciendas. When Chuy told how she called him into her house Rico nodded and interrupted—

“I know what’s coming next.”

Chuy frowned up at the tall barkeep.

“Oh yeah? So tell me then.”

Rico shook his head.

“No. I’m enjoying this too much.”

He poked his chin again.

“Keep going.”

Chuy continued with his story. Rico smiled and nodded when the Anglo woman pulled off her dress.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought she wanted.”

Chuy frowned again.

“How did you know?”

Rico shrugged.

“Experience.”

Rico put his hands on the bar and leaned down toward Chuy. He made a grin that was lopsided.

“So what’s she look like?”

Chuy shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

He waved a hand in front of his mouth.

“She has lots of teeth.”

Chuy frowned up at Rico.

“She reminds me of a collie.”

Rico’s grin vanished. He raised his eyebrows.

“So she’s a dog? That’s too bad. Kind of ruins your story.”

Chuy shook his head.

“No. I didn’t say that.”

“If she looks like a collie how can she not be a dog?”

“Are you going to make me explain everything?”

“No. Just this one thing that makes no sense.”

“I tried not to look at her.”

“But you *did* look at her.”

“It was dark, okay?”

Rico’s confusion twisted up his face.

“It was night? When did this happen?”

Chuy lifted his mug and drank. It came back down half empty. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“What?” Chuy said.

“Listen to me when I talk to you.”

“I’m having trouble concentrating.”

“I thought this happened today. While you were there working.”

Chuy nodded.

“Yeah. It did.”

“So how was it dark?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You just said it was dark.”

“Oh. Yeah. Inside her house. There weren’t any lights on.”

Rico raised a hand and pointed while he nodded.

“Oh. Okay. Now I get it.”

“You thought she got naked out in the yard?”

“No. I just didn’t get how it was dark.”

“What’s so hard to understand about that?”

Rico raised both hands over the bar.

“You said it was dark. Dark usually means at night.”

Chuy grunted and looked at his beer.

Rico held a hand out across the bar.

“Hey, it’s not my fault you messed up your own story.”

Chuy raised a hand and held his thumb and index finger about a half an inch apart. He jabbed the air with this hand while he said—

“Could you maybe make this just a little bit easier?”

“Not on your life.”

Chuy put his hand down.

“I didn’t think so.”

Rico poked his chin again.

“So what’s your damned problem?”

“What do you think?”

“You don’t want to tell Terésa. But you know you have to.”

“That’s one problem. But not the one I was thinking about.”

“So what’s the problem you were thinking about?”

“I have to work there. At her house.”

Rico frowned.

“So?”

“It’s embarrassing. I refused her. Women don’t like that.”

Rico nodded.

“Women don’t like that.”

“Now you’re starting to get it.”

“You think she might fire you?”

Chuy shook his head.

“No.”

“Good. So you’re safe.”

Chuy snorted.

“Safe isn’t the word I would use.”

“So you’re afraid of her?”

“That’s not the word I would use either.”

“So what word *would* you use.”

Chuy shook his head.

“I don’t know. I just don’t like it.”

He looked up at Rico.

“I have to tell Terésa.”

Rico nodded. Deeply and slowly. With pronounced gravity.

“Yes, my friend. You most certainly do. And if I were you that’s the only problem I would be worrying about.”

### 6

Chuy looked down into his beer. He made a hissing sound and shook his head. Then he raised his mug and drained it and returned it to the bar.

Rico pointed at the empty glass.

Chuy shrugged. Then he sighed.

Finally he nodded.

Rico took the empty mug away and left it by the sink and brought a fresh one out of the freezer beneath the bar and raised it to the tap and filled it and brought it back down the bar. Where he placed it before Chuy then stood up straight and folded his arms across his chest and put his head to one side.

“Terésa knows what it’s like out there. She’s a sensible woman.”

Chuy looked up at his friend, studied his face for a moment.

“I don’t want—”

He frowned and shook his head. A moment later he shrugged. He needed another moment before he was ready to continue. Then Chuy told Rico what happened after. How the Anglo woman came outside and stood before him and blubbered about her loneliness.

“She’s a lonely woman who did a desperate thing. I feel ashamed for her. I don’t want to shame her any more by telling Terésa. It’s bad enough that I know how she feels.”

“You told me.”

“That’s different.”

Chuy took a deep breath and sighed.

“I don’t want to shame her before another woman.”

Chuy sighed again. He tapped a finger against the bar.

“Terésa can be really tough on other women.”

Rico frowned and nodded. A car passed by out on Los Huertos Road and in the stillness of the moment it seemed to pass through the room.

Chuy raised a hand and gestured at his friend.

“But telling you—that’s nothing.”

He pointed at Rico.

“You forgive women for everything they do.”

Rico looked away. He tapped a foot against the floor.

“Well maybe not everything,” Rico said.

He turned back to Chuy.

“You think Terésa’s gonna go over there and yell at her?”

Chuy snorted. Then he smiled.

“She might.”

Rico grinned.

“She just might. I could see her going over there.”

“But she wouldn’t yell at her. She would just stare at her and make her sweat.”

Rico laughed.

“Yeah. She would.”

Another car approached along Los Huertos Road.

“I feel bad for her,” Chuy said. “It’s hard being alone.”

The car out on the road slowed down and turned into the lane that ran past Rico’s bar. The barkeep’s eyes went to the approaching sound. Then he stared down at Chuy and his face was set hard.

“That’s too bad for you,” Rico said. “It’s too bad that you feel sorry for that woman. Because you have no choice. When you try to keep anything from Terésa, she knows.”

Rico pointed at Chuy.

“She probably knows already. She can sense it.”

The car outside swung into the parking lot. Rico’s eyes went to the door and then back to his friend. His expression softened.

“Besides. You already feel sorry for this woman. Who sounds kind of crazy if you ask me.”

Rico smiled at Chuy.

“So what’s a little more pity?” Rico said.

### 7

After Chuy emptied his glass for a second time and placed his empty mug back down on the bar he propped his folded arms up there too and used them as a pillow for his bleary head. He meant to close his aching eyes for just a moment before he went back outside and into his truck and continued home. But instead that moment ended with him snoring.

Rico let his exhausted friend alone for a few minutes. Then quietly tried to wake him. Rico tried again a few minutes later and wasn’t so gentle about it. When a third and almost forceful attempt also failed Rico gave up and called Terésa. Who laughed into the telephone then came rattling across the village in her old station wagon and stood next to her snoring husband. She laughed at Chuy with Rico and a few other men who were seated nearby. Then she put a tender hand on her husband’s strong shoulder and bent down beside him and spoke into his ear.

“Chuy,” Terésa said. “Wake up.”

Chuy shifted on his bar stool. His snoring grew louder.

The men seated nearby laughed softly.

“Chuy,” Terésa said again.

She spoke sharper this time. Chuy stirred again. Then his head came up. He blinked across the bar at Rico.

“He’s up,” Rico said.

Chuy frowned at his old friend.

“Of course I’m up.”

Rico frowned back at Chuy.

“Well you’ve been asleep long enough. About twenty minutes.”

“And you let me sleep like that?”

“I tried to wake you up. You weren’t having it.”

Chuy sat upright and turned to Terésa.

“You came to get me?”

“Someone had to.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Rico called me.”

“Well at least he did that.”

The men seated nearby laughed again, louder this time.

“Besides,” Terésa said. “Where else would you be?”

Their audience laughed louder still.

Terésa patted Chuy’s shoulder.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you home.”

Chuy was still for a moment. Then he nodded at his wife. He put a hand to his mouth and yawned as he rose to his feet. They bid goodnight to Rico and the other men. Then crossed the big room and stepped outside through the black metal door.

### 8

The parking lot was filled with the pale pink glow from Rico’s red neon sign. Chuy noticed it was still warm and the village was quiet. Only the bugs were busy, chirping and humming in the dark.

Chuy stopped beside his truck and pulled out his keys.

“No you don’t,” Terésa said. “You’re coming with me.”

Chuy nodded and yawned and dropped his keys back into his pocket. He followed Terésa to her car and slipped in beside her. He yawned long and hard while Terésa found her keys and started her engine. A low dust cloud rose after her old rusted wagon as it rumbled out of the parking lot and started up the lane.

Chuy knew there was no time like the present and no avoiding what had to be done. Waiting could only make it worse.

“A thing happened today,” Chuy said.

He tried to decide how to tell it. And told himself he should have decided that before he opened his mouth.

“What kind of thing,” Terésa said.

“A weird thing.”

Terésa glanced over at her husband.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“No. It wasn’t.”

Terésa listened silently while Chuy recounted his misadventure with the Anglo woman. When he was done she remained quiet for another moment. Then she asked what the Anglo woman looked like. She laughed when Chuy said the Anglo woman resembled a collie.

“Is that so. Like how? She has a tail?”

Chuy gestured in front of his face.

“She has a lot of mouth. With a lot of teeth in it.”

“You were looking at her teeth?”

Terésa laughed.

“She must have felt pretty foolish. When you left her standing there naked. That’s quite a thing to do to a woman.”

“So you’re on her side?”

“No way. And watch out for this one. You know what they say about a woman scorned.”

“So I should be afraid of her?”

“I don’t know her. So I don’t know. But you should be careful.”

“You want me to quit?”

“It’s good money, right?”

“Real good money. I keep taking down more of her wall and she keeps paying me to do it.”

“Then why would you quit? Because she took off her clothes and made a fool out of herself? She didn’t hit you or pull a knife.”

“No. She didn’t. No guns either.”

“So you see my point.”

“I thought it was *my* point. Somehow you took it away from me.”

“That’s because I’m quicker and smarter than you are.”

“I guess so.”

Terésa smiled.

“I would have liked to have been a fly on her wall.”

“So you could see her get naked in front of me? Why would you want to see that?”

“So I could see her shame after you left.”

Chuy smiled before he laughed. Then he pointed over at Terésa.

“Now that’s just cruel,” Chuy said.

### 9

They were quiet the rest of the way home. Chuy could feel Terésa digesting what he had told her. He knew there would be more questions. When the old wagon had climbed up their lane and come to a stop in their driveway and Terésa had cut the engine and dropped her keys into her purse Chuy looked at his wife and waited.

“So,” Terésa said.

“So,” Chuy said back to her.

“Is that why you had too much to drink?”

“I had two beers.”

“Which today was too much. Or you wouldn’t have passed out.”

“I feel asleep.”

“Which is different how?”

“One is alcohol. The other is exhaustion. Pretty different.”

“It seems like more than a coincidence. This happens. Then you have two beers and poof. Out like a light.”

Chuy took a moment to consider this. He had not made the connection.

“You have a point.”

“Stress. It will do that to people.”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“Anything like this ever happen to you before?”

“What? You mean a woman gets naked in front of me?”

“What else are we talking about?”

“You think I wouldn’t have told you?”

“You almost didn’t tell me this time.”

“That’s not true.”

“Well you didn’t exactly make it a priority. First you stayed there and worked for the rest of the day. Then you went to Rico’s and told *him* what happened. Before you told me.”

Terésa folded her arms together.

“What if I wanted you to quit? Right away. Soon as it happened. I didn’t get to say. Because I didn’t know about it. Because you stayed there and kept working.”

“Should I have come home and told you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You never answered my question.”

“Which one? You asked a lot of them.”

“Has something like this ever happened to you before?”

Chuy started to smile. He stopped himself and shook his head.

“No. Nothing like this. A little come on here and there. I’ve told you about that stuff. But no stunt like this. Not even close.”

Terésa nodded.

“I know you would have told me.”

She shrugged.

“I thought maybe I forgot.”

Chuy grinned. His eyes opened wide.

“You mean something like this could happen to me and you could forget about it?”

“I hate to break it to you. But I have other things to remember.”

“Still.”

“And we’ve been married a long time.”

“I would remember if a man took his clothes off in front of you.”

“Are you sure?”

Chuy stared at Terésa.

When a moment had passed without his answer she started laughing.

When another moment had passed Chuy joined her.

### 10

Chuy slept later than usual. Which usually would have irritated him. But after the trial of yesterday this morning he didn’t care. The sky was paling when he stood in the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. As the machine began to hiss and spit he stepped out into the backyard for a look at his peppers. So far it was a good year for them. Not so good for beans. But Chuy hadn’t planted beans this year so that was someone else’s problem.

His problem was down in Las Haciendas. He didn’t want to think about it yet. But there it was. Ruining his morning again.

He went back inside and waited for the coffeemaker to finish. He poured two cups and carried them through the house back to their bedroom. He found Terésa awake but still in bed. She was on her back staring up at the ceiling. She sat up as Chuy approached and reached out for the cup he handed her. She wrapped both hands around the cup and sipped at it.

“Good morning,” Chuy said.

“What’s so good about it?”

They frowned at each other.

“What’s the matter?”

“I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking about that woman.”

Chuy waited for Terésa to explain. She only stared at him.

He sat down on the bed beside her.

“You got angry?”

Terésa nodded.

“Last night you made jokes about it,” Chuy said.

“I know. But then I lay here and got furious.”

“Why?”

“I know being lonely can make you do things you shouldn’t. And I know we’re lucky to have each other and being lucky that way doesn’t make me better than anyone else. But I also know that no matter what I would never throw myself at a married man. And I hate that she did that to you when you work for her.”

Terésa looked intently at her husband.

“It’s sexual harassment. It’s doesn’t matter why she did it.”

Chuy pulled his head back and frowned.

“I didn’t think of that.”

“Well you should have. We both should have seen that right away. What she did to you was wrong. Don’t feel sorry for her.”

“Part of me feels sorry for her. Part of me is plenty mad.”

“Well it’s the mad part that has sense.”

They sat quietly beside each other. Terésa looked up at the ceiling. Chuy stared at the wall. Occasionally one would raise their cup and sip at it. Then the other would do the same.

Eventually Chuy broke their silence.

“I’m just thinking. What if her neighbors are invited? To her party. They would all see that big hole in her wall and she would make an excuse. Put the blame on someone.”

“I didn’t say I wanted you to quit.”

“*I* want to quit.”

“But you can’t. See what I mean? This is wrong.”

“Yeah. I sure as hell do.”

“How much longer do you have to work there?”

“Her wall is a mess. Maybe another week.”

“Well this is one job I can’t wait for you to finish.”

“Me either.”

They were quiet for a moment. Then Terésa puffed up her cheeks and let the air hiss out slowly between her lips. She nodded before she spoke.

“Yeah. That’s how it is. But she better keep her clothes on.”

She jabbed a finger at her husband.

“If that puta gets naked again she’s toast.”

### 11

There was no repeat of the Anglo woman out tending her flowers when he arrived. Now the morning was mostly gone and Chuy still had not seen her. This was a break from her previous habit of coming outside to say hello and waste his time with some stupid chit chat.

At a little before eleven o’clock Chuy drove across Las Haciendas to inspect a water-damaged wall and talk to its owner. He thought about his schedule on the way back to the Anglo woman’s house. How he would juggle the jobs he had lined up before him. He was still trying to sort that problem out when he parked his truck back beside the gap he had opened in her wall.

When he cut his engine her voice startled him.

“You forgot your lunch,” the Anglo woman called out.

She was walking toward his truck carrying a brown paper grocery bag. One hand clutched the folded-over top and the other was tucked underneath. Chuy looked over at his empty passenger seat where his lunch should have been waiting. Then remembered being emptyhanded on his way out to Terésa’s car and again when he climbed into his truck in Rico’s parking lot. Where he had left his truck overnight because this woman coming toward him had the nerve to peel off her clothes and then blubber about it. Terésa must have found his lunch on the kitchen counter and brought it here. Then given it to the Anglo woman since Chuy wasn’t around.

“Shit,” Chuy said.

He didn’t care if she heard him. And didn’t care if she was offended. He just wanted this encounter over with. If he had to pack up and leave to end it then that’s what he’d do.

He stepped out of his truck and they approached each other.

“Your wife dropped it off,” the Anglo woman said.

Chuy wondered what else Terésa might have said or done while she was here. And wanted to say or do but thought better of it.

The Anglo woman stopped and held out the brown bag.

“It’s heavy,” she said.

Chuy took it from her.

“You must eat a lot,” the Anglo woman said.

Chuy kept his eyes down on his lunch.

“Yeah.”

“You wouldn’t know it to look at you.”

Chuy felt heat on his face and along his shoulders. He raised the bag in the air and glanced at the Anglo woman.

“Thanks for this,” he said.

The Anglo woman nodded.

“Of course.”

Chuy nodded back and wondered if the Anglo woman had forgotten what she did yesterday—or wasn’t trying hard enough to avoid remarks that could be misinterpreted—or didn’t see that comments about his appearance could be unwelcome now—not that such comments were welcome before—or if God forbid she was about to try again.

He was ready to get back in his truck and get the hell out of there.

“About yesterday,” the Anglo woman said.

Chuy’s face burned.

“It’s all right.”

She shook her head.

“No. It’s nice of you to say that. But it’s not all right. Not at all.”

Chuy couldn’t look at her.

He waited for the Anglo woman to unburden herself.

But she didn’t. Which forced him to look at her again. Chuy did so fully and directly this time. He saw her face was drawn and her eyes were hollow. And that fear and guilt and shame all dwelt together back in those hollowed eyes. This was a much more extreme display of misery than he had anticipated.

She blinked at him. Then folded her hands behind her back and lowered her head. Chuy was grateful to see that she was wearing a bra. He took that as a good sign. It allowed him to relax just a little.

“What I did was wrong,” the Anglo woman said.

Her voice trembled. She raised her head.

Chuy met her eyes and then looked away.

“I hope you can forgive me,” she said.

He turned back and watched her pale blue eyes dart across his face. She kept trying to look him in the eye and couldn’t do it. He swallowed and his words scratched in his dry throat—

“Of course. Don’t worry about it.”

Her eyes met his for just an instant. Then the Anglo woman turned away and retreated back across her yard. Chuy remained where he was and watched her go. She kept her hands clutched behind her back and only released them when she reached out to open the carved wooden door. When it moaned shut behind her and Chuy heard the latch snick shut he emptied his lungs and saw stars at the edges of his vision.

Then his stomach growled and his eyesight cleared. His faintness left his head and went down into his belly. Chuy realized he hadn’t eaten much since the Anglo woman stood naked before him. He picked at his dinner last night and skipped breakfast this morning. He returned to his truck and climbed in behind the wheel and put the brown bag on the passenger seat and unrolled the top and bent over to peer in at his lunch.

On top of his food he found a white slip of note paper creased once down the middle. He unfolded the note and saw Terésa’s neat script, each letter as precise as if it was sewn into the page—

Is the collie behaving herself?

Chuy stared for a moment. Then laughed loud and deep. He read the note again and he laughed again. Then he smiled and shook his head and folded the paper into quarters. As he tucked the note into his shirt pocket Chuy turned to look at the grand old house where the Anglo woman had tried to seduce him. He could picture Terésa at the door introducing herself as his wife. Of course she wouldn’t speak of what had happened here the day before. That would be beneath her.

But Chuy knew how his wife had looked at the woman who lived here. That level gaze of knowing disapproval. Which could be so profoundly unnerving. And now he recognized the effect of that look. Which he had seen in those hollowed-out eyes.

## No Mix

### 1

At midday thunderheads appeared off on the horizon toward the southwest. Then made a slow march over the mesa lands. By the time the storms arrived they were too insignificant to herald the monsoons. Many residents of the great valley of the Río Huérfano only grumbled that the rain wasn’t enough. And while it was true that the hour of scattered showers only dampened the earth it also left behind clean air that was almost cool and a thin bank of clouds along the western horizon that turned the sunset coral and violet and vermillion. It became a lovely evening for a party.

At Madilyn Kovac’s old adobe in Las Haciendas de Tijeras the guests began to arrive when the colors in the sky were at their peak. One-by-one vehicles turned in till they lined both sides of the long dirt drive halfway to the road. A significant number were sedans and SUVs that cost more than the typical working resident of the valley earned in a year. A few cost substantially more. There were two that cost more than the average three bedroom house.

Only a thin dusky rose band remained at the bottom of the western sky when Rico Lupe parked his long red vintage convertible at the end of the vehicles that stretched away from Madilyn’s gate. The moon was close to full and well up in the sky. Rico sat in his open car and looked up at the glowing white orb and felt alone. Then he stepped out onto the dirt drive and walked along the line of cars and through the open wooden gate and into the enclosed yard. He found more vehicles jammed onto the gravel parking circle inside the walls. A caterer’s truck was parked off the gravel on the dirt.

Sounds of the festivities came floating over the house. Which told Rico that the party was centered on the deep back porch and the courtyard beyond. He stopped to listen. There was soft tinkling piano jazz and the scratch and buzz of conversation. Above this came a laugh that could only be Madilyn. Her near-bray with its odd music.

Rico looked up again at the high remote moon. He took a few steps sideways to see it clearly through a gap in the branches of an old cottonwood. He was not yet ready to enter this crowd of strangers. To endure being with people he did not want to meet again. Walking past all those expensive cars had confirmed what the guests were like and told him he did not want to be here. He watched the clouds drift and scolded himself that he should get moving and get this over with. But his feet remained planted and his eyes stayed up on the heavens.

His attention returned to ground level when a pair of waitstaff appeared from behind the house. Two young women in white blouses and black slacks. He watched them cross the yard and remembered being young and working at events like this and how exciting that had seemed at first and how quickly the excitement vanished and all that remained was the persistent slights and the relentless grunt work.

Rico turned and walked along the front wall. He had decided to look for the portion that Chuy had been hired to rebuild. He knew that Madilyn had paid well to have her wall repaired in time for tonight’s party. He told himself it would be a shame if none of her guests admired the workmanship.

Rico stopped when he found a section of adobe that was a shade darker. He put his hand flat against it and confirmed this was fresh mud, cool and damp and soft. He stood with his hand pressed to the wall and considered how his friend who had done this work felt about the presumptuous Anglo woman who lived here. Rico knew it didn’t matter between them, that Chuy did not judge him. Chuy understood where a man’s need could lead him. And Rico was not overproud, especially before his old friend, and had long given up being embarrassed by such things. But seeing and feeling what Chuy had done here made him sad. For no reason he could have explained. It came on fast and jolted him. A spasm shook his body.

When it had passed he turned toward Madilyn’s splendid house and listened again to the music and voices spilling toward him. He felt ridiculous pitying the rich woman who lived here, her life spent amid plenty in a world of want. But he felt sorry for her anyway. And wanted to be rid of that feeling. Which he knew was circumstantial. Remove himself from these circumstances and the feeling would pass. If he turned around and went back down the drive by the time he reached his car this stupid feeling might be gone.

But he had given Madilyn his word that he would be here.

Rico looked up once more at the lordly moon. Spent a long moment staring at it through the shroud of another ancient cottonwood. Then crossed the short distance to the party.

### 2

The breezes that blew in through Rico’s open windows danced around inside his bar and eventually lured him outside. From there they pulled him across his parking lot and out into the lane. Where he stood watching the changing colors streak the western sky. Then fresh customers came rolling up and he followed them back inside.

He let the black metal door close behind him then reached for a galvanized switchbox mounted on the wall. He found the toggle switch and pushed it up. From outside came a rising buzz then the buzz dropped away and a low hum took its place. Rico moved to the nearest window and ducked down so he could look up at his name glowing in neon script above his parking lot.

The sign was pale and bright against the darkening sky, an intense electric pink. It hurt his eyes. He blinked and saw spots as he turned away from the window and crossed the room and stepped behind the bar.

The new arrivals were four middle-aged Anglo construction workers. They sat at a table and did not have to tell him they wanted beer. Rico went about getting it for them. Three old Spanish men were his only other customers. They occupied another table and the conversation at both tables was identical in all but language. Slow and muted with frequent pauses. Occasionally punctuated with unhurried gestures.

Rico delivered the Anglo men their beer then returned to his station behind the bar and watched them talk and drink. They first appeared two weeks ago and had returned on several weeknights since. Which meant he had seen enough of them to know they would behave themselves. They would be polite and subdued in his Spanish bar. Maybe they told themselves they came here because the beer was cold and cheap. And that was certainly one reason. But Rico guessed they missed the old ways you found at a place like his. The Spanish held the old ways closer. When Anglo men like these came around it was often because they wanted to step back.

Rico didn’t know what these men were building during their working day and didn’t care to find out. Too much was going up around Los Huertos and he didn’t like to think about it. Housing developments and shopping malls and office parks spread like spilled garbage across the new city of Rancho Grande up on the mesas to the west and across the old city of Tijeras down in the valley to the south. If it wasn’t for the open pueblo lands to the east and north the old village of Los Huertos del Río Huérfano would be entirely engulfed. And that engulfment would mean absorption. Which would end in a quiet annihilation.

All this construction came with rising property values that pushed the poor Spanish families out of these old agricultural lands nestled in a green band along the river. Rico could see a day when his clientele would be more Anglo than Spanish. Like it was at this moment. If only at a ratio of four to three. When that ratio persistently tilted the wrong direction what he did here would become just a job and no longer a living. He might sell then and move away. He thought maybe up in the mountains at Los Pilares del Cielo. Where he liked to fish and go walking under the high pines.

If even up there wasn’t ruined by then too.

### 3

The main section of the old house was flanked by two wings that extended east toward the mountains. The wings framed a spacious porch that opened on a courtyard planted with flowers and shrubs. In the center of the courtyard was an enormous cottonwood, its trunk six feet in diameter. The porch roof was supported by thick vigas and corbels. The floor was made from the same glazed bricks the color of dried blood that were used inside the house.

A portable bar was set up at one end of the porch. A stiff-backed young Anglo man stood behind it. Along the back wall of the house was a buffet table. Waitstaff circulated with trays of food and drink. The guests overflowed the porch and spilled into the courtyard.

Rico found Madilyn in the middle of the porch. Which was also the center of the action. Exactly where he expected she would be. Her pale skin glowed against a short black dress that clung to her curves and made her look even taller. Her straight brown hair hung loose against her shoulders and her blue eyes danced. Her even white teeth glistened when she threw her head back and laughed.

Rico watched her laugh and remembered her laughing beside him in her bed. He wanted to have that moment again. He remembered how her wide mouth felt when he kissed it.

Madilyn saw Rico a second after he saw her. She smiled and waved. He made his way past people drinking and eating and talking and laughing. People smiled at him and people ignored him. He bumped into people and people bumped into him.

Madilyn stood with a small thin man in a black pinstripe three-piece suit and a white shirt with a turquoise tie. The suit appeared heavy and therefore hot and uncomfortable but the man wearing it looked cool and amused. He had white hair and surprised white eyebrows and large glistening black eyes that looked enormous behind the oval lenses of his translucent plastic eyeglasses.

“Hello Rico!” Madilyn called out.

She took his arm and pecked him on the cheek and turned back to the small man in the black suit.

“Wallace, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine. Rico Lupe. Rico, this is Wallace Whipkey. He owns an important gallery in New York.”

Whipkey looked Rico up and down, then made a wide-eyed face at Madilyn. He ducked his pointed chin and arched his eyebrows to his hairline and pursed his lips till they were white at the edges.

Madilyn seemed pleased by this reaction.

“I don’t know how *important* it is, dear,” Whipkey said.

A young man at Whipkey’s elbow laughed. He was tall and angular and had reddish-brown skin and short black hair. His shoes were black and his pants were black and his shirt was a deep iridescent blue.

Madilyn squeezed Rico’s hand.

“Trust me, Rico,” she said. “It’s important.”

Rico smiled and nodded. He had only joined the party a few moments ago and here he was already confronted with the divide between him and the other guests. In his world art galleries were incapable of being important. They were instead reliable bastions of complete irrelevance.

Whipkey turned his owlish face up at Rico.

“And what do *you* do, Señor Lupe?”

A few years back a small group of Anglo gays began frequenting Rico’s bar. They would look Rico up and down, as Whipkey had done. They would stop talking when Rico approached their table then titter and smirk when he left. Rico had remained aloof and eventually they started tipping badly and then they stopped coming around. There were gays that came to his bar before the ones who laughed at him, and there were gays who came after. But they had all acted decently so he treated them with the respect he showed everyone who behaved themselves.

This man Whipkey reminded Rico of the gays who had laughed at him.

“I own a bar,” Rico said.

His voice was cold and flat.

Madilyn squeezed his hand again. Harder this time.

“He owns a fabulous bar in Los Huertos,” Madilyn said.

“A bar, you say?”

“Rico makes the best margaritas in the world.”

“Margaritas, you say?”

Whipkey chortled.

One of the gays who laughed at Rico was a chortler. Their ringleader. A real bitchy thing. Rico had disliked him the most.

Whipkey turned his face back up at Rico.

“Well pray tell, Señor Lupe, how good are they?”

“The best,” Madilyn said.

Whipkey swiveled his head in her direction.

“I wasn’t asking *you*, dear. I was asking your big *friend*.”

He gave Rico another look up and down, then turned back to Madilyn.

“We can scarcely expect your opinion to be objective.”

Madilyn and the angular young man at Whipkey’s elbow laughed together.

Whipkey tilted his face back up at Rico.

“So how good are they, Señor Lupe? Be honest now.”

“Good enough.”

“Hmm, I’ll bet they’re plenty good, yes. What’s your secret?”

“No secret.”

“No secret, you say? Remarkable.”

The tiny man smiled. His lips were a tart little parsimonious curve.

“Well pray tell, Señor Lupe, you must mix us some.”

The angular young man cackled. Madilyn gave Rico a fixed grin.

Rico looked down at Whipkey through slitted eyes.

“I’m sure the caterer’s bartender does a fine job.”

Madilyn drew her hand away from Rico’s and pushed her hair behind her shoulders. Whipkey raised his surprised eyebrows and his pointy chin.

“By all means, Señor Lupe, I’m sure he does. But you *must* mix us some of your *world famous* margaritas.”

The angular young man laughed and laughed.

Rico turned to Madilyn.

“Please excuse me,” Rico said.

### 4

His newspaper was spread open on the bartop. He finished the article he was reading and as he turned the page car tires crunched across the gravel out at the edge of the lane. He scanned the pages now open before him and listened to the tires hiss on the sand and dust as the car crossed his parking lot. When the car came to a stop he looked up and through the farthest of the three windows in the front wall he could see the passenger side of a black sedan. He couldn’t see much of it but he saw enough to guess a price tag. Probably some rich tourist wanting directions.

He went back to his newspaper and found he was done with it. He folded the paper up and stashed it beneath the bar then moved to the stereo and turned it on. He switched from the CD player to the radio and country music came softly from the speakers. A man sang his plaintive mourning for a love he had lost while a steel guitar swelled behind him. Rico returned to his place by the cash register expecting to bend over his newspaper again and was surprised not to find it. He shook his head when he remembered putting it away.

A car door smacked shut and a woman’s footsteps started toward the door. Rico considered the delay between the car arriving and the driver making her entrance and assumed correctly that the woman had spent a few moments on her appearance. Checking her hair and touching up her lipstick. Which told Rico maybe she wanted more than just directions. Through the low broad windows she was visible from her shoulders down to her calves. A tall pale woman in a blue dress of light cotton that clung to her bosom and hips. A black leather purse swung at her side.

The door pushed open and the woman entered. She stood just inside as the big metal door swung closed behind her. Blinking while her eyes adjusted to the shadowed room. Then her shoes clacked lightly as she angled across the tile floor. She passed close to the table of old Spanish men. They had stopped their lazy conversation when she entered and now watched her progress. The Anglo men did the same.

She selected a seat at the middle of the bar. Notably removed from where Rico stood waiting. She did not look in his direction. He remained where he was while she settled in. Then stepped over and stood before her. She took another moment before she gave him her attention. When she did Rico smiled and bowed with one shoulder slightly forward and his head angled in that direction. He could see that this gesture charmed her. And he saw that her eyes were pastel blue and her mouth was wide and mobile. She looked away and ran her eyes over the bottles at the back of the bar.

“Buenas noches, señorita.”

This charmed her too.

“What would be your pleasure this evening?”

She smiled without looking at him. Then swung her eyes over and ran them across his face. When she glanced into his eyes a warm ball formed at the bottom of Rico’s chest just below his lungs. Meanwhile her blanched eyes were moving again. When they finally returned to his and stopped moving she blinked languidly.

“Do you make a good margarita? A real one, not any of that frozen stuff.”

Rico looked into her pale blue eyes and did not hurry his answer.

“I am told that I make an excellent margarita.”

She tilted her head to the left and nodded once. Then pulled her eyes away from his and looked down at her hands. Rico nodded back at her but she didn’t notice.

He moved around behind the bar and assembled her drink. The men out at the tables resumed their conversations. Rico placed the glass before the Anglo woman and she raised it to her lips. The room was quiet again while she sipped. Everyone watched her glass as she slowly put it down.

She brought her eyes up from under her lashes when she softly said—

“Fabulous.”

The way she said it made Rico wish they were alone. But they weren’t. And they wouldn’t be anytime soon.

The door kept opening and more customers kept coming in.

### 5

The stiff-backed young Anglo bartender made a real gin and tonic. Plenty of gin, just a hint of quinine from not too much tonic, and a generous squeeze of lime. A proper G&T that had some bite to it. Not the insipid watery mess Rico expected to be served at an event like this.

He watched Madilyn approach through the crowd. Her progress was greatly impeded by guests wanting to chat.

Finally she appeared before him.

“How’s the little devil?” Rico said.

Madilyn smiled and rolled her eyes.

“He’s still talking about your world famous margaritas. He sent me to find you.”

Rico nodded and looked away.

Madilyn put her hand on his forearm. It was warm and soft.

“Whipkey is a very important client,” she said.

He looked down at her hand. Her fingers were long and slender. Rico knew where the conversation was going and regretted it.

Madilyn squeezed his arm.

“Will you please make him a damned margarita?”

Rico kept his eyes pointed down at her hand. It was a pretty hand.

He shook his head.

“No mix.”

He spoke loudly enough. But he knew she wouldn’t hear. He knew his words would never cut through what she wanted.

She squeezed his arm again.

“Please?”

She let that single word hang for a moment. Then added—

“For me?”

Rico raised his head slowly. He stared into her pallid blue eyes. He watched her pupils dilate when he said—

“Did you ask me here to perform tricks for the real guests?”

Madilyn pulled her head back and yanked her hand away.

“Of course not!”

Rico found her eyes again and peered into them.

Madilyn blinked.

### 6

Rico knew she couldn’t hear their conversation. Not at this distance with the room jammed full of drinkers all talking at once and a particularly raucous number booming from the stereo. For a weeknight the place was thunderous.

But he lowered his voice anyway.

“You’re kidding me right.”

“This is not a joking matter.”

“You’re sure?”

“I could move closer. Get a better look.”

Rico frowned. Then shook his head.

Chuy nodded.

“Yeah I didn’t think so.”

“But you’re sure.”

“I saw her car outside. I almost turned around and went home.”

“Sure it’s her car?”

“New black Audi. License A-R-T-D-L-R. You think there’s two of those rolling around?”

Rico scowled. Chuy put both hands up in the air.

“Hey don’t look at me like that. I didn’t do anything.”

Rico bent down over the bar.

“You said she was a dog.”

“So that’s what this is about.”

“This is about you being wrong.”

“I didn’t say she was a dog. I said she looked like a collie.”

“A collie is a dog.”

“True. But that’s not what I meant.”

“Whatever you meant she doesn’t look like any kinda dog.”

“So we disagree on that.”

“No. You’re just wrong.”

“Well Terésa agrees with me.”

Rico snorted.

“Then you both need your eyes examined.”

He stood up straight and scanned his customers. They were satisfied for now but he could feel the refills coming. In another moment he would busy again. He stole a glance up the bar to the tall woman in the blue cotton dress seated by herself with her second margarita.

Then Rico bent low over the bar and braced himself on a forearm while he used his other hand to point at Chuy.

“She’s a good-looking woman.”

“I didn’t say she wasn’t.”

Rico poked his finger at Chuy’s nose.

“I need a favor.”

### 7

Rico told himself he should apologize. Not because he felt he should but because then he could leave. He doubted Madilyn would insist that he stay. But he felt too poisonous for apologies. And while choking on an attempted apology he might say something worse.

He hadn’t eaten. Maybe if he got some food in his belly the poison would drain out of him. Then he could apologize and make his escape. If his mood didn’t improve he would just leave. Make his apologies later when this mood was behind him.

He loaded a plate with food from the buffet and took it inside. Then picked at it while he wandered through the house. He passed through the living room and an attractive blond woman watched him over the shoulder of the man she was speaking with. He considered taking her away from whomever it was she wanted to be taken away from.

Now there was a poisonous game. Taking another lover under the nose of the one you were angry with. Especially dangerous when in such a poisonous mood. Just thinking about it made Rico feel sick. And that dispelled what little appetite he had after his scene with Madilyn. He carried his plate of food into the kitchen and left it on the counter.

The kitchen was empty. He stood in it and looked around. Deep countertops of dark blue tile over the beautiful red brick floors. A big gas restaurant-style stove. An island in the middle with copper-clad pots and pans hanging from a rack above it. He had cooked her breakfast in this kitchen. French toast and coffee with cream.

A waitress came in carrying a tray of dishes. A Navajo girl with a beautifully impassive face. He nodded at her and she smiled serenely. She carried her tray to the sink and started unloading it.

Rico stepped out into the hallway. He passed an Anglo man and woman, a matched pair in dark severe clothing, that stood outside the kitchen talking in lowered voices. They studied Rico from behind spectacles with thick frames and rectangular lenses and their eyes followed Rico as he passed and their voices lowered further still. He couldn’t tell if they were a couple or siblings.

He went to the nearest bathroom and found it occupied. He continued on into the depths of the house and found a bathroom that was empty. He turned on the light and closed the door and locked it.

A facemask was mounted on the wall above the toilet. Rico studied it while he urinated. The mask was made of painted wood and feathers and he assumed it was supposed to be frightening. To Rico anything hanging on a bathroom wall could only look sad. He flushed and washed his hands and glanced in the mirror and saw a weary old man with a lined face. He avoided the mirror and dried his hands and unlocked the door and turned off the light. Instead of going back the way he came he went deeper into the house.

He stopped outside Madilyn’s bedroom. A big square room in a far corner of the sprawling old adobe. All the furniture was made from the same lustrous yellow pine. And all that polished wood glowed dimly in the faint light from the lamp on the low side table. Making the room softy golden.

Rico stepped into the doorframe and looked at the big low bed. Then went over to the bed and laid down on his back. He looked up at the white stucco ceiling. His eyes found the thin crack that forked like a snake’s tongue and the swirl in the stucco that looked like a satellite photograph of a hurricane.

He remembered that her hair was soft against his cheek and her skin was smooth and cool. He remembered the swell of her breasts against him and the hard points of her pelvis tucked against his. They were never in a hurry and they laid together well when it was over. They were gentle and playful. She laughed easily and often.

When Madilyn appeared at his bar she was an attractive woman who made her desires clear. There had been such women in the past and he had gone with many of them. But when he went to bed with Madilyn, and afterward when they lay together, it was different than it had been in a long time. They were hungry for each other but there had been less rush to feed that hunger because the hunger itself was good. And when it was over he did not want to leave. He wasn’t sure if there was something different with this woman or something had changed in him. Before he came here he had wanted to be with her again to find out. Now he wasn’t sure what he wanted.

There was a tight feeling in his stomach and behind his eyes. But no tears came. He wondered if this would be the last woman, if he was through with women now. He did not want to be that old and indifferent. But being with yet another woman was too sad. This one had been good in a way he hadn’t expected, in a way he didn’t understand, in a way he had thought was lost to his youth. He did not want to be an old bachelor who was too forlorn to even admire an attractive woman. But that seemed to be where he was going. The man he would inevitably become in a few more of these years.

He lay in the gentle light from the bedside lamp till the tightness went away. Then he went back through the house, back to the party, and stood outside in the throng on the porch.

And before him the crowd parted. Revealing Madilyn and Whipkey and the angular youth who seemed attached to the tiny man’s elbow. With them was a tall fat Anglo in a linen suit. This man spoke and Whipkey turned to look up at him. He put an index finger against his pointed chin and nodded slightly while the fat man finished what he was saying.

Madilyn saw Rico. She smiled and waved him over. The other three looked at her and then at him.

Whipkey chortled. Rico couldn’t hear but he saw the tiny man’s expression and his movements and he knew what sound the little terror made.

Rico held up one finger—just a moment, that finger said—then he turned and went back inside. He went through the house and passed the blond woman. She gave him her look again but this time he didn’t notice. He went out the front door and down the front walk and across the gravel and out the gate.

Where he was stopped by the lordly moon. Again standing shrouded behind the branches of an old cottonwood. Rico moved forward till the trees opened and the moon was entirely visible. He peered up at its imperious whiteness.

“You’re right,” Rico said. “What was I thinking?”

### 8

Chuy laughed when Rico asked him to leave. He laughed harder when Rico asked him to do it without being seen by a certain woman. But he offered no protest and only delayed his exit long enough to gulp down what remained of his beer. A moment later he had slipped across the room and was gone.

Chuy was not alone in making a fast entrance and exit. Most everyone did not linger on this particular evening. They enjoyed a few quick drinks and some time with their friends and went off to rest for the next day’s work. It wasn’t late yet when the crowd had come and gone and only a single group of young Spanish men occupied one of the round tables. And only the Anglo woman in the blue dress remained at the bar.

Rico rang up the last of his tickets, feeding the cash into the drawer and impaling the checks on the steel pin next to the register. When he was done he went along the bar and stood across from the Anglo woman. She smiled up at him and her wide mouth displayed an array of gleaming white teeth.

Okay. So maybe she looks a little like a collie.

Her white glossy teeth flashed when she said—

“When do you get off work?”

A very pretty collie.

Rico nodded at the table of young Spanish men.

“As soon as I can get them to leave.”

The Anglo woman laughed.

“Does that mean you’re the owner?”

“In fact it does.”

“Then you must be Rico.”

“That I must. And you are…?”

The woman looked down at her half-finished drink, then smiled again when she turned her eyes up at Rico.

“Madilyn.”

Thank God it’s not Lassie.

Rico smiled back at Madilyn. He liked how her tooth-full smile played across her wide active mouth and how her pale blue eyes caught the light and glinted. Rico glanced out into the room, then looked down at Madilyn and held up a finger.

“Just a second, señorita.”

He went down the bar and out onto the floor and over to the table where the three young Spanish men slouched around a near-spent pitcher of beer. He sat down with them and leaned over the table. He tipped his head toward the bar. The young men’s eyes went to the Anglo woman and back to Rico.

“Next time a round on me,” Rico said.

The young men grinned and nodded and shuffled out the door. Rico carried their pitcher and mugs to the sink behind the bar and poured out the dregs. A car started up out in the parking lot.

“What did you say to them?”

“I asked them to have pity on an old man.”

Madilyn put her head back and laughed. It was an odd sound, a near-bray, but with its own music. It fit with the pale blue eyes and the wide mouth full of glossy white teeth. She finished her laugh and watched Rico gather some more dirty glassware from another table. He brought the glassware behind the bar and set it next to the sink. He smiled at Madilyn.

“Give me a couple minutes.”

Rico went up the bar and into the storeroom and closed the two windows in the rear. Then went through the barroom into the ladies’ room and closed the small window set high in the wall. In the men’s room he did the same then relieved himself and washed his face and hands. He combed his hair then messed it back up a little. He stepped out into the big room and worked his way along the front wall closing the three windows. Then crossed to the bar and perched on a stool next to Madilyn.

“Are you ready, señorita?”

“I’m really too old for this señorita shit.”

“Not to me. Never to me.”

Madilyn blushed. Which Rico found surprising and endearing. He offered his hand and led her slowly across the big room to the door and held it open while Madilyn stepped outside. He found the switches to the right of the door and cut the lights. He stepped out into the night then turned and pushed his key into the lock. He twisted hard and the big deadbolt snicked into place.

Then Rico turned around and saw his parking lot bathed in a red glow under a moonless sky.

“Dang.”

“What’s wrong?”

Rico gestured at the humming neon.

“I forgot to turn off my sign. Give me a second.”

He put his key back into the stubborn lock, worked it open, cracked the door a few inches, reached inside and found the big switch. He snapped it over with his thumb and the flowing red script that spelled out his name faded to a smoldering glow as the hum dropped in volume and pitch. The hum from the sign stopped but its glow lingered on for another moment. Then the night became silent. And the sign went completely dark.

### 9

Rico rolled through the pink glow cast by his red sign, past the cars and trucks waiting there, more than a few of which he recognized, and parked his long red convertible in the garage behind his bar and across from his casita. He let himself in through the back door and went through the storeroom into the barroom. His entrance was greeted by several of his patrons. He responded in kind while he joined Chuy on the working side of the bar.

Chuy was wiping down the bartop. He finished this task, tossed the dirty bar mop in the laundry bin beneath the bar, and turned to his old friend.

“Done already?” Chuy said.

“I’m done all right.”

“Oh yeah? How done are you?”

“As done as you think I should be.”

“And you know how done that is.”

“As done as done gets.”

Chuy studied Rico’s face.

“You want me to keep working?”

“No. Thanks.”

Chuy nodded. Then went around to the customer side and took his usual seat. The one closest to the cash register.

Rico went down the bar and stood across from his friend.

“Go home to your wife,” Rico said. “Leave me in peace.”

“Maybe I want a beer first. And maybe Terésa will be mad if I don’t know what happened.”

Rico smiled. There wasn’t any joy in it.

“Maybe I won’t tell you.”

“That’s the thanks I get? I didn’t want to work tonight.”

“You could have told me going there was a mistake.”

“Like you would listened.”

“No. I wouldn’t have listened.”

“You would have told me to mind my own business.”

“I would have told you to go to hell.”

“Yeah. Most likely.”

Rico looked up the bar at the customers seated there, then around the room at the customers seated out at the tables, then back at Chuy again. He put one hand up on the bar and used the other to point at his friend.

“Tell you what. Instead of that beer how about I mix us some of my *world famous* margaritas. Then I’ll tell you what happened.”

“Since when are they world famous?”

“We’ll get to that.”

Rico moved up the bar and went to work. He was interrupted by a customer. A moment later he was interrupted by another. In a few minutes he returned with their cocktails.

Chuy lifted his glass and took a sip. He put it back down and nodded at it.

“They deserve to be world famous.”

He pointed at his margarita.

“Drinking one of these always makes me feel like a lucky man.”

Rico laughed.

“I mean it,” Chuy said. “No joke.”

Rico smiled at Chuy. This one was a good smile.

“Thanks.”

Rico told Chuy about the tiny owl-faced man he would not mix these good drinks for and Chuy grunted his agreement. Rico said he was afraid Madilyn Kovac would be the last woman for him and Chuy started laughing and couldn’t stop. He laughed for a good long time before he managed to tell his friend how foolish he was being.

“Rico. Come to your senses. Do you really think the women will let that happen?”

Chuy shook his head.

“No. Not on your life. No way they will let you alone.”

Chuy pointed a finger up at Rico.

“And you will be powerless against them.”

### 10

Midnight had come and gone. The two old friends were alone in the big room. On the radio a deep-voiced man sang slowly and plaintively about a love he had wronged. Chuy sat at the bar looking into his drink. Rico stood behind the bar looking into his.

Both looked up when a car slowed out on Los Huertos Road. They listened to the car hiss and crackle across the dirt and gravel of Carril Espinoso and then turn into Rico’s parking lot. A black sedan appeared in the dim light outside. It came to a stop before the window closest to the door. There were four interlocking rings on the car’s grill.

“Time for me to go,” Chuy said.

He was reaching for the door when it swung open. He stepped back out of the way and watched Madilyn step inside.

She stopped with her hand still on the door holding it open. Then took a step forward and let the door swing closed behind here.

“Chuy?”

“The one and only.”

Her eyes went to Rico and came back again.

“Do you come here often?”

“All the time.”

Madilyn snorted.

“So you two know each other.”

Chuy turned to look at Rico.

“What do you say. Do we know each other?”

“A little bit.”

“And for a little while.”

“But not too long.”

“And not too well.”

Chuy turned back to Madilyn.

They stared at each other.

“What?” Madilyn said.

“I need to use the door.”

Madilyn blinked. She swayed a little. Then stepped aside.

Chuy made a small bow.

“Gracias señora. Y ahora buenas noches.”

He moved past her and out the door. The door banged shut behind him. Through the open windows came the sound of Chuy’s footsteps disappearing across the parking lot.

Madilyn stuck a hip out, planted a hand on it, and glared across the room.

“So how well *do* you know each other?”

“He’s my best friend. Has been since I moved here. That was about thirty years ago.”

“Fucking hell. You could’ve told me.”

“I would’ve gotten around to it.”

“Bullshit.”

Rico shrugged.

“Think what you like.”

Madilyn took a step forward. Stopped short and swayed again. Then stuck her hip back out and planted her hand back on it.

“Why did you leave?”

“Why do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

She waved the hand that wasn’t on her hip at the door Chuy had just exited through.

“Especially after *that*!”

Rico put his hands up on the bar and frowned at them.

“It wasn’t much to ask,” Madilyn said.

Rico raised his head and looked at her.

“It was everything to ask.”

“A goddamn margarita for the little fucker? What’s the big goddamn deal about a goddamn margarita for the little fucker.”

“It has nothing to do with margaritas.”

“It had everything to do with margaritas!”

Her breathing was heavy. She swayed again and had to replant her feet.

Rico stood up straight and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You shouldn’t have driven here. Not in your condition.”

Madilyn put her hands on her waist.

“Go to hell. I’m not drunk.”

She tossed her head and had to replant her feet again.

“Not that it’s any of your goddamned business.”

Rico shrugged.

“Suit yourself.”

“I think *you’re* drunk.”

“Maybe I am. But I walk away from here. No drive home for me.”

“It’s a lousy stinking bar.”

Rico’s face clouded over.

“Say that again and I’ll throw you out of here.”

“Why wouldn’t you make that little fucker a goddamn drink? You’re a goddamn bartender.”

Rico put his hands back on the bar and waited till the heat was gone from his throat. His voice was hard to control.

“Here. In *my* bar. Yes. I’m a bartender. But when I go to *your* house. And meet your big deal important bastard friends. I’m a bar *owner*. Do you understand the difference?”

“I understand you’re a fucking asshole.”

Rico’s eyes narrowed and his lip curled. Madilyn spun around and stumbled. Rico thought she might fall and was disappointed when she didn’t.

He watched Madilyn stomp out the door. Then lowered his head and listened to her stumble around the back of her car. Listened to her car door click open and smack shut and her engine roar.

Then her tires raised dust and spat sand and gravel as she swung around in the parking lot and shot out into the dirt lane. Her tires squealed when they hit asphalt out on Los Huertos Road.

### 11

The night sounds came in the three front windows and mixed with the soft country music playing on the radio. The bugs chirping out beyond the parking lot sounded like they were in the room. Down in the bosque a coyote howled. Rico waited for the call to be answered. He shivered when it wasn’t.

He lifted his glass and examined the half-inch that remained in the bottom. How many drinks had he made in the long line of booze that stretched out across his life? It was too late and he had put too many of those drinks in his belly over the course of this dismal evening to attempt the math.

But he had made one hell of a lot of drinks. He could be certain of that. And exactly because he had made so many of them none of the drinks he had made mattered at all.

But those drinks he had *not* made. When he felt like a trick pony at Madilyn’s fancy party. Those drinks mattered very much. And now he was entirely glad he had not made them. His doubts on that had been unequivocally resolved. Which was one thing to be grateful for. At the end of this mess.

Rico tipped his glass to his lips, emptied it, then set it carefully on the bartop.

His said soft and gentle—

“Buenas noches, señora. Please never come here again.”

Rico rinsed the glasses he and Chuy had used. Turned off the stereo. Went to the front door and locked it. Cut the lights and pushed down the big switch for his sign. Shut all the windows. The night was dark and quiet when he stepped out the back door and locked it behind him. He walked under his big cottonwoods and stepped over a dead branch one of them had dropped.

He let himself into his casita and turned on a lamp. He put his stereo on and dialed in the same country western station he had just turned off in the bar. He peeled off his shirt and went in the bathroom and splashed water on his face and brushed his teeth. He went back through the living room and turned the lamp off and left the stereo on. He went in the bedroom and lay on his bed and listened to the soft music filtering in from the other room. In his mind he saw the lordly moon that had looked down at him from on high through the ancient cottonwoods outside Madilyn’s house. He remembered how alone he had felt and that loneliness was with him again.

He fell asleep that way, on top of the bedspread, shirtless, but still wearing his long indigo jeans and his sharp-toed black cowboy boots.

## Queen of the Angels

### 1

Chuy turned west toward the setting sun and rolled along a wide potholed street between rows of small square houses. Each house was faced with the same off-white stucco and most had black iron bars over the windows and doors. The empty street and the vacant yards made Chuy guess everyone was inside cooking dinner or slumped in front of their TV sets. All of them hiding from the heat.

Even after a long day spent out working under the sun there was only so much air conditioning Chuy could stand. He switched his air off and rolled his windows down. The stale smell of the city crawled into his nose and the rumbling drone of the highway poured into his ears. The highway was raised and ran a few blocks to the north parallel to the street he was on. Between his truck and the Interstate, and on his other side off to the south, were the flat roofs of the low houses and on those flat roofs swamp coolers labored to cool the people hiding inside. The hum of the coolers joined the drone of the highway. The hive of the city buzzed beneath the lowering sun.

Chuy pointed his pickup along the cracked gray streets and made slow curves around the gaping potholes. At every third or fourth house he saw a car or a truck or an SUV with Mexican plates. As he approached a house with a van up on cinderblocks in the driveway the door swung open and norteño music came blasting out. Behind the music followed a man carrying a bulging black trash bag. An accordion wheeled and a snare drum rattled and snapped, then the door closed and the music was gone.

The man with the trash spat onto the bare dirt of his front yard as he crossed it to a banged-up galvanized can waiting out at the curb. He wore a sleeveless ribbed white undershirt and had black and red tattoos on both shoulders and down his thick arms. He spat into the gutter before he stuffed the bag into the can. As Chuy passed him the man turned from the street and started back across the bare dirt. His shirt was tattered and sweat-stained and stretched tight over his expansive ribcage. He walked with a rolling swagger. Like he was prowling the deck of a pirate ship.

Chuy watched him spit again just before he arrived at his door.

*They live like dogs*, Chuy thought.

The door swung open and again the norteño music came blasting out. When the door banged shut behind the spitting man the music disappeared again and the drone of the highway seemed louder than before. Against the drone a laboring swamp cooler made a loud grinding rattle. Chuy scanned the roofs and located the sound and predicted the complaining cooler would fail within the next few days. Or maybe even the next few hours.

Then he wondered once again why his sister chose to live down here in the city. And once again it made no sense to him. She did not have to leave Los Huertos. There was no reason for her to go join the Chicanos and Mexicanos in their barrio here on the south side. It was a choice she made years ago. A choice that was now gone. The village had become too expensive. Rents there were too high. She couldn’t move home if she wanted to. Which she didn’t. She made that clear the one time Chuy suggested it.

That was maybe fifteen years ago now. When she still could have. Before Persicon built their semiconductor factory up on the Western Mesa and the Anglos who came from California to run it discovered the old village of Los Huertos del Río Huérfano down under the cottonwoods beside the river and chased the price of a tumble-down adobe up beyond the reach of families who had lived there for generations.

When Chuy tried to persuade his sister to move home he argued that life in the village would be better for her son. For the next half an hour she had screamed at him, ceaselessly repeating the same complaints. That he should mind his own business and not tell her how to live. That the village where they both grew up was an object of her contempt.

*Fuck Los Huertos!* she screeched. *I hate that shithole!*

Chuy looked around him at the neglected houses and the inoperable vehicles and the accumulated debris and the trash blowing across the barren yards and along the broken street and noted once more that he and his sister had very different ideas of what constituted a shithole.

Then he sighed and reminded himself even if she had moved home chances were good the rising property values in the village would have pushed her back out again. And maybe then she would have landed in a neighborhood even worse than this one. As bad as this place was Chuy knew there were sections of the city that made this one seem reasonably livable. Places where his nephew stood a slim chance of doing anything more than just surviving.

A few turns more brought Chuy to the little dead-end street where his sister lived. He pulled up at the curb and watched his nephew appear at the front door. Esteban was small and fine-boned and would enter eleventh grade in the fall. They waved to each other and Chuy watched his nephew descend the short slope of the small gravel-covered yard. Esteban stood on the curb and they talked through the open passenger window.

“How’s it hangin’, Unc?”

Chuy shrugged and shook his head.

“Could be better. Could be worse. How about you?”

“Yeah. Me too. I have a ton of homework.”

“You wanna do this another day?”

Esteban shook his head.

“Nah. I’ll get it done.”

He nodded at his uncle.

“Thanks for comin’ down.”

Chuy nodded back.

“Sure.”

He put his windows up and got out and locked the cab. He followed Esteban to an old Malibu parked in the short driveway. It had been bleached by the merciless sun to a flat gray-blue.

“Payne’s gray,” Chuy said.

Esteban frowned at him.

“I’m sorry?”

Chuy pointed at the car.

“I was looking at paint chips the other day. They called this color Payne’s gray.”

Esteban looked at his car.

“Hunh,” he said.

Chuy pointed at the car again.

“Remind me what’s wrong.”

Esteban described the trouble he was having. A rough idle they thought they had fixed was back again. The car choked going into second gear. He popped the hood and they stared at the engine.

It was gray too. A dark greasy gray.

*Pain’s gray*, Chuy thought.

He laughed quietly. Esteban frowned at him.

“What’s funny?” the boy said.

Chuy debated how to explain this pun to his nephew. But the day had been long and he was tired and the words would not come to him. He needed to do what had to be done and get home. Then food and then bed and then another day in the hot sun.

“It’s nothing,” Chuy said. “Get your tools.”

### 2

They cruised around the south side while Esteban worked the gears up and down. While Chuy listened to the motor and the transmission he watched the strip malls and warehouses and clusters of houses go sliding past. And noted again how well his nephew drove. Confident but careful and alert. So unlike the typical teenager.

They didn’t talk. Too intent on determining if their repairs were successful. Which seemed to be the case. The idle was as smooth as could be expected with a car this old. No glitches going into second or any other gear.

When Chuy was satisfied he reached out and tapped the dashboard.

“Take us home,” Chuy said.

Which put his nephew’s home into Chuy’s thoughts. And reminded him what his nephew had to endure there. He wished they could discuss something else. Or nothing at all. But Chuy had to know.

He watched Esteban check his side mirrors. Then Chuy said—

“How’s your mother doing?”

Esteban shrugged.

“Okay I guess.”

Chuy knew what passed for okay with his sister could be pretty bad.

“How okay are we talking?”

Esteban shook his head.

“I don’t know. Could be better. Could definitely be worse.”

“How’s her drinking?”

Esteban hissed through his teeth.

“Yeah. There’s that.”

He paused.

“She doesn’t get drunk so much.”

A moment later he added—

“Not like she used to, anyway. But you knew that already.”

“I did?”

“Sure. If she still drank like that…”

Esteban shrugged again.

“She would be dead.”

Chuy grimaced.

“Good point.”

They approached an intersection between two wide avenues. Over the cross streets loomed an enormous billboard. They rolled to a stop beneath it and Chuy looked up at the massive image.

Three bikini-clad Latinas lounged in what could only be post-coital euphoria beneath a towering bottle of beer. Drops of condensation and perspiration glistened on the brown bottle and the brown girls. The neck of the bottle extended above the rectangle of the sign and a giant wedge of lime rose from the mouth of the bottle with the largest drop of moisture hanging off the very tip of the slice. Other than the brand name on the bottle the only text on the sign appeared at the bottom of the image like a caption—

¡Siéntase el alivio!

Feel the relief!

Chuy pointed up at the sign.

“Is that really necessary?”

He turned to his nephew.

“Kids shouldn’t see that shit.”

Esteban glanced up at the billboard.

“Tell me about it.”

He turned to his uncle.

“And people wonder why half the girls at my school are pregnant.”

“For real? That many.”

Esteban thought for a second.

“No. Not half.”

He paused.

“A quarter though. Easy.”

The light changed and the cars ahead of them started moving. They joined the flow of traffic through the intersection.

“A lot of them drop out when it happens. If they stayed. It would be more. Maybe not half. But close enough.”

“I heard that was getting better. Fewer girls getting pregnant.”

“Right now, at my school, it’s bad. But a few years ago it wasn’t. So I wonder if maybe like there was this one girl? At my school. And she was considered cool or whatever. And she got pregnant. So all these other girls, they went out and got pregnant too. And then it became, just like, what those girls do. Like how they wear their hair and shit. I mean, it wouldn’t surprise me. People are stupid like that.”

Chuy was struck by his nephew’s perception.

“You’re right. People are stupid like that.”

“And that one girl, who started it? She’s gone. Graduated or dropped out or whatever. Maybe she joined the Army. More girls are doing that now. Left her baby with her abuela and got sent to Afghanistan or wherever. And all these other girls are still getting pregnant because of her. And they don’t even know it. They never even heard of her.”

Chuy smiled at Esteban.

“Maybe you should tell them.”

Esteban grinned and shook his head.

“You tryin’ to get me hurt?”

“No. Maybe you better keep your mouth shut.”

“Yeah. I think I’m gonna.”

At the next intersection Esteban slowed to turn right. Here a billboard showed the determined face of a bald Anglo. Beside his ear was written—

Hurt? Call BURT!

Beneath this concise slogan was the phone number and name of a personal injury law firm. Chuy imagined Esteban calling that number. Asking for Burt. Telling Burt the lawyer he wanted to sue the pregnant high school girls who beat him up after he offended them by sharing his theory about why they were all with child. The waxy-looking Burt, with his naked egg-shaped head, standing beside Esteban in the courtroom. Esteban wearing a neck brace and in a wheelchair. On the other side of the aisle all the pregnant girls. As Burt began his opening statement one of the defendants went into labor.

Meanwhile in the real world they had completed their turn. The billboard was receding behind them. But Chuy remained in the scene he imagined because of that sign. And when Esteban said—

“I’m kinda surprised that didn’t happen to my mother.”

—his mother, Chuy’s sister, became the girl who was in labor.

Chuy frowned and swallowed and the courtroom vanished. Taking Burt and the pregnant defendants and Esteban’s injuries with it.

He turned to his nephew.

“What was that?” Chuy said.

“Getting pregnant in high school.”

Chuy needed a few seconds to piece together Esteban’s meaning. And was struck again by his nephew’s insight. Chuy knew he hadn’t been nearly that wise at his nephew’s age.

Then Chuy remembered his sister from all those years ago. Slouching and scowling her way through the village school.

“Our parents were convinced that was gonna happen. Especially my mother.”

He blew his breath out and shook his head.

“Man those two used to scream at each other.”

Esteban frowned.

“Your parents?”

“No. My mother and my sister. They fought all the time.”

But Chuy was done with his mother and sister. His thoughts had been pushed off in that other direction, the one pointed at by Esteban’s question. Now Chuy remembered how his parents fought. Not hot and screaming but cold and seething. Two or three times his father had disappeared for a few days. Too often their marriage seemed like a trial they were struggling to endure. Not as bad as some couples. But much worse than Terésa and Chuy. Which he gave thanks for once again.

Then Chuy remembered how Esteban’s parents fought. He never saw his sister and her man when they weren’t fighting. It seemed they only stopped long enough to conceive their son. Who had proved to be one of the calmest and most collected boys Chuy ever met.

*Go figure*, Chuy told himself.

Chuy didn’t want to ask. But he had to. He turned to his nephew and said—

“You hear from your father lately?”

Esteban shook his head. Chuy nodded before he looked back out his window.

Outside the city kept going by.

### 3

Chuy’s jaw clenched when he saw her car in the driveway. He swallowed and worked it loose again. As they approached his truck waiting at the curb the front door opened and his sister stepped into the sunlight.

“And there she is,” Esteban said. “La reina de los ángeles.”

The queen of the angels.

Chuy snorted and his eyes narrowed. His mouth twisted while he watched his sister glare at them.

Frescura wandered over to the driveway while Esteban pulled in. She was still in her uniform from work, the pale green dress she wore to clean rooms at a hotel along the highway. She had let down her brown-black hair and it spilled across her shoulders.

Esteban cut the engine and he and Chuy climbed out of the car.

“How’s it runnin’?” Frescura said.

She did not look at her son or her brother. She kept her eyes on the Malibu.

“Seems better now,” Chuy said.

He saw that her hair needed washing and her red lipstick was smeared at one corner of her mouth. He wondered if she was already drunk.

Frescura took a pack of Newports and a butane lighter from the big pocket on the front of her work dress. She tapped a cigarette from the pack. She placed the cigarette between her lips, put a flame to its end, tilted her head back and blew smoke up into the air. The cigarette came away from her mouth with a heavy ring of red around the filter. She dropped the pack and the lighter back into her big pocket.

Esteban fidgeted with his keys. Frescura sucked on her Newport again and shot out another jet of smoke.

“I gotta go,” Chuy said.

Frescura squinted up at the sky.

“I *bet* you do.”

Chuy turned to Esteban.

“Let me know if it acts up again.”

“Thanks, Unc.”

“Sure.”

Chuy went down the short drive and out into the street. His footsteps echoed off the houses. He unlocked his truck and climbed inside, started the engine and ran the windows down. He glanced at Frescura as he pulled away from the curb. She held her cigarette scissored in two fingers with the red-ringed filter a few inches from her cheek. The elbow of her smoking arm was tucked into her other hand down at the side of her belly. Her arms pressed her breasts together. A plume of smoke curled over her head.

Chuy went past a couple houses and turned around in the cul-de-sac at the end of the little dead-end street. His sister and his nephew were still outside when he came past again. Esteban waved and Chuy waved back. Frescura scowled and turned away. As Chuy pulled up to the stop sign at the corner her hard voice bounced off the houses and the pavement and in through Chuy’s open windows—

“I hate it when you call him ‘Unc’. Sounds fucking stupid.”

Chuy put both hands on the steering wheel and squeezed. There was nothing he could do or say to help his nephew. Anything he did or said would only increase her anger. And her anger would remain long after Chuy was gone. And she would take her anger out on her son.

Chuy drove past the rows of iron-barred houses and remembered one of the times he asked Frescura to let her son come live with him and Terésa. She had pulled out her Newports and her butane lighter and flamed up a cigarette. Then blown smoke straight into his face before she said—

“I don’t *think* so.”

That wasn’t the first time or the last time Chuy asked. But he remembered that time best because it was different from all the other times. All the other times Chuy asked Frescura started screaming. And kept at it. Once for more than an hour. And the screaming happened many times.

Because Chuy asked many times before he stopped asking.

### 4

Chuy dreamt he was repairing an adobe wall that kept tumbling down. When he finished rebuilding one section another crumbled and collapsed. He told someone (he never saw who but he believed this unseen person was his employer) that this wall was the worst thing he had ever worked on. And then another section fell down.

From somewhere behind him in the distance he heard what sounded like steel drums. He did his best to ignore this sound and kept to his work. Then the sound came again but it had changed. Now it sounded like someone was banging on an iron pipe. He turned away from the wall toward the changing sound. Then the sound was much closer—

And Chuy realized he was dreaming. His eyes shot open and he fumbled for the telephone. He tried to say “Hello”—

“Hunh,” was what came out.

The voice at the other end said his name.

“Wha,” he said.

“It’s Frescura,” the voice said.

Chuy squinted at the clock. He couldn’t read it. He pushed his tongue around inside his mouth and swallowed. His dry throat ached. He blinked some more and squinted at the clock again. Now it glowed 2:07. He pushed his voice out and it scratched and rattled—

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Late.”

“How late.”

He heard his sister breathe.

“Real late,” she said.

“You don’t know…”

Chuy stopped and swallowed. That didn’t help.

“…what time it is. But you call me anyway.”

“It’s late, okay?”

“What do you want?”

Frescura mumbled something unintelligible.

“What?” Chuy said.

He heard footsteps at the other end of the line, hard steps smacking on a hard floor, reverberating against hard walls. When the footsteps stopped Frescura spoke quietly—

“I got arrested.”

Chuy groaned and sat up.

“What for?”

Frescura said nothing. Chuy waited.

“You still there?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“So why were you arrested?”

Frescura sighed and her breath hissed and crackled in Chuy’s ear. He held the handset away from his head.

“It’s bullshit,” Frescura said. “Just come get me.”

Chuy looked at the clock again—2:08. He rubbed a hand over his face.

“Okay,” he said. “Where are you?”

Frescura spoke to someone and Chuy heard only their voices. No words in what found his ears, only more sounds banging off hard surfaces. He pictured his sister at a payphone in a hallway with concrete block walls and a linoleum floor. The voices stopped and Frescura came back on the line—

“Ashland and Fourth. Two blocks south of the Corona Center.”

Chuy tried to remember the intersection. He couldn’t picture it. He thought about how he’d get there—across the valley to the highway, down into the middle of the city, then a little over on the east side. Not too bad. There wouldn’t be any traffic in the middle of the night.

Chuy yawned and rubbed his face and squinted at the clock. Still 2:08. He wanted to be at work at 6:00, before the sun cleared the mountains and began cooking the valley.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll be there.”

No answer. Chuy waited for a few seconds.

“Anything else?” he said.

“Don’t you leave me here.”

There was fear in her voice. But no pleading. It was an order, not a request.

Chuy let his breath hiss out of him.

“You have a hell of a way of asking for a favor.”

No response from his sister. Just static and more hard echoing footsteps.

Finally Frescura coughed.

“Bet you’re dyin’ for a smoke,” Chuy said.

“Just come get me.”

“You could say please.”

More footsteps banging in his ear. Someone yelled and a telephone rang, metallic and shrill and insistent.

Then Frescura’s voice. Small and contained but still furious and indignant—

“Please.”

Chuy let a moment pass.

“Don’t worry. I won’t leave you there.”

He paused.

“But I should.”

He listened and waited. He could feel how his sister wanted to respond. How she would shriek at him if circumstances permitted. But only static came back along the line. No yelling, no footsteps, no ringing telephones, no coughing. Not even any breathing. Just sizzle and hum. Chuy listened and waited, half expecting the line to go dead. But his sister did not hang up on him.

When Chuy had enough of the nothing she offered, he removed the handset from his ear and slipped it back into its cradle. Then stared at the silent telephone as if it might ring again and bring more bad news.

He lowered his head and stared down at the floor. Where no light reached and he peered into blackness. For a moment his mind was empty of coherent thought. All he experienced was anger and resentment.

Then something was wrong. He was too alone.

His skin crawled at how alone he was.

And then he was ashamed of being a stupid fool panicking in the dark.

Of course he was alone.

He turned around and looked at the emptiness where Terésa usually slept. For a week she would be away up north taking her turn tending an old great aunt who was slowly dying. Chuy knew how very much Terésa was needed where she was but at this moment he badly wanted his good wife beside him. He reached over and smoothed the covers where she belonged.

“I hope you’re having a better night than me,” Chuy said.

He patted the bed before he turned forward again.

Then sat with his elbows on his knees and a scowl on his face. His anger at Frescura churned in his guts and tightened the muscles across his shoulders and up into his neck. He spat out—

“*Fuck*.”

And felt a little better.

He lowered his head and closed his eyes. Took a deep breath and slowly blew it out. He raised his head again and began to reach for the small table lamp beside the telephone but stopped before his hand met the switch. He was used to dressing in the dark. Letting Terésa sleep while he prepared for work. The light would only hurt his eyes.

He brought his hand away from the lamp and propped his elbows back on his knees. He felt drained. No energy at all for what had to be done.

“Fuck and shit and ten gallons of piss.”

Then Chuy rose to his feet and pulled on his clothes.

### 5

Chuy drove slowly along the lane where he lived, down into the sleeping village, toward the sleepless river and the black mountains standing far across the valley. He turned right on the wide sandy Entrada Oeste, where his lane began before the old mission church, then left at the traffic signal where the Entrada met Route 418. His truck rattled alone across the steel and concrete bridge over the Río Huérfano.

While stopped for a red light at Las Haciendas Boulevard, Chuy looked to the south and thought of a job he had pending down in Las Haciendas de Tijeras, renovations to a casita on one of the estates. What began as repairing water damage to the back wall of an old casita being used for storage became a full-blown restoration when the owner decided he wanted to convert the casita into a guest house. Chuy considered what the job would demand of him and imagined what the refurbished casita would look like and wondered at a life that included things like guest houses and the resources to spontaneously undertake renovations.

The light went green and Chuy rolled on, through the fields and pastures that still remained along this edge of the metropolis, then through an expanse of strip malls and housing developments and apartment complexes. Near the center of the valley Chuy took the raised highway that ran south into the city.

Up on the highway Chuy yawned and before his first yawn finished he started yawning again. This second yawn clouded his vision and tingled the nerves down his arms and into his hands. When it passed everything was louder and clearer and brighter. Sleep had been wiped away from him. He blinked while his eyes adjusted to the enhanced yellow glare of the streetlamps mounted over the roadway. He rolled his window down and the cool night air filled the cab. He found a paper napkin in the console and blew his nose.

Then Chuy stared into the night. His mind was clean and blank. His eyes read the signs. His hands worked the wheel. His foot fed the engine gasoline. And the miles slipped past. Ticked off one-by-one in the yellow pools of light thrown down by the wide-spaced lamps.

Then a green road sign mounted over the roadway told Chuy that he had two more of these yellow-pooled miles before his exit. And somehow that got his mind working again. Bringing out of nowhere a memory from the day when he last saw Frescura, after he and Esteban had worked on the old Malibu again. On his way home traffic on the highway had been so stupid and so heavy he got off and took the avenues and boulevards across Tijeras.

He found himself in a part of the city he hadn’t been through in years. Full of hulking warehouses and soot-stained truck terminals. Massive buildings over desolate potholed streets. The setting sun cast deep shadows and the evening wind blew trash along the pavement. Chuy had looked down a block on a wide avenue that ran east and west and saw a string of prostitutes posing and promenading along a dirty stretch of sidewalk in a dwindling patch of the fading sun. All painted orange in the last glow of the dying day.

Now Chuy saw those women again in his mind and wondered if his sister had ever sold herself. The thought was so unexpected and hit so hard he jerked backwards into his seat. He remembered how she had looked when he last saw her—the harsh green maid uniform dress, her dirty hair spilling down, her cigarette with red lipstick ringing the filter so it looked like it was dipped in thickening blood. She had the same lazy insolence as the painted women on the avenue. And like those women she had never been a beauty but what she had some men wanted. The same kind of men who would pay for sordid encounters with soiled women found on dirty streets.

Then Chuy saw that would explain why he was driving into the city in the middle of the night to pay his sister’s bail without knowing why she had been arrested. Frescura sure as hell wouldn’t want to tell her big brother if she had been caught whoring. He might leave her in jail if he knew. And she had always been a terrible liar, too resentful to mask her deceit. If she lied he would know and that could also make him stay home. Her best option was to stonewall. So that was what she did.

These thoughts ate up those last two highway miles. Then he was down on the avenues and boulevards again, making the turns that brought him to the police station where his sister waited. He parked his truck and locked it and stood under the buzzing lights looking at the station house. It was made of concrete and glass. Instead of yellow like up on the highway the lights down here painted everything orange.

Chuy remembered he was dreaming when the telephone rang. Trying to fix that adobe wall that kept crumbling. Somehow he felt his dream was set in Las Haciendas even though he knew that wall did not really exist. The dream was set in his mind and nowhere else.

“Just a stupid dream.”

His voice was rough. He swallowed and his dry throat hurt. Chuy wished he had something to drink before he left home.

He crossed the parking lot and went in through the double glass doors.

### 6

The desk sergeant was a great big Navajo. His chest was the size of a car door. Chuy explained why he was there. The Navajo nodded and asked for Chuy’s driver’s license. Chuy pulled it out of his wallet and handed it over. The Navajo looked at it and began filling out some forms. The counter was too high for Chuy to see what the Navajo was working on. He assumed it was the paperwork for Frescura’s release.

“Will this take a long time?” Chuy said.

The Navajo stared at him. Chuy wondered if he had said the wrong thing.

“Depends on your definition of long,” the Navajo said.

Chuy nodded and looked away. He thought their conversation was over.

“Been quiet tonight,” the Navajo said. “Should go faster than usual. Bail proceedings should start in half an hour or so. Beyond that…”

The Navajo shrugged.

“Thanks,” Chuy said.

The Navajo handed back Chuy’s license. Chuy slipped it into his wallet.

Two rows of empty chairs faced the desk. Chuy sat in the middle of the front row. The chairs had hard plastic seats that did nothing to accommodate the human form. Chuy spent a few minutes trying to get comfortable, then stood up and returned to the desk. The Navajo looked at him.

“Water fountain?” Chuy said.

The Navajo pointed. Chuy went where he was directed, found the fountain, drank just enough of the lousy city water to quiet his mouth, and returned to the unaccommodating plastic chair. He found it even less comfortable on his second attempt. He tried a neighbor just to be sure he hadn’t selected one that was unusually unpleasant. He had not.

He returned to the desk again. The Navajo looked at him again. Chuy hitched a thumb over his shoulder toward the parking lot.

“I’m gonna wait in my truck.”

The Navajo lifted his chin toward the rows of empty seats.

“Write your state rep and tell him we need better chairs.”

Chuy smiled and nodded. Then he went back out through the glass doors, back into his truck cab, and less than a minute later he was asleep.

He woke up when his neck started to hurt. He blinked opened his eyes and didn’t know where he was. When he sat up straight he saw the police station and remembered the big Navajo behind the desk. Then he remembered that his sister was in a jail cell.

He fumbled for his keys and checked the clock in his dashboard. He’d been in his truck for about fifteen minutes. He yawned while he rolled up his window, then he climbed down out of the cab, locked the door and pushed it shut. He went across the asphalt, through the glass doors, and yawned again as he approached the desk.

“Fall asleep?” the big Navajo said.

Chuy nodded. The Navajo pointed down a hallway.

“Two doors down,” he said. “Starts in a few minutes. Chairs in there aren’t so bad.”

“Thanks.”

Chuy started down the hallway. And wished he had remained awake. His head was full of cotton. He missed that clear feeling he had up on the highway. After those good deep yawns had wiped him clean.

He found a gray room that could have been in a hotel or a conference center, with rows of sparsely cushioned seats lined up facing a dais. Frescura sat in the front row. Beside her was a cop. There were two men nearby with cops of their own. Half a dozen other people were scattered around the room. Chuy assumed they were friends and family, people like him there to bail out some pain in the ass.

He took a seat in the back and far to one side where he could watch his sister. Frescura kept her eyes on the wall before her and the only motion she made was to blink slowly every few seconds. Other heads turned when someone new entered the room but Frescura remained immobile. Watching her made Chuy tired and he started to doze again.

He was almost asleep when a deep voice boomed out—

“All rise!”

A rawboned black man in a brown uniform stood beside a door at the side of the room. Chuy pushed himself onto his feet as the bailiff announced the Honorable Judge Elna Tillman. A tiny old Anglo woman came through the door. She wore big wireframe glasses and had long crinkly gray hair that she wore tied back. She took her seat up on the dais, then everyone but the bailiff sat down. The bailiff consulted a clipboard and his booming voice called for Frescura Sandoval to approach the bench. She and her cop both stood up and stepped forward. The cop was a lean Spanish kid with a buzz cut.

The bailiff read the charges against Frescura: public drunkenness and public indecency. Chuy winced when he heard the second charge. But then the moment passed and he felt relieved. Public indecency was bad. It was more than bad enough. But solicitation would have been so much worse.

The young cop read his account of the arrest, in a halting monotone, pausing often to clear his throat and stumbling over words. He said that he and his partner answered a noise complaint. Someone had called the precinct house to report intoxicated men yelling outside a bar. When the cops arrived at the scene they didn’t see or hear any loud drunks. But when they made a loop through the parking lot they found “a partially undressed male and female, having sexual relations in the back of a pickup truck”. The half-naked man had the sense to cause no trouble. He pulled his pants up and the cops let him go with a warning. But “the female responded in a hostile manner, using foul and abusive language”. So the cops arrested her.

When the young cop was done the little gray-haired judge looked at Frescura.

“Well that was a stupid thing to do,” the judge said.

Frescura stared at Judge Tillman. Then she slowly nodded.

The judge adjusted her glasses.

“I’m talking about arguing with the police. But having sex in the truck was stupid too.”

Chuy’s stomach knotted and his ears burned. Muffled laughter came from the other side of the room. Everyone looked that direction and the laughter stopped. Chuy grimaced and rubbed his forehead. The judge glanced at some papers spread before her, then turned and said something to the bailiff. The bailiff nodded. The judge returned her attention to the paperwork.

Chuy looked Frescura and wondered again if she was a prostitute. He doubted she knew the name of the man she was with when the police found her half-naked. His stomach knotted up again. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair and waited to hear what the judge would decide.

He didn’t have to wait long. The little old Anglo lady looked up from her papers and stared at Frescura for a moment, then set bail at three hundred dollars. Chuy considered this an act of high mercy. The bailiff called his name and Chuy stood up. The bailiff waved him down to the front of the room and gave him a form and sent him out to pay the desk sergeant.

They only accepted cash and certified check. Chuy had a hundred and fifteen dollars in his wallet. He meant to stop at a bank machine but forgot. The big Navajo gave him directions to the nearest ATM. Chuy stood in front of the machine, waiting for the bills to appear, and remembered that his sister still owed him two hundred from the last time.

### 7

Frescura stopped just past the glass doors. Chuy watched her dig a pack of Newports out of her purse. She pulled one from the pack and stuck it in her mouth then dug around some more and came up with a butane lighter. On the second click it ignited. She drew deeply and the cigarette crackled. Smoke drifted over to Chuy. The cold-hot scent of menthol.

Frescura looked at him. She saw his frown and made one of her own.

“What?” she said.

Chuy snorted.

“What the hell, Frescura. *That’s* what.”

She pulled her head back and held up her cigarette.

“Because I need a smoke?”

“Your *life* is smoke.”

She took another drag and eyed him through her cloud.

Chuy shook his head.

“Are you ever going to stop living like this?”

Frescura blew out a long jet of smoke. It twisted orange in the hideous light.

“Sure. When I stop living.”

She pulled on her cigarette again.

Chuy turned away and started across the parking lot. He was unlocking his truck when Frescura caught up with him. She started to climb in with her cigarette hanging off her lip.

“Not on your goddamn life,” Chuy said.

Frescura rolled her eyes. She took another long drag, dropped the cigarette to the pavement, and crushed it underfoot. She shot one last orange jet of smoke into the night and climbed into her brother’s truck.

“Happy?” she said.

“*Fuck* no.”

Frescura croaked out a laugh. Chuy started his engine and the truck began to roll. Frescura pointed across the city—

“My car’s still—”

“I don’t give a fuck where your car is. I’m taking you home.”

“I need my goddamn car.”

“That’s your goddamn problem.”

Frescura groaned.

“Aw Chu-*eee*—come *on*!”

Chuy turned the wheel. The truck swung out of the lot and into the street.

“I came all the way down here in the middle of the night.”

He pointed at the clock in the dashboard.

“I have to work in a couple hours.”

The booze Frescura had been drinking crawled into Chuy’s nose. He opened his window and leaned toward the fresh air.

“I just gave the city three hundred dollars so you could sit there and stink up my truck.”

He shot his sister a hard look.

“I can take you wherever I goddamn feel like.”

Frescura snorted and moved away from Chuy. She leaned against her door.

“Go fuck yourself.”

“You mean like you keep doing? Over and over again. Let’s see, what am I going to do today? Oh, I know, I’ll go fuck myself again. It’s been a while since I did that. And then I’ll call my brother to come bail me out. Just like I always do.”

They came to a stop sign at a wide avenue. Chuy turned south. They went a block without speaking.

“I’ll pay you back,” Frescura said.

“You’ll pay me back.”

“It’s only three hundred bucks.”

“*Only* three hundred.”

Chuy looked at his sister.

“You got that lyin’ around?”

Frescura made her breath hiss in the back of her throat.

“Me either,” Chuy said. “So don’t say it’s only three hundred.”

“If it’s such a big deal why come get me?”

“You know why.”

“No I don’t fuckin’ know why.”

“Then why am I the one you call? If you don’t even know why I do this shit. Then why call me.”

“Sorry I’m such a pain in your ass.”

“You sure as hell are.”

A black Lexus pulled out of a side street up ahead. Chuy watched it turn into the avenue and accelerate away from them.

“You know why,” Chuy said.

“I fuckin’ *don’t*.”

“Because there’s no one else left to do it. And because they’d want me to. And you damn well know that or you wouldn’t call me. If you thought Esteban could scrape up enough money you’d call him.”

Frescura started hissing again. Then began swinging her head around.

She banged her head against her window.

“Ow!”

Chuy laughed at her.

“Fuck you!”

“So who’s the guy?”

“What guy?”

“The guy you were screwing when the cops found you.”

Frescura didn’t answer.

“So who is he?” Chuy said.

“Who’s this *they*?”

“What?”

“You said *they*. That *they’d* want you to get me.”

“Come on. Don’t give me that.”

“Come on *what*?!”

“You’re unbelievable. Who else could it be?”

“*Fuck* if I know! It’s like all fuckin’ *riddles* with you! Just *spit* it *out*!”

“I can’t believe you.”

“Just fuckin’ *tell* me already!”

“Mamá y papá. Who the hell else?”

Frescura was silent.

“You even know his name?” Chuy said.

“Who.”

“The guy you were fucking in the truck.”

“He’s nobody.”

“Nobody? You were fucking nobody out in public?”

“It wasn’t out in public—”

“It was in the back of a pickup truck, in a parking lot, in the middle of the city. Sounds plenty out in public to me.”

“It was dark—”

“Don’t even. And this nobody, whoever he is? You could learn from him. He had enough sense not to give the cops any lip. But you? No. Not you. *Never* you. Always a hothead.”

They cleared a shallow rise. Ahead they could see the raised highway that ran east and west across the valley and cut off the south side of the city. Chuy couldn’t wait to drop Frescura on the other side and turn back home.

“So what’s his name?” Chuy said.

Frescura shifted in her seat.

“You don’t even know his name,” Chuy said.

“So what.”

“He pay you to have sex with him?”

Frescura sat up straight. She turned on Chuy and her voice filled the cab—

“*What*, you think I’m a *whore* now?”

“You’re either a whore or a slut. I just wanna know which.”

“Your little sister is a fuckin’ *slut*, Chuy. Ya *happy* with that?”

### 8

They had said more than enough. Chuy knew Frescura would insist on the last word so he kept his mouth shut and let her have it. They rode in silence the rest of the way to her little off-white stucco house with the black iron bars over the windows and doors. When Chuy pulled into the drive and his headlights gleamed on Esteban’s old Malibu he hoped the boy was asleep and would remain inside and in bed.

But as Frescura opened her door Esteban came shuffling out of the house. He was sleep-groggy and his hair and clothes were rumpled. He looked even younger than he usually did.

Chuy’s heart ached looking at his nephew.

“What happened?” Esteban said.

Frescura pulled her Newports out of her purse.

“My car broke down so—”

Chuy leaned across the cab and yelled out the open door.

“She was arrested, Esteban. Don’t let her lie to you.”

Frescura glared at Chuy. Then pointed her glare at her son. She stuck a smoke between her lips. Her lighter flickered and the cigarette ignited.

Frescura folded her arms. She pointed her chin at Esteban.

“Get your keys.”

“Where we goin’?”

Frescura cut her eyes sideways at her brother.

“To get my fuckin’ car.”

Heat went down the back of Chuy’s neck. He knew Frescura didn’t want to go anywhere. He knew she wanted to crawl into bed and pass out, or maybe fall asleep in front of the TV set with a drink beside her and a cigarette in her hand. But she sure as hell didn’t want to go get her car.

“He has school tomorrow,” Chuy said.

“An’ I got work.”

“Don’t use him to get back at me.”

Frescura turned and blew smoke into the truck.

“Fuck off,” she said.

Chuy snorted and shook his head.

“You’re a piece a work, you know that?”

Frescura replied with more smoke. Chuy briefly considered acknowledging his defeat and offering to take his sister to her car and knew she would never get back in the truck. If he pushed her any harder than he had already she would start screaming and one of the neighbors might call the police. He sighed and ran his hand over his face.

Then Chuy looked at his nephew.

“I’m sorry about this.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Good night, Esteban.”

“See ya, Unc.”

“See ya, Unc,” Frescura mimicked.

Chuy pointed at his sister.

“Close the door, you goddamn pain in my ass.”

Frescura slammed the door shut. Chuy looked at Esteban. The boy raised his hand and waved. Chuy nodded and waved in return.

When Chuy stopped his truck out in the street and shifted into first, Frescura spat words at her son that Chuy couldn’t hear. Only her nasty tone reached inside the truck. Chuy had to turn away when Esteban lowered his head and began to follow his mother inside.

As Chuy rolled through the darkened neighborhood the only sounds came from his truck and from a semi up on the interstate. When he was out of Frescura’s neighborhood and up on the highway himself going west across the valley Chuy put both windows down. The cab filled with the cool night air of the high desert.

*Three hundred dollars*, Chuy thought. *She’d sell her soul for less.*

And then he wondered if maybe she already had. If over the years in the many small awful things she had done—and for all he knew maybe some of them weren’t so small—Frescura had bargained away her soul. If she even had one to begin with. Some rude ugly stump of a soul.

His chest felt tight. There was a sharp pain behind his breastbone. When the pain passed, and he could breathe again, Chuy sucked in the night air, hungry for it in his nostrils and lungs, struggling desperately to clear all the tubes and pockets that still held the stink of his sister’s menthol and smoke.

## Fireworks

### 1

The after-work crowd had come and gone. The Friday night drinkers were drifting in. The stereo played an old Johnny Cash song turned low. The quiet crowd talked softly and drank slowly. The three low broad windows in the front wall let in the sounds of the village at evening and orange light from the descending sun.

Rico was behind the bar, hands flat on the bartop, with his newspaper spread out before him. He looked up when an old Spanish man scraped a chair across the floor. The old man started shuffling toward the restroom and Rico resumed his reading. He turned a page and smoothed it down.

The Johnny Cash song finished. Hank Williams’ twang floated across the big room and out the open windows—

🎜 Just another guy on the lost highway 🎜

A car entered the parking lot. Rolled slowly over the gravel and dust. Rico stopped reading but his eyes remained on the newsprint. The back of his neck went cool and prickly. Car doors opened and closed.

Rico asked himself what had triggered his abrupt hyperawareness. He had no answer. Nothing he heard out in his parking lot was a cause for alarm. The big room remained quiet and undisturbed.

A knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

He folded his newspaper, put it under the bar, and stood upright watching the door. The knot in his belly tightened when the door opened and a young man stepped inside. Rico did not recognize this young man. Or the young woman who followed him. Or the two young men who followed her. But despite having no idea who these people were his heart was pounding by the time he saw the beautiful young woman who entered last.

He did not know her either. Not as someone he had seen before.

But he also *did* know her. Like he had never known anyone else.

She looked directly at him. She smiled broadly.

Then the beautiful young woman dropped her eyes.

Rico had to brace himself against the bar.

### 2

The young man who led them in selected a table in the middle of the room. He gestured at the table and looked at his companions and everyone nodded their approval and began choosing seats.

The beautiful young woman sat with her back to the open windows. Which meant she faced the bar and the bartender. She flashed a smile at Rico then glanced away. The young man who led them in asked for a pitcher of beer. Rico nodded his response and went to work. When the beautiful young woman laughed at something one of her companions said her eyes sparkled and Rico felt like his aching heart was ready to burst.

Rico placed the pitcher of beer and glasses on a tray, carried the tray out onto the floor, and went around to the far side of the table. He stood next to the beautiful young woman. When she looked up at him her eyes glittered and gleamed. They smiled at each other and Rico felt he might fall into the vastness of her eyes. Warmth surged through his muscles and veins. Then he put the beer and glasses on the table, met the young woman’s glance once more, and retreated back behind the bar. Where Rico told himself he was an idiot for not speaking when he had the chance. And cursed whatever demon held his tongue.

Then Rico watched his prospects for redemption dim and grow dimmer. The door kept swinging open and customers kept coming in. Soon the room was full and the mood was lively. And that made Rico a busy man.

He made drinks and poured drinks and filled pitchers and took money and cleared tables and the bar and wiped the bar down and washed glassware and did all these things many times. When he ran low on bottled beer Rico went into the storeroom and returned with two cases that he set down behind the bar where he knelt to shove the bottles deep into the ice within the cooler under the back bar. He did the same with the second case then stood up and braced himself with one hand on the bar and used a booted foot to shove the empty boxes back toward the storeroom.

The empty cases were still in motion across the red tiles while Rico reached for the empty pitcher handed to him across the bar. With one hand working the tap his eyes found the beautiful young woman. She was talking with the other girl at her table while the young men sat and listened. Rico sensed these three stallions had all spent themselves in furious chase of the same glorious mare. And yet she remained free and untethered. He handed the pitcher back to the man who had wanted it refilled and took the man’s money and for a second he did nothing but stand and stare at the beautiful young woman while she smiled and laughed with her friends.

Then a familiar voice said—

“A beer would be nice.”

And Rico saw Chuy Sandoval sitting before him. Chuy pointed across the bar to the mugs on the shelves behind Rico.

“If you hand me a glass I’ll pull it myself,” Chuy said.

Rico frowned at his old friend.

“Weren’t you here earlier? Didn’t I get rid of you already?”

Chuy shrugged and made a face.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Maybe ten minutes. Too long without a beer.”

Rico smacked his forehead with the butt of his hand. He grabbed a mug and filled it to overflowing and handed it across the bar.

“She’s half your age,” Chuy said.

Rico ignored this invitation to look again and kept his eyes averted from the beautiful young woman. Instead he watched his friend turn and glance in her direction. When Chuy faced forward again he lifted his beer and said—

“I was going to say she’s young enough to be your daughter.”

“So what stopped you?”

“I realized she’s young enough to be your granddaughter.”

“Go to hell.”

“I thought that might upset you. So I didn’t want to mention it.”

“Right. Then you mentioned it anyway.”

“Hey. You asked.”

“And now I could ask you to go fuck yourself. But I’m too busy feeling fucked myself.”

Chuy’s mug stopped an inch from his lips. His laughter blew foam down the far side of the glass.

“Don’t make me spill my beer now,” Chuy said.

He gestured at his mug.

“It took too long to get it.”

### 3

Rico didn’t hear what Chuy said. He didn’t hear because he couldn’t listen. He couldn’t listen because his eyes were on the beautiful young woman.

And her eyes were on him.

Time slowed down. The sounds of the room—voices, laughter, the music from the stereo—all these sounds moved away, to some other room in some other place at some other time. A tunnel of light formed between Rico and the beautiful young woman. Everything outside the tunnel was a murmuring blur—the action in the room all but ceased, the room and its players almost frozen—while inside the tunnel everything glowed. As if in heaven.

The beautiful young woman smiled.

Her expression spoke of eternal happiness.

Then the tunnel was gone and the sounds of the room roared in Rico’s ears. The beautiful young woman turned away when one of the young men at the table leaned toward her and touched her arm. A group of customers down the bar wanted drinks and a man was approaching from one of the tables with two empty pitchers in his hands.

Rico gulped for air and plunged back in. There was no time to think about the tunnel of light or the woman at the other end. Only work to be done and not enough hands to do it with.

### 4

Things became a little easier when Chuy slipped behind the bar and helped his old friend through the siege. Chuy handled the simple drinks that only needed pouring and left the mixing to Rico. And Rico’s hands were kept very busy to keep all those drinks coming.

Maybe an hour had passed when Rico turned for a bottle of vodka and when he turned back the beautiful young woman stood before him across the bar. For an instant he could only stare and smile. Then in a flash he was back in the world and busy at his job. His eyes went back and forth between her face and his work. They wanted to forget about his work and stay with her face.

“What would be your pleasure?” Rico said.

The young woman turned her head to one side. She smiled at Rico while she looked at him from the corners of her eyes.

“Do you only play country music?”

Rico put a tray on the bar and on the tray went two vodka martinis. He turned to put the vodka back and grabbed a bottle of bourbon.

“I have been known to play different types of music.”

Two doubles of bourbon joined the martinis on the tray. Rico said—

“Is there anything wrong with country music?”

The young woman’s eyes danced and teased.

“Don’t ask if you don’t want to know.”

Rico put a hand over his heart.

“I am stricken!”

While the young woman laughed Rico drew a beer from a tap and placed the mug on the tray. He called to a man at a table nearby—

“Your drinks, Hector.”

The man did not hear.

“Hector, your drinks!”

The man snapped his head toward Rico, a grin across his face. He jumped up and grabbed the tray and left money behind. Rico swept up the bills and dropped them into a can behind the bar.

Then he stopped and stood before the young woman.

“You were saying, my dear?”

She smiled straight into Rico’s eyes. His heart shuddered and thumped. Then the beautiful young woman said—

“There is nothing wrong with country music. Nothing at all. But tonight I would like to hear mariachi.”

Rico raised a hand and one finger into the air.

“Mariachi it is!”

He dashed down the bar to the CD rack beside the stereo, pulled a disc and fed it into the player. The mariachi began as he turned back to see the beautiful young woman was gone from her place before the bar. A stabbing pain came deep in his belly and Rico felt like a stupid old fool.

But there was no time to dwell on it. The door swung open again and more drinkers crammed the big room. The minutes went past like seconds and the drinkers remained thirsty.

Just after eleven o’clock lightning crackled overhead. A minute later rain burst in through the big front windows and drenched the customers who were nearby. Some scampered away but most stayed and laughed. No one made any move to close the windows. Rain in the desert is a holy event and to be kissed by it a blessing.

But the young woman who was a friend of the beautiful one had been kissed a bit too lustfully. She was pressed up against a window, caught in a throng on her return from the restroom, facing out toward the parking lot, when the rain came in like a wave against a beach. From her bosom to her knees her sheer summer clothes conformed to every curve. With a forearm across her breasts and a spread hand shielding her pelvis she scuttled back toward her friends, enduring scattered laughter and a few catcalls. When her friends saw her condition they rose together and engulfed her, closed ranks around her, and moved toward the door.

The beautiful young woman looked over her shoulder to the bar and found Rico stopped still and frowning at her departure. She smiled and mouthed something Rico didn’t understand. Then the door closed and she was gone. Rico blinked at the spot where she had just been and felt his worn out old heart could bear no more of this life. But there were tables to be cleared and drinks to be made and the roar of the room pushed him onward.

### 5

All of the drinkers still in the bar were men Rico had known for years. When he turned off the stereo they finished their drinks and shuffled out. Rico followed the last man to the door and locked it, then reached for the big switch mounted beside the door and turned off his sign. As the red neon script flickered and dimmed and the parking lot descended into darkness the sound of a departing pickup truck going south down Los Huertos Road drifted in through the big windows. Then thunder rolled across the valley.

When Rico went to close the windows he saw the floor was still wet from the burst of rain that came blowing in. And now dirty from all the feet that had trod across it. He remembered how that burst of rain had taken the beautiful young woman away from him. He cursed it and resumed closing windows and turning off lights and left the soiled floor for tomorrow.

Rico usually had his key in his hand ready to lock the back door behind him when he cut the lights in the storeroom and stepped out into the darkness. Tonight he forget. He stood in the dark and found his key by feel. Knowing the edge of the one he needed had a distinctive notch in the middle. When he fit the key into the lock and turned the edge of it bit into his thumb as he forced the bolt into place. The pain from this seemed excessive. He rubbed the sore spot on his thumb with his index finger as he started across the lot beneath the cottonwoods toward his casita.

A car came north up Los Huertos Road. Rico had moved out from behind his bar and could see the headlights swell as the car hissed toward him on the wet blacktop. Something about the sound of the car against the quiet of the night opened Rico’s memory and sent him back across the years. He remembered being young and having his heart broken and half-losing his mind. Waking up monstrously hungover in a rock-strewn arroyo. The gut-wrenching pain when he tried to move his arm. His left hand crossed over to his right wrist to search out the lump that marked where the bone had snapped and fused back together. An habitual gesture he repeated most frequently late at night, when he was taken aback by wonder and fear at the mystery of living.

And then that mystery did what it often does beneath a night sky and pushed Rico to turn his face upwards. As if the sky held the answers he knew he would never find. Up through the gaps in the cottonwood the spread over him Rico saw a few strands of billowing clouds, too thin to mask the stars that gleamed behind them. He lowered his head and walked out into the parking lot. From here when he turned his face up again he saw shafts of moonlight coloring the night sky but the moon itself was cloaked by a thunderhead that glowed yellow and gray. The deep blue-blackness of the void between the stars seemed to pull all the earth upward toward endlessness.

An endlessness that sent a chill down his spine.

Rico spent another moment with his face tilted at the sky while he failed to convince himself there was nothing to fear and that this night was nothing remarkable before he lowered his head and started back across his parking lot toward his casita. He walked slowly, with his eyes cast down before him, his ears open and taking in the night. Off to the west a dog barked. A closer dog answered. To the south down in the city sirens wailed.

Then thunder came rumbling. And again Rico remembered the lightning that had crackled overhead and the burst of rain that came in through his open windows and soaked the beautiful young woman’s friend and pushed her away from him and off into the night. He was trying to claw his way back across the hours between now and then to see the words the beautiful young woman had mouthed from his doorway as she left when he was stopped by the sound of a car approaching out on Los Huertos Road.

He turned around and watched the glow of headlights became beams that probed through the trees along the roadway. The car moved slowly and slowed further as it approached Carril Espinoso. Eventually a small blue sedan appeared out in the intersection and the headlights swung toward Rico and his heart rose up within his chest.

He stopped breathing when the lights swept past him as the car entered the lane. His heart began to pound when the car cut into his parking lot. He squinted and averted his eyes when the headlights found him.

Then the car stopped short. The idling engine made a ticking sound.

Rico closed his eyes against the glaring headlights.

He realized he was holding his breath. He resumed breathing.

Then a woman’s voice called out—

“What kind of bar is closed at one a-clock?”

—and Rico opened his eyes and was blinded.

### 6

The car’s headlights died away and its engine stopped. Rico still couldn’t see. Thunder came rumbling again. A breeze stirred the storm smells of creosote and ozone. He was aware of how his blood surged and hummed. How his nerves were all electrified.

He blinked and now he could see again. Just forms and outlines but enough for him to start across the parking lot. The car door opened and the driver stepped out into the night. Rico called out—

“So that’s what you said? That you would be back?”

She smiled and her teeth flashed.

Rico stopped. He put his head back and laughed. His eyes filled with tears.

Because he already loved this beautiful young woman. He was stunned and baffled and euphoric. It seemed a tragedy to have found her so late when he was already so old and used up and when so many other women had crashed through his life and taken parts of him away with them—

But it was a miracle to have found her at all.

And he worried that he was insane, finally gone completely out of his head, to feel this way about a woman he could not claim to know, had barely even spoken with. But his feelings for her felt more real and more important than anything he had ever felt before in all of his life. How could he contain himself while he waited to learn if she felt the same way?

But something told him already that she did.

And that made him feel even crazier.

If he was a crazy man so what? He refused to care.

How could he care when being crazy made him so deliriously happy?

He continued forward. She pushed the door of her car closed. When they stood facing each other Rico said—

“So tell me. Why do you like mariachi so much?”

“Why do you like country so much?”

“I asked first.”

“True. But a gentleman would defer to a lady.”

“Forgive me. I’m only impatient to learn more about you.”

“Well in that case. Perhaps I will humor you.”

“Please. Do me the honor. I would be grateful.”

“My grandfather was a mariachi. I keep his guitarrón in my living room. So I can be close to him every day.”

“A guitarrón player. The heart and soul of mariachi.”

The young woman smiled and again her teeth flashed. She nodded at Rico.

“Yes,” she said. “Not everyone knows that.”

Rico smiled and shrugged. He had never felt so highly praised in all his life.

“And is that the only reason, because of your abuelo? That you love mariachi. A good reason, maybe the best. Tradition. Family. But are there other reasons?”

“I love its melodies and rhythms. Its deep passions. Mariachi is full of joy. Even when it is sad. And I want my life to be full of joy. Now what about you and all this weepy country music? There is only joy in that when they smirk and scuff their boots.”

Rico could not argue with this assessment. So he laughed instead. He was delighted when the beautiful young woman laughed with him. He laughed again when she said—

“So tell me. What is it you like about country music?”

Rico had been asked this question before, several times, but had never been able to answer it. Maybe because he always felt on the spot when the question came. And he never felt more on the spot than he did now. How would he ever think straight enough before a woman like this to answer a question like that? She moved her head and her black hair glistened blue in the darkness. Her restless eyes searched his face while they demanded an answer and he felt any chance of saying something sensible growing ever dimmer.

“Damned if I know,” Rico said.

And they were laughing again. Rico had never enjoyed laughing so much in all his years. Not even as a child. The laughing he had done before had been nothing compared to this. He was floating on clouds of happiness and the sound coming out of him was the only way he could even remotely express how utterly delirious with joy he truly was. There was only one trouble with all this laughing. While he was laughing he could not kiss her.

And of course that was when things had to go terribly wrong for Rico Lupe. When his only problem in all the world was how to stop laughing long enough to kiss the stunning woman he had just fallen madly in love with. The woman who had appeared so unexpectedly and turned his life inside out and made everything seem wondrous and new. Who made him crazy happy and made him laugh like a crazy fool and made him want to remain happily crazy till God called him away.

As their laughter finally began to fade and Rico thought maybe he could catch his breath and lean toward the beautiful young woman and even maybe ask her name before he kissed her the sound of another car approaching reached his ears. And the sound of this car seemed familiar. When he saw headlights with a cold blue cast on the trees along Los Huertos Road heat came to the back of his neck.

He still did not know who was coming. But he knew—with all his heart and soul—that he did not want whoever it was to come here.

Meanwhile the beautiful young woman still wanted her answer.

“Well?” she said.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Cat got your tongue?”

Rico forced himself to laugh.

“No no,” he said.

He felt sick when he saw how her expression changed. The false note in his laugh had been unmistakable. He knew he would never be able to fool this one. And he wanted to tell her that. After he kissed her. And asked her name. Whatever order those things would happen in.

But it was already too late for what Rico wanted. The approaching car appeared out on Los Huertos Road and veered toward Carril Espinoso.

There was just enough moonlight for Rico to recognize the black Audi.

### 7

“What the *fuck*!” Madilyn said.

She shouted at them from behind her open car door. Behind her swirled a cloud of dust that glowed pink in her taillights. She had jammed on her brakes just after she swerved into the parking lot.

Her engine was still running. An alarm was dinging. Her blue-white headlights glared at an angle against the front of Rico’s bar. Bathing the scene in garish light and long shadows.

This time Madilyn underscored each bellowed word with a smack of her right hand against the roof of her car—

“What! The! *Fuck!*”

She slammed her door shut and stumbled backward. Took a few lurching steps in their direction. Cocked one hip and put a hand on it. Used her other hand to point when she demanded of Rico—

“Who the fuck is *that*?”

The young woman sucked her breath in. Rico turned and saw the distress on her face. For a moment he remained silent and immobile. Too consumed by wanting this not to happen and cursing that it was to do anything to fix it.

Then he moved toward Madilyn. He stopped about three feet from her.

She still had one arm raised and pointing.

“You’re drunk,” Rico said.

“Answer my question.”

“You have no right to ask it.”

“Fuck if I don’t.”

“Stop pointing.”

Madilyn looked at her arm like it belonged to someone else. Her arm came down as if it was on strings.

“What are you doing here?” Rico said.

Madilyn lowered her head and looked at the ground while she planted her feet. Then stood up straight and stuck out her chin. She held this pose for a moment. And for that moment she was steady.

Then she spun to one side and vomited.

“*Nice*,” Rico said. “That’s just perfect.”

He turned to the beautiful young woman.

“I am so sorry for this.”

The young woman just shook her head. Her mouth was slightly open and her teeth shone the palest blue in the reflected glare of the headlights.

Rico watched her and felt his swollen heart was now surely breaking.

But he soon learned that he was wrong. The pain he felt then only hinted at what would follow.

The real wound came after he turned back to Madilyn and caught her just as she pitched forward and carried her to her car and was getting her settled into the rear seat. While he was still trying to find the words to explain who this drunken mess of a woman was and why he had to deal with her. How anyone drunk at his place was his problem. The condition a person arrived in was irrelevant. Yes they had a history. But at the moment their history did not matter. What mattered was the damage she could do if he let her drive like this. How she might kill herself or someone else out on the road. And the law could see things badly for Rico if she crashed driving home from his bar. Even if his bar was closed while she was here the law might not like it. Which was why every drunk who set foot on his property became his problem.

But after he had managed to yank the car door open despite an unconscious Madilyn poured across his arms and was struggling to maneuver her oozing gelatinous form into the back seat of her car and was searching desperately for the proper words to explain her extremely unwelcome presence and how her condition made her his problem and was only wanting to toss Madilyn into her car so he could turn and speak with the beautiful young woman and try with all his heart and soul to salvage some of the incomprehensible magic they had shared before this hideous apparition appeared in their midst—

Rico heard the other car start up behind him.

He dropped Madilyn onto the back seat of her expensive sedan and smacked his head in his hurried exit but when he spun around to try and stop this new disaster from unfolding the small blue car driven by the beautiful young woman was already in motion.

And while still unable to absorb what had happened he was watching the red and white lights from her car retreat into the night through the trees along Los Huertos Road.

And felt that he was watching any hope of his happiness disappear forever.

Then Rico heard someone screaming—

“*Nooo!*”

And he realized it was his own voice that was tearing across the old village in the middle of the night.

### 8

Rico shut off the headlights and then the engine. The alarm stopped dinging and that was a small relief. He remained in the driver’s seat and sat looking at his darkened bar. Behind him Madilyn snored softly.

Well at least someone’s getting some rest.

He considered his options. He could put Madilyn in his bed and take the sofa. Or put Madilyn on the sofa and keep his bed. Or lock Madilyn in her car and have his casita to himself. He liked the last solution best. He imagined her anxiety and shame when she woke up out here and smiled.

But he wanted her gone. When morning came he wanted the problem of her behind him. So he would drive Madilyn and her Audi down to Las Haciendas and have a taxi bring him home.

Her breathing had slowed and deepened. He listened for a few moments and resented every breath. Then climbed out of her car and started across the parking lot toward his bar and the telephone inside.

He was at the door when a whistling sound came up the valley. Rico turned as a white burst flashed in the night sky and was followed by a small explosive boom. The white burst blossomed into a dome of red flares that brightened and then dimmed and finally extinguished as they fell.

His long strange endless night had made Rico forget it was now the Fourth of July. And on the Fourth there was always someone who couldn’t resist an early start. Rico wondered if maybe he had poured a drink for that someone earlier in the evening. He knew it was typically the drinkers who pulled their fireworks out into the yard between midnight and dawn.

Another whistle preceded another white burst and another boom. Nothing he had ever witnessed before made Rico feel as alone as he did watching those anonymous fireworks. He endured their effect through a third display then turned back around and swore at himself when he tried to push the wrong key into his lock.

A fourth explosion came quickly after the third.

Then no more followed.

The night felt heavy in its quiet.

### 9

Chuy stood about five feet from the black sedan and looked in through the open back door at the unconscious Anglo woman. One black-stockinged leg protruded toward him. At the end of that long leg a blue pump dangled. He stepped forward, removed the shoe from Madilyn’s foot, and tossed it onto the floor before the backseat. The shoe tumbled across the car and stopped against the far door.

“Tell me again,” Chuy said.

He turned and looked at Rico.

“Tell me again what you said to that beautiful girl. To explain this stupid shit.”

“Nothing. I didn’t say anything.”

“And tell me again why you did that.”

“Because I didn’t get a chance.”

“No.”

Chuy shook his head.

“That’s not why.”

Rico sighed and shoved his hands into the back pockets of his blue jeans.

“Because I’m an idiot.”

Chuy nodded.

“Now you’re catching on.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s all for the best.”

Chuy pointed at Madilyn.

“Best for who? Best for her? Because it sure as hell isn’t best for you.”

“Best for the girl.”

“Could be. Maybe that’s why she ran away from you. She came to her senses.”

“I felt bad for her. And I didn’t think—”

Rico shrugged and stopped talking.

Chuy frowned. He pointed at Madilyn again.

“For this one? You felt bad for *her*?”

Rico nodded.

Chuy shook his head.

“Why feel bad for her? You should feel bad for yourself. The hell with her. She’s a big pain in the ass.”

“You felt bad for her once.”

“Not for long. You know why?”

“Because she’s a big pain in the ass.”

Chuy nodded.

“You’re learning. Maybe there’s hope for you.”

He put his hand on Rico’s shoulder.

“You poor stupid fool,” Chuy said.

Rico nodded.

“Yeah. That’s me. Stupid as all hell.”

He frowned at Chuy.

“Did I wake Terésa up?”

Chuy nodded.

“Shit,” Rico said.

Chuy squeezed Rico’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it. She understands.”

He took his hand away and used it to gesture at Madilyn.

“Problems like her are what old friends are for.”

### 10

The second key Rico tried unlocked the big carved wooden door. When he started back toward the Audi he saw Madilyn was sitting up. She leaned her head out of the open window as he drew near.

Her words came out slow and uncertain—

“Rico? Is that you?”

“Did you find your shoes?”

“What?”

Rico waited till he was standing beside the car. He put his hands on the roof and leaned down toward Madilyn’s upturned face.

“Your shoes. Did you find them?”

Madilyn nodded. Then she frowned.

“What happened?”

“You showed up at my place stinking drunk.”

Her lips parted and her eyes moved across his face.

“Again?”

“Yeah. Again.”

She ran a hand over her mouth.

“Was I sick?”

“Yup.”

Rico considered telling her she was outside when it happened. That he would just hose down her mess in the morning. But he saw no reason to make this any easier for her. Let her believe she had puked in his bar.

Then he wanted to tell her that before she destroyed the most perfect and most incredible experience of his entire life for one shining moment he had known love was real and believed he would finally have it. But then she came crashing in and took all of that away from him.

How crazy would that sound?

“I gotta go,” Rico said.

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

Madilyn frowned and raised her chin Some of the drunkenness slipped back into her speech—

“Now tha’s notta nice thing t’ say.”

Rico lifted a hand from the car and pointed toward Chuy’s truck.

“You showed up stone cold drunk in the middle of the night. I had to wake up my friend to help me drag your ass home.”

Madilyn turned and peered at the pickup that was parked behind the Audi.

“Oh shit. Is that Chuy?”

“Who else?”

“Right. Who else.”

“You okay now?”

Madilyn looked up at Rico. She blinked and then she nodded.

“Yes. Of course. I’m fine.”

She paused.

“I’m so sorry.”

“So you say. Want to prove it?”

Madilyn frowned.

“That sounds a little—”

“Yes or no.”

Madilyn didn’t answer.

“Yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“Okay then. Here’s what I want from you. Leave me alone. Don’t come around anymore. We’re done.”

Madilyn was silent.

“Understood?” Rico said.

“Yes. I understand.”

Rico nodded.

“Good.”

He held out her keys, cupped in his palm.

Madilyn gingerly extracted them.

She glanced over her shoulder. Then looked back up at Rico.

“Will you thank Chuy for me?”

“No.”

Madilyn startled.

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn’t wanna hear that shit. *No one* wants to hear that shit. What’re you thanking him for? For cleaning up your shit. *Fuck* that. What he wants and what I want—what the whole *world* wants from you, Madilyn—is for you to stop taking a shit all over the place.”

Rico pushed away from the Audi and started toward Chuy’s truck. Behind him he heard Madilyn open her door. Then the crunch of her feet coming out onto the gravel. Then nothing. No footsteps followed.

Rico resisted the urge to look back. He climbed in beside Chuy.

“She all right?” Chuy said.

“She says she is.”

Chuy reached for the ignition and hesitated. Then started his engine and switched on his lights. The Audi gleamed before them. Madilyn was seated sideways with her legs out the open door and her feet on the ground. Her face averted from the glare of the headlights.

Rico told himself she wasn’t his problem. She could spend the night out in her driveway for all he cared. And get attacked by coyotes too.

Chuy put his truck in reverse. They rolled away from the Audi.

“Get this,” Rico said. “She asked me to thank you.”

Chuy stopped his truck and shifted into drive. Then sat with his hand still on the shifter and his other hand on the steering wheel. He turned to Rico.

“Why would I wanna hear that shit?”

“Fuck if I know.”

Chuy snorted. He looked at Madilyn and shook his head.

“You think that shit ever works?”

### 11

Chuy turned his pickup into Rico’s empty parking lot and stopped beneath the darkened sign. When Rico opened the passenger door the cabin light came on and stung his eyes. He blinked and squinted while he stepped down and out into the night and was still squinting when he turned back and hunched down so he could look into the truck to see its driver.

“Thanks again,” Rico said.

“You will pay me in beer.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow for your first payment.”

“You mean today.”

Rico shook his head.

“No. Tomorrow. I’ve seen enough of your ugly face for today.”

Chuy put his head back and laughed.

“Good night, old dog,” Chuy said. “Sleep well.”

“You too.”

Rico started to close the door, then swung it back open.

“I forgot something. I meant to tell you.”

He paused. Chuy waited. Rico leaned against the open door with his head lowered and looked down at his black cowboy boots. Then he raised his head slowly and looked back into the truck at his old friend. He meant to share the news he had learned and pushed aside about the death of Alma Galván. But instead he opened his mouth and out came—

“I almost had a daughter.”

Chuy sat up straight. A frown creased his face.

“What did you say?”

Rico raised his left arm and pointed east toward the river. But he was actually pointing across time.

“About I don’t know. Three weeks ago. Maybe a month.”

Chuy leaned toward his friend.

“You said what?”

“I said I almost had a daughter.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Sort of. I sort of almost had a daughter. And I could have had the daughter if I wanted to.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Rico only stared.

“Are you all right?” Chuy said.

Rico shook his head slowly.

“No. I’m not all right.”

“Tell me what the hell you’re talking about.”

Rico turned to the east, the direction he had just pointed, and peered off into the darkness.

“You remember Alma Galván?”

No answer came from within the truck. Rico turned back to Chuy and the cabin light stung his eyes. He squinted while Chuy searched his face.

“Nope,” Chuy said.

He shook his head.

“I don’t remember that one.”

“Sure you do. She was in grad school—”

“I remember when you were seeing her. But I never met her.”

Rico frowned.

“You didn’t?”

Chuy shook his head.

“Not that one. I always figured you were ashamed of her—”

He lifted his shoulders and dropped them again.

“—or ashamed of your friends.”

His shoulders went up and down a second time.

“Either way I didn’t care. I have always liked you despite the many stupid things your dick makes you do.”

Rico heard his own laughter but did not feel it. The part of him that could laugh at his persistent folly with women was disconnected from the part that ached with longing for the beautiful young woman and from the other part that felt death’s hand resting lightly on his shoulder. He asked himself which it was with Alma Galván—had he been ashamed of her? Or of his friends? It was true that he kept them apart. He saw that now. Chuy was right.

But before he resolved why he kept them separated his thoughts moved on to his latest romantic folly, his brief affair with the woman he had just delivered home across the river. And he wished he could reach back across time and erase their interlude from his life so that she had not come here tonight in her drunken ugliness and soiled forever the perfection of his moments with the beautiful young woman.

“Ah *fuck*,” Rico said. “What a mess.”

“This thing with that girl?”

Rico nodded. Chuy nodded once and they were silent. Rico looked off to the east again and Chuy sat facing forward. Then Rico turned back to Chuy and waited till his friend looked at him.

“Her daughter was here,” Rico said.

Chuy frowned.

“You lost me.”

“Alma Galván. Her daughter came looking for me.”

Rico paused. Chuy watched him and waited.

“She thought I might be her father.”

Chuy’s eyes opened wide.

“No shit.”

“Yeah.”

“She doesn’t know who her father is?”

Rico shook his head. Then stopped and frowned.

“What?” Chuy said.

“She said she was looking for her father. She never said she didn’t know who he was.”

“Ah. So she could be full of shit.”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m thinking. Now that I think about it.”

“Which would be no big surprise. Given who her mother is.”

“Right.”

“Crazy like her momma.”

“Yeah. On the way out the door—”

“Is she hot like her momma? You said her momma was smokin’.”

Rico sighed. Then he nodded.

“On her way out the door—”

“You kissed her.”

Rico grimaced and Chuy laughed.

“You really think I’m *that* bad?”

Chuy shrugged.

“Fuck,” Rico said.

Chuy laughed some more.

“So did you?” he said.

“What? Kiss her?”

“Yeah.”

“No! I’m not *that* stupid.”

“Maybe not. But your dick sure is.”

Rico raised a hand and pressed his palm toward Chuy.

“Enough about my dick already.”

Chuy grinned.

“The truth hurts.”

Rico hissed and Chuy laughed.

Then they were silent for a few moments.

“She wanted me to kiss her,” Rico said.

“Of course she did. They all do.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re the one who mentioned it.”

Rico shook his head and looked away. When he turned back again Chuy was watching him.

“It’s been thirty years since I knew Alma,” Rico said. “Alma’s girl is older than Alma was when I was seeing her.”

“Don’t tell me that.”

“It’s true.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to hear it.”

Chuy sighed and shook his head.

“Thirty years,” he said.

“That’s right.”

“We are *sooooo* fucking *old*.”

“Tell me about it.”

“How the hell did that happen?”

“Beats the shit out of me.”

“So that’s the daughter you almost had? Alma’s girl?”

Rico nodded.

“But she’s not yours?”

Rico shook his head.

“You’re sure?”

Rico nodded again.

“She told me some crazy shit,” Rico said. “Did I ever tell you about when Alma and I went up to Los Pilares?”

Rico wished he hadn’t said that. He didn’t want to talk about Alma any more.

“Sure,” Chuy said. “Plenty of times.”

Chuy smiled. He pointed at Rico.

“But only when you’re drunk.”

Rico frowned. Chuy frowned back at him.

“What crazy shit did she tell you?” Chuy said.

Rico shook his head.

“Forget it.”

Thunder came up the valley. They were quiet while it rolled across the sky.

“You know something,” Chuy said. “That’s not definitely the end of it. There still could be a kid out there somewhere. Who really *is* yours.”

Rico looked away. After a moment he looked back again. He shook his head.

“Nah. I would know.”

“How would you know?”

“I just would.”

Chuy studied Rico’s face for a moment. Then he nodded.

“Yeah. You would know.”

They looked away from each other. Rico turned back to the east toward the river. Chuy faced straight ahead again. He leaned forward and picked at something stuck to the inside of his windshield. Then turned back to Rico and his face clouded as he watched Rico suffer. When Chuy said—

“What’s wrong?”

Rico flinched. It was only a slight movement but Chuy saw. Rico glanced around them at the night in this corner of the old village. He pointed his eyes everywhere except at his old friend Chuy Sandoval.

I don’t want to feel so alone.

“Nothing,” Rico said.

He shook his head.

“Nothing,” he repeated.

More thunder filled the silence between them.

“That’s bullshit,” Chuy said.

Rico nodded.

“Yeah. It’s bullshit.”

“What happened to Alma?”

Rico peered at his friend. Then filled his lungs and sighed out his answer—

“She’s dead.”

Chuy nodded.

“Yeah. I was thinking. The daughter is out running around trying to find daddy. Good chance her momma is gone.”

“You’re a smart man.”

Chuy shrugged.

“I’ve learned a thing or two.”

Chuy looked past Rico. At the bar standing across the parking lot.

“I heard something here once. Back when Don Pepe’s place was still standing over there. From the good old man himself. He said it in Spanish but I only remember it in English.”

He brought his eyes back from the bar and looked at Rico.

“He said that when an old flame dies, a man feels that part of himself has gone to the grave.”

The look in Rico’s eyes said the old man had been right.

“I’m sorry,” Chuy said.

“Thanks.”

“How did she die?”

“Lung cancer.”

Chuy shook his head. He leaned forward and draped his forearms over his steering wheel.

“That’s a lousy way to die.”

“Yeah.”

“How old was she?”

“A couple years older than me.”

Chuy lifted an arm and scratched the back of his head.

“We’re getting to that age where people start dying pretty regular,” Chuy said. “For now, it’s one or two here and there.”

He finished with his scratching and draped his arm across the wheel again.

“Soon enough they start dying in packs.”

Rico grunted.

“I can always count on you to show me the bright side.”

“What bright side?”

Rico laughed and this time he felt it.

Then the night was quiet again. Rico looked up at the sky and watched a silent plane slip past overhead, white lights blinking at its wing tips.

“What’s her daughter’s name?” Chuy said.

Rico kept his face up at the sky.

“Soledad.”

Chuy huffed. Rico brought his head back down and looked into the truck.

“What?” Rico said.

Chuy shrugged.

“Soledad. It means solitude. Even I know that and my Spanish is for shit.”

Rico frowned.

“Yeah. And?”

“And I’m guessing now she’s alone.”

Rico pulled his head back. He drew in his breath and held it for a moment then let it rush out of him.

“And I’m guessing you’re right,” he said.

Chuy nodded and shrugged. Rico pushed away from the truck door he had been leaning against all this time and stood upright.

“Well,” he said.

“Well.”

“Good night, old friend. Sweet dreams.”

Chuy dipped his chin.

“Right back at you old man.”

### 12

Rico followed Chuy’s truck out into the lane. He stood in a pool of powdery dust and watched Chuy’s taillights till they disappeared over the little bridge across the Acequia Mayor beside the old mission church. While the red lights grew smaller and finally disappeared Rico’s only thoughts were gratitude for the understanding and help extended by his old friend.

Then Rico stood under the night sky and tried to absorb all that happened on this long and strange and bewildering night.

He remembered the wonderful moments he had shared with the beautiful young woman. He remembered their first conversation at the bar and how the room had stopped when they exchanged that long glance of inexpressible intensity and meaning. And he remembered when she returned to be with him and the promise he felt at that moment.

Then he remembered how Madilyn arrived to ruin it all. He remembered the distressed look on the beautiful young woman’s face before she sped away. His heart felt choked inside his chest when he confronted that he had no way to contact her, that he still didn’t even know her name.

How could I have been so stupid.

He turned his face up to the heavens. Stars floated against the void. Rico worried that the distance between himself and the beautiful young woman had grown as immeasurable as that between the earth and those distant specks of light.

I may never see her again.

Life seemed as vast and indifferent as the stars and planets and asteroids all wheeling and careening through the cosmos. He saw how we flash across the face of this world and are gone. Just brief little bursts of mortal fire.

I will never see Alma again.

Rico looked inside himself and found no desire to see Alma Galván again. But the finality of her passing, for one so vital to have been snuffed out, that brought a sharp hurt all the same. He thought of Alma and Soledad and how they were now permanently separated. The finality of that was too horrible.

And the beautiful young woman he was so unexpectedly in love with—was he now permanently separated from her? His heart ached and his nerves felt shot with ice. Tears clouded his vision. He blinked and tears ran down his face. He did not wipe them away.

“What a stupid life I have lived,” Rico said.

## Cancelado

### 1

The man was Spanish and heavyset and thick-featured. Gray at the temples and behind his long fleshy ears. He wore a light gray suit of good cloth and a crisp white shirt and a blue-striped red tie. The woman who followed after him was Anglo and a few inches taller in her high heels. She had small sharp eyes set tight against her long pointed nose. She wore a coral-colored silk dress cut tight at the waist and carried a glossy tan leather purse. The woman hesitated inside the door while the fat man continued across the room.

The stools along the bar were empty. Out on the floor a table was occupied by three working Spanish men, their clothes and faces and hands still dirty from a long day on a construction site. They fell silent as the fat man passed them. Another table held two Anglos, one in paint-stained work clothes and the other in blue jeans and a tee shirt for a rock band. The man in the tee shirt played air guitar along with the twanging lead that came from the country music on the stereo. He and his friend laughed. Then they fell silent too as the woman in the silk dress went past them.

The fat man sat in the middle of the bar. The woman joined him.

“Bacardi Solera,” the fat man said. “Straight double.”

His voice was deep and rough and loud. Rico had seen this man a few times before and didn’t need to be told what he drank. In the past the man had come alone and drank by himself, not wanting any conversation from Rico or the other drinkers and not getting any.

Rico put the man’s drink down on the bar and turned to the woman.

“Club soda,” she said.

Rico filled a highball glass with ice and soda, set a wedge of lime on the rim, and placed the drink before the woman in the coral dress. He went down the bar to his usual station and bent over his newspaper.

“I’ll have a drink if I want to,” the fat man said.

Rico let his eyes drift up the bar. The fat man had his elbows up on the bar and glared straight ahead. The woman had her head angled down. She spoke softly but the acoustics of the big empty room worked against her. Where Rico stood he could hear every word.

“Please,” she said. “Don’t make a scene.”

“Who’s making a scene? I’m just having a drink.”

He lifted his glass to prove his point. He brought the glass down and said—

“That’s all. Just a drink to take the edge off. So I can stand all those assholes.”

“Those assholes are my sister and her family.”

The man lifted his glass and studied the rum’s color. Rico’s eyes went back to his newspaper. A moment passed with just the sound of the country music on the stereo and the men out on the floor talking quietly. Then the woman leaned close to the fat man and spoke into his ear.

“Just one drink and we go,” the fat man said.

The woman whispered at him again.

“Yeah, okay. I hear you. Just let me have my drink in peace.”

He sipped his rum.

“It’s the only pleasure I’ll have all evening.”

He sipped again.

“No one will care if we’re a few minutes late. They’ll be happy if we don’t come at all.”

This time the woman raised her voice—

“That’s not true and you know it.”

“Oh-*kay*. Can you just be quiet already?”

The woman turned away and muttered to herself.

The fat man ignored her and sipped his rum.

Rico ignored his newspaper and stole glances up the bar while he considered what he had avoided by not marrying. He was grateful for never being part of a scene like this one. He had witnessed too many of these from behind the bar and knew only married couples resented each other with such ferocity. Not even the rings on their fingers said these two were married as clearly as the displeasure they expressed toward each other. There is something unique to the seething hostility that can swell up between husband and wife.

A truck pulled up outside and the sound of its diesel engine came rattling in through the open windows. The engine died as boots hit gravel and doors creaked open and banged shut. Then the door of Rico’s bar swung open and five work-soiled Spanish drywallers straggled in. They were brothers and cousins and all looked alike, the same height and build and similar features.

One-by-one Rico watched as they smiled and waved in his direction and then frowned when they spotted the well-dressed couple seated at the bar. At this time of day going into Rico’s and finding the fat man in his expensive gray suit and the woman dolled up in her orange silk dress was like seeing a pair of flamingoes in a flock of crows.

The drywallers took seats around a table in the middle of the room. One of them looked at Rico and held up two fingers. Rico nodded and went up to the taps and pulled two pitchers. He avoided looking at the couple seated across from him. The man who ordered the beer met Rico at the bar, left a few bills, and took the pitchers back to his table. Another appeared and took the tray of glasses Rico handed over. Rico rang up their order and called out—

“Tu cambio.”

The man who ordered waved their change away. Rico nodded his thanks and slipped the change into his tip jar. As he returned to his newspaper the table of drywallers laughed at something one of them said.

The fat man upended his glass and downed the last of his rum. He smacked his glass onto the bar, pulled his wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket, removed a ten dollar bill and slapped it down next to his empty glass. He returned his wallet to his jacket pocket and slid his bulk off his stool and lumbered away across the room. He did not speak to his wife or hold the door for her. She caught the heavy door as it swung shut and stumbled before she slipped out behind him.

“Bastard,” Rico said.

He watched his black metal door swing closed and wondered what event in the family of the woman’s sister brought the sour couple to the old village in dress clothes. A christening? A wake? A wedding?

Rico stared hard across his barroom while he tried to crush the feelings that swelled inside of him. Thoughts of family had become hard to endure as the years added up. Rico suspected there must be something wrong with him that he had left the family he was born into behind when he was young and never started a family of his own. He wondered if his lifelong bachelorhood meant he was somehow lower and smaller than even the fat man who went out in public and mistreated his wife before strangers.

Rico took a deep breath and looked around his barroom. He wanted the night to be done so he could lock the door and shut off his sign and be alone.

And do what? Lie in the darkness and wallow in your sorrow?

You’ve done too much of that already.

And he had been doing much more of it lately. Ever since a certain young woman burned through his life like a meteor. And then another uptick when an advertisement for a certain mariachi ensemble began appearing in the local newspaper.

She’s just a girl. Just another beautiful girl who has come and gone.

He repeated these lies often. But they never made him feel better.

Heat rose up from his belly. He looked down at the newspaper before him and his face was red and drawn. His heart beat hard and slow thudding inside his rib cage. He had been putting off making a decision for too long. Not taking action didn’t mean a decision had been made. No matter how many times he told himself otherwise.

So what will it be, old man?

Rico pulled air deep into his lungs and pushed it out hard. His heart refused to stop knocking against his ribs. He turned the pages of his newspaper till he found the advertisement—and once again that face jumped out at him.

Time to find out.

He raised his head and his voice rang out in the quiet room—

“Listen up, everybody. Sorry to do this to you. But I’m closing early tonight. Like right now.”

Heads swung around. Men looked at Rico and at each other. No one moved. Rico went down the bar and snapped off the stereo. The room was silent.

“I’m not joking. Time to go.”

The two Anglo men got to their feet and started for the door. They stopped when one of the Spanish drywallers said—

“What the hell, Rico.”

The drywaller pointed at a half-empty pitcher on the table before him.

“We just got here.”

Rico shook his head.

“I’m sorry. I gotta go.”

He pointed at the sweating pitcher.

“Chug it or lose it.”

### 2

Rico wore his best suit of a deep charcoal gray. Beneath his jacket was a crisp white shirt and a garnet red tie. His sharp-toed black boots were freshly polished. His black hair was still wet from the shower when it was wetted again by the pouring rain as he dashed to his car.

He stayed off the highways and took Las Haciendas Boulevard into the city and then side streets down through the University. His destination was a new restaurant in a part of town he hadn’t visited in a number of years. The neighborhood had gentrified as the University spread across the city. Rico drove along blocks lined with shops and restaurants and cafés.

He remembered newsstands and launderettes and luncheonettes. A dingy storefront that somehow said bookie joint. Dark bars that only men went into. Upstairs were apartments, some with black iron railings along narrow balconies that fronted French doors. Rico had been in some of those apartments years ago, at parties and visiting girls. Back then these streets belonged to working people, young adults and new families.

Now mostly students streamed along the sidewalks, ducking under the balconies and awnings to avoid the rain, which fell straight down and steady. Rico wondered what all these students were doing here in the summer. Things had definitely changed. Now the students never left.

The restaurant that advertised the mariachi group occupied the ground floor of a three story building in the center of a long block. Rico was stopped in front of it when a truck halted traffic while it slowly negotiated the turn into a narrow alleyway. While he waited Rico studied the building’s façade.

It was dressed in pale pink stucco and a neon sign spelled out *La Fuente Azul* in a long blue curve over the arched entranceway. The entranceway was framed in red brick and about twenty feet deep, with red tile on the floor and blue tile up the walls and across the arched ceiling. Black iron gates, pulled back against the blue tile walls, could be closed to shut the entranceway from the street. At the back were wide double doors, glass panels in wood frames. And beyond the doors gleamed an expansive dining room.

Rico wondered if the building had been designed as a hotel, back in the late nineteenth century when this neighborhood was a commercial district. He could picture a uniformed doorman greeting guests as they stepped into the arched vestibule, bowing slightly as the doorman pulled open the glass paneled doors. Rico looked up at the top two stories and could imagine apartments formed by cutting through walls to link hotel rooms together. Maybe he had even been in one of those apartments years ago, when he ran around town as a young man.

And here he was running around town again.

“This is a fool’s errand,” Rico said.

And hoped it wasn’t true. He started drumming on his steering wheel.

Finally the truck made its turn and Rico continued down the block. He found an empty parking spot a few doors past the restaurant, locked his car and dashed through the rain to the sidewalk. He joined the pedestrian throng skirting under the balconies and awnings. A young man jostled him and girls laughed. A professor’s wife let her eyes follow Rico down the street. Rico ducked into the restaurant’s entranceway and used his fingers to push the rain through his hair. He shook the rain from his fingers and stepped through the glass paneled doors and into the thrumming room.

The crowd was lively. Laughter came often and danced along the top of a hundred voices. The red tile from the vestibule continued inside and spread across the wide deep room in all directions. The walls and linens were white. White columns rose to a high tinned ceiling, restored to its original near-silver sheen. The captain’s station, a simple dark wood podium, was centered between the first pair of columns, about ten feet inside the doors. Along the back wall of the sizable room, a stage rose about two feet from the floor.

Next to the captain’s station was a poster on an easel. And on the poster was the same photograph of the mariachi group that appeared in the newspaper advertisement, the photograph that brought Rico to this restaurant on this monsoon-soaked evening. But here, on the easel, the photograph of the group that called itself Los Corchos Rojos was enormous and in color. And looking at this enormous color photograph, Rico was finally and absolutely certain that the girl standing on the left side, slightly behind the principal members of the group, was the same beautiful girl that had come to his bar and left with his heart and soul.

Rico’s eyes kept going back to the poster while he waited in line to be seated. His throat was tight and dry and his belly felt hollow. Then the line before him was gone and he was standing in front of the captain, a small fine-boned young Spanish man with piercing black eyes.

“Good evening, sir,” the captain said.

Rico swallowed hard.

“Good evening,” Rico croaked.

“Do you have a reservation this evening, sir?”

Rico swallowed hard again.

“No.”

The captain flashed a look that was not lost on Rico. A single diner costs you money when your restaurant is full. You lose half a deuce, half the check from a table for two. Which makes the waiter you stick with the single diner unhappy. Waiters can be a petulant and troublesome lot. An unhappy waiter can make a captain’s shift miserable. The captain looked past Rico to the diners waiting behind him.

“Will you be meeting someone this evening, sir?”

“Not exactly,” Rico said.

Rico put on his game smile. The captain noticed.

*This one is good*, Rico thought.

“There is a young lady performing here tonight.”

He had the captain’s full attention now.

“Could you possibly seat me near the stage?”

Rico put a hand on the edge of the podium. A folded twenty dollar bill was tucked between his knuckles. The captain’s eyes went down to the bill, then across to his seating book.

“Preferably at a table where she will see me,” Rico said.

The captain smiled down at his book, then he looked up and smiled at Rico.

“I suspect I know who you are referring to,” the captain said. “She took a solo last night.”

The captain smiled and shook his head.

“Incredible.”

Rico felt heat in his cheeks. He smiled and nodded.

The captain looked down at his book again.

“I am strong supporter of romance,” the captain said. “It’s an honor to assist you.”

Rico nodded once, then he removed his hand from the podium. The captain made a mark in his book, then he stepped away from his station and escorted Rico across the dining room. The captain had remained at the podium before now, sending the diners to their tables with one of his two assistants. A waiter noted the captain walking past and took a long look at Rico.

I’m getting the treatment. And he didn’t even take my money.

This seemed a good omen and Rico’s heart and spirits lifted. At the table he shook the captain’s hand and pushed the bill into the young man’s palm.

“Take it,” Rico said. “Spend it on some romance of your own.”

The captain smiled broadly. He bowed his head at Rico.

“In that spirit, sir, I will. Thank you.”

Then the captain started back across the dining room and Rico took his seat at the edge of the stage. A Spanish waiter arrived and Rico ordered a drink. When the drink came he ordered dinner.

Now there was nothing to do but wait for the music to begin.

### 3

The room was completely full and roaringly loud. A plate of fish cooled before Rico with a few bites gone. The waiter appeared at Rico’s elbow.

“Is your dinner not to your liking, sir?”

Rico smiled and shook his head.

“No, it’s fine. Delicious. I’m just not hungry. Do you know when the band will go on?”

The waiter glanced at the stage.

“You are here to see the mariachi, sir?”

“Yes.”

The waiter frowned.

“Usually they have started by now.”

He raised a finger.

“One moment sir and I will find out.”

He left. A few minutes later he was back. He was frowning again.

“I am sorry, sir. I don’t know what happened. But tonight there will be no mariachi.”

Rico was silent. His expression was remote.

The waiter gestured at Rico’s plate.

“Would you like to take your dinner home, sir?”

Rico looked at his food, then shook his head.

“No. Thank you.”

The waiter bowed and left. Rico slowly reached for his drink, lifted the glass and drained it. He put the glass down but clutched it for a moment longer. Then he stood, sending his chair rattling across the red tile, and took out his wallet. He counted out a few bills and left them on the table. He put his wallet away and ambled across the big room, looking from side to side, surveying the crowd, holding his chin up. More than a few women watched his progress. So did a few men.

The captain called to Rico as he passed the dark wood podium—

“My apologies, sir.”

Rico stopped and turned. He pushed a smile onto his face.

“We just got a call a few minutes ago,” the captain said. “Some of the musicians live in Luna Heights and the road up there is flooded. So they can’t make it.”

Rico kept his smile on and made his shoulders form a shrug. The captain placed his hand on the edge of the podium and Rico saw the folded twenty between the young man’s fingers.

“I cannot accept this, sir,” the captain said. “We failed to deliver what you asked of us.”

Rico shook his head.

“You don’t make the weather.”

“Please.”

Rico looked at the young man’s face and saw distress in the sharp black eyes.

“My mother would kill me if I took this,” the captain said.

“So give it to charity.”

“She would say that wasn’t good enough.”

Rico saw the depth of feeling in those black eyes and took back his money.

“I hope we’ll see you again, sir,” the captain said.

Rico nodded.

“Sure.”

He looked around at the big room and felt the energy of the crowd.

“You have a great place here,” he said.

“Thank you, sir. We’re pleased with how it came together.”

Rico nodded.

“You should be.”

Rico saw there was no line waiting to be seated. The young captain seemed open to conversation and Rico wasn’t sure what waited for him outside alone in the rain and the dark.

“So the rain is bad?” Rico said.

“Across the valley, apparently. Up against the mountains.”

Rico looked out at the street.

“Where are you headed, sir?” the captain said.

Rico turned back to the captain and canted his head toward Los Huertos.

“Up the valley.”

“I think you should be fine then.”

Rico nodded and took another look around at the big white room.

“Are the investors local?” he said.

He wondered if the owners were anyone he knew.

“No sir. The investors are from Los Angeles.”

California money. They have more than they know what to do with.

He looked at the captain.

“And you?”

“San Diego, sir. I worked for the investors there.”

Rico nodded and looked around the room again.

“How do you like Tijeras?” he said.

“Very much.”

“How do you like the monsoons?”

The captain grinned.

“I love it, sir.”

Rico smiled and nodded.

“You’ll do all right here then.”

The captain allowed himself to laugh.

“Thanks. I’m glad to hear you think so.”

Rico’s smile widened.

“You had doubts?”

The captain shook his head.

“Oh no, sir. I feel good here. But I do miss my family.”

“Where you born in San Diego?”

The captain shook his head.

“Honduras. We moved to the States when I was two.”

Rico nodded. He had run out of questions. He waited to see if the captain had anything to say.

“Where you born in Tijeras, sir?” the captain said.

Rico shook his head.

“Los Vados.”

The captain made a polite frown.

“It’s south of here,” Rico said. “A couple hundred miles.”

The captain nodded. His frown faded away.

“May I ask your name, sir?”

“Rico Lupe.”

“Señor Lupe, if I can ever be of service.”

The captain reached under the top of the podium and brought out a business card. He handed the card over and Rico looked down at the name printed across it. He smiled at the captain.

“Thank you, Luis,” Rico said.

“My pleasure.”

Rico tilted his head toward the north.

“If you’re ever up in Los Huertos, stop in at my place. You can’t miss it. It says ‘Rico’s’ in big red neon.”

The captain smiled.

“You have a place of your own.”

Rico nodded.

“It’s a neighborhood bar. Nothing fancy.”

The captain bowed.

“Thank you for the invitation, Señor Lupe. If I ever get a day off, I’ll make a point of coming up to Los Huertos.”

Rico laughed and offered his hand and the captain shook it. Then fresh wet diners came in through the glass doors and the captain was busy again.

Before he left Rico turned for one last look at the poster on the easel. A piece of white paper was taped over the photograph of the mariachi group. The beautiful young woman was hidden. Scrawled across the paper in black magic marker was a single word:

CANCELADO

Cancelled.

Rico blinked at this message and felt all his years pressing against him.

You’re running out of time.

Rico stepped through the glass doors and went out through the arched vestibule into the rain. He didn’t bother with the awnings and balconies. He found his long red convertible and unlocked the door and tumbled into the driver’s seat. He stabbed the key into the ignition. Then Rico sat hunched forward, staring at the figures passing by, their forms blurred by the rain flooding against his windshield, the sound of his keys swinging from the ignition marking a steady tinkling beat against the deeper rhythm of the rain.

“Almost out of time,” Rico said.

Then he reached out and turned the key.

### 4

A traffic light stopped Rico at the end of the next block. He looked around the intersection and realized he had once dated a waitress who lived in the building to his left. She had long slinky brown legs and when she was happy she liked to lay on her back and kick those long legs up in the air. Rico wondered if she had ever married, if she ever had kids, if she was still kicking those long slinky legs.

He tried to remember her name and couldn’t. He tried to remember her face and couldn’t do that either.

He could only remember her long slinky legs dancing in the air.

“Damn,” Rico said. “That’s not right.”

He looked forward again and surveyed the intersection. The quickest way home was to go right. When the light turned green he went left.

He realized the rain had stopped when his wipers started to squeak. He turned them off, turned off the defogger, and rolled down his window. When he pulled up at the next traffic light he reached over and rolled down the passenger window too.

He looked around at this intersection and realized that he had dated another waitress who lived in the building at the far corner. He couldn’t remember her name or face either, just that she was short and buxom and had wavy hair and that he found her scent displeasing. He shook his head and frowned.

“Damn,” he said again.

Again the light changed and again he was moving. Rico drove across the city and remembered when he was a young man with time and money to waste. The women and girls had been numerous and willing. Rico had believed that somewhere and somehow in that endless party he would meet a good and wonderful woman, fall deeply in love, marry harmoniously, and have happy beautiful children. And a few good women had found their way into his life. But love had never followed. Now his years were chasing him down but he still lived the same life he had started all those years ago. He was still tall and handsome and charming and still had money in his pocket. The women and girls, some good and some bad, still came and went. His life was still a party without end and now he felt there was nothing in his life to be celebrated. The party went on and on for no reason.

And Rico was tired. He was tired of opening and closing his bar. He was tired of waking up next to strange women. He was tired of searching new faces for the one that would unlock his heart. He had seen that face and seen it vanish. He had chased that face down here into the city and sat alone in a crowd at the edge of an empty stage and that face had left him waiting. That face had left him feeling old and broken and useless.

Blocks came and went. Wet streets went under his tires. Rico saw the beautiful young woman he met in his bar onstage in the mariachi outfit she wore in the photograph. She opened her mouth to sing and nothing came out. He saw old faces he hadn’t remembered in years and suddenly there was the face of the waitress with the long slinky brown legs. A long face with a wide happy mouth and far apart eyes. Then the face was gone and he wasn’t sure if he had really remembered it or just made up a new one.

“Damn if you’re not losing it,” Rico said.

He leaned his head toward his open window and hoped the cool wet air would restore him to his senses.

### 5

Rico only became aware of his destination when he was almost there. He had driven across the city past the east side of the University and was pointed north on a side street. Then he saw the mouth of the little alleyway up ahead and his heart shuddered at where his impulses had brought him.

Deal with it. You came here for a reason.

He parked out on the street and debated the wisdom of walking down that alleyway and into his past. Then he rolled up his windows, climbed out onto the pavement that was glossy black from the rain, locked his car and started up the block. When he turned into the alleyway Rico stopped to absorb how little had changed in thirty years. Fresh paint and fresh stucco, plastic trash cans instead of metal. The two rows of garages, three apiece, still faced each other. The row on the left still painted gray and the row on the right still painted dark blue. There was still a light with a tin crown mounted high on the eaves of the second garage on the left. At the end the short alleyway still opened into a cul-de-sac.

And when he stepped into that cul-de-sac Rico saw that on the left there was still an adobe casita. And just like all those years before a small table lamp with a red shade glowed in one of the two front windows along the shallow porch. The flesh on the back of Rico’s neck rose and prickled. He stopped in the middle of the cul-de-sac and stared at the glowing lamp.

Thirty years had gone where? Thirty years since the impossibly vital Alma Galván lived here and snatched hold of Rico’s spirit and sex and twisted him and his life into a torturous knot. Followed by thirty years of other women and other women’s dramas. And now the powerful Alma—who seemed like the godhead of all his female troubles—was dead. Dead and gone and in all those thirty years he had never encountered anyone like her again. She was an original in a world of fakes. Cold and cruel and perhaps even demonic. But she imitated no one and obeyed only her own rules.

A door creaked open behind Rico. He turned toward the sound. A wooden cottage sat across the cul-de-sac from the adobe casita where Alma had lived. The front door of this cottage stood open and Rico heard voices inside. A young couple stepped out onto the porch and into the light cast by a lamp beside the door. The young man was Anglo and the young woman was Asian. The young woman locked the door behind them and the two came across the porch and made their out between two bushes and turned down the alleyway, talking quietly as they went. They did not see Rico standing in the shadows at the center of the cul-de-sac.

“It’s like, I don’t know,” the young woman said. “It’s like we never even knew him.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“How could he do that to her?”

“I have no idea.”

“I really *liked* him.”

“Yeah. Me too. I thought he was a good guy.”

They moved into the channel between the two rows of opposing garages. The young woman stopped and looked up at the night sky and her black hair shimmered in the yellow light cast by the tin-crowned lamp mounted up on the eaves of that garage in the middle of the row that was still painted gray.

“It’s a strange night,” she said. “Things that happened years ago seem like yesterday.”

The young man bent down and kissed the young woman.

“I know *exactly* what you mean,” he said.

She took his hand and they resumed walking. Their footsteps reverberated off the opposing garages. When they reached the street they turned right and disappeared. Rico kept his eyes pointed down the alleyway, staring out at the street, while he listened to their footsteps recede into the night. The young woman said something he didn’t catch and the young man laughed. Then a car went down the street and when it was gone he couldn’t hear anything more from the young couple.

Rico turned back to the adobe casita and its red-shaded lamp glowing in the window. He looked at the casita and the lamp and tried to convince himself that the young Asian woman had told him the true source of his disturbed mood, that what plagued him were simply the effects of this strange night upon his troubled heart and mind, the kind of night that made distant events and feelings seem impossibly close and real.

Then Rico sighed and shook his head slowly.

“Bullshit,” Rico said. “It’s all bullshit.”

### 6

The rain started again, softly now, as Rico pulled to a stop before a traffic light two blocks north of the alleyway. He turned his wipers on low and left his windows down. He looked up at the red lamp glowing over the intersection and noted that this traffic light didn’t exist thirty years ago. Then brought his eyes back down and looked to his left and watched a young Spanish couple approach the intersection.

They stopped at the corner and turned to face each other, holding hands and swinging their arms between them. The boy embraced the girl and kissed her, slowly bending her back into a deep dip. Then their lips parted and the girl’s laughter came across the gleaming wet night. Rico watched and smiled when the boy joined his girl in laughing. The boy pulled his girl back onto her feet, then they put their arms around each other and crossed in front of Rico’s car. The boy was talking and the girl had a broad smile on her pretty young face.

The light changed and Rico got himself moving again. He pointed his car along the shining black streets and his mind was full of youth, both his lost and recently witnessed—those long slinky brown legs from long ago kicking in the air; the lamp in Alma’s old window; the young couple walking away down the alley; the young Spanish couple kissing in the sweet light rain on the glistening wet street corner. These images all told him he was a fool to protest his fate. These images asked him why he thought he deserved the love of the beautiful young mariachi. And told him she deserved far better than a broken-down old barkeep.

If I was meant to be with her then we would be together already.

These thoughts and images chased him along the rain-polished streets and up onto the raised highway that ran north and south through the valley. Where Rico reached to the center of his dashboard and switched on the radio. The tuner was set to a classic rock station and when power hit the circuits the Zombies sang out—

🎜 …she’s not there!🎜

Rico wished he could laugh.

“She wasn’t there all right,” Rico said.

He didn’t wait to hear the title phrase again. He pushed the next button on the tuner and mariachi spilled from the speakers. Rico shook his head as trumpets mounted a fanfare and the guitarrón thumped. When the guitars and violins joined in he snapped the radio off. He leaned his head toward the open window and sucked in the damp air and remembered when he could enjoy the good smell of the desert rain.

The highway went fast and soon Rico exited and turned west. Then the river went beneath him, under the concrete and steel bridge on Route 418, and Rico turned into Los Huertos Road. He felt fully defeated by the events of the night when he saw his darkened sign over his empty parking lot. He had thrown good customers out and more good customers had come to find his door locked and nothing good had come of it.

The rain started hard again as Rico swung into his parking lot. He went past the bar and around back and parked before his old wooden garage with the big swinging double doors, a former carriage house built a century ago. He stepped out into the pouring rain and walked with his head down to the back door of the bar. He pulled out his keys and let himself into the storeroom. He moved through the dark and pushed through the door that led out into his barroom. He went down along the bar and found the lights and switched them on.

The pitchers and glasses left by the paying customers he had thrown out still sat on the tables. On the bar in front of the taps were the empty tumblers he had filled for the fat man and his wife. A crushed wedge of lime floated in the melted ice that filled the bottom third of the woman’s glass. Rico wondered when she had emptied her drink. Between their bickering and their quick exit it didn’t seem she had time. He remembered how the fat man had insulted his wife’s family and wondered how the rest of their evening went, after they left Rico’s bar for the event that had them in dress clothes. He couldn’t imagine that terms improved between them. Rico looked at their dirty glasses and recalled that the unhappy couple and their ugliness where what sent him into the city chasing after the beautiful mariachi. If the fat man hadn’t dragged his sharp-nosed wife into Rico’s bar for a quick and bitter drink Rico would have been saved his fool’s errand.

“What a bitched-up night,” Rico said.

He looked at the glassware out on the tables and resolved to give the men he had chased away a free round when he saw them next. Then he moved down the bar and found his newspaper still spread out across the bartop. He folded it carefully and took it with him as he made his way back out of the bar, flicking off the lights as he went, moving through the dark again. He tucked the newspaper under his damp suit jacket and pinned it against his ribs with one arm and locked the back door behind him.

He made a fist around his keys. An edge of one bit into his palm. He squeezed harder and focused on the pain as he angled across his property to his little adobe house waiting back in the corner under the tall cottonwoods. He unlocked the door and let himself in and dropped his keys into his pocket. Then pushed the door shut behind him and brought the newspaper out from under his jacket as he moved to a set of bookshelves in the living room.

He reached to a high shelf and brought down a boxed volume that had been a gift from a former resident of Los Huertos. The aged gentleman made this gift at the very end of his life, after the doctors had told him his death was near. Rico carried the boxed book and the newspaper into his kitchen and placed them on the table. He slipped off his damp jacket and draped it over the back of one of his tall wooden chairs. He unbuttoned the cuffs of his long white shirtsleeves and rolled them up to his elbows. He slipped the book from its box and looked at the cover—*Tales from the Spanish* by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón. He had read the book over a long weekend once, when he was off fishing up in Los Pilares del Cielo, savoring each page and remembering the fine old gentleman who had given him the book.

Rico opened it midway and laid the open book on the table. He stepped to the counter and from a drawer next to the sink brought out an old pair of long gray shears with handles that were painted black. He stepped back to the table and put the shears down and opened the newspaper and turned the pages till he found the photograph of the mariachi group.

He slowly and carefully clipped the photograph from the newspaper. He put the shears down on the table and stood over the open book and edged the clipping into the seam where the open pages met. He closed the book gently and slipped it back inside its box. He carried the boxed book with the piece of newsprint secluded between its pages into his living room and returned the book to its place high on his shelves. For a moment he stood with his index finger still touching the spine of the book.

Then Rico turned and crossed his living room and stepped out the front door and into the pouring rain. He looked up through the cottonwoods at the gray clouds piled high above the dark valley. A fat cold drop of rain plunged into his eye. Rico blinked and wiped the rain away. He opened his mouth and let the cold rain wet his tongue.

“Tonight I am done,” Rico said.

Lightning blazed off to the south and thunder came crashing up the valley. The rain poured down, rattling off the leaves of the cottonwoods and across the roof of the adobe casita. Soon Rico Lupe’s drenched white shirt clung to his broad shoulders, glowing oddly in the darkness of the storm.

## Ashes in the River

### 1

Chuy pulled and prodded at his only silk tie. Which was deep red and covered with blue flowers. He bought the tie a few years before at a rummage sale in the front yard of a sprawling old hacienda near the center of Los Huertos. At the time narrower ties were in fashion. But now this tie was fashionable again.

His fourth attempt at a Windsor knot left the narrow end of the tie exposed and touching his belt buckle. Chuy made a face at himself in the mirror. Then pulled the silk from his neck, tossed it across his bureau, and took a silver and turquoise bolo from the shallow top drawer.

Terésa came into their bedroom and saw what her husband was doing.

“I like that one better anyway,” she said.

Chuy glanced at his wife before he looped the woven black leather of the bolo around his neck and settled the pendant into place. He looked into the mirror and remembered seeing this bolo worn by his mother’s father. He decided that made it the right thing to wear today and wondered why he hadn’t thought of that before. And saved himself all that trouble with the flowered piece of silk.

Esteban appeared in the doorway. He wore a new suit bought too big for him so he could wear it more than once. His face was fresh-scrubbed and fresh-shaved and still reddened by the abuse. Terésa smiled at their nephew before she spoke to her husband—

“I think we’re ready,” Terésa said.

Chuy turned and saw Esteban watching him.

“You look good,” Chuy said.

The boy smiled. His eyes went to Terésa and back to Chuy. Esteban nodded when he said—

“Thanks.”

Chuy watched his nephew for another moment then glanced at Terésa before he turned to retrieve his suit jacket from where it waited on the bed. He slipped his jacket on and looked at his nephew before he turned to his wife.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s do this then.”

For a moment no one moved.

Then Esteban turned and started down the hall.

Terésa and Chuy followed their nephew through the house and outside into the heat. Esteban opened the passenger door of Chuy’s truck and stood aside waiting for his aunt to climb in. Terésa stopped before her nephew and held him by his shoulders and peered into his eyes. Then Terésa wrapped him in her arms. When she was done embracing Esteban she held Chuy’s offered hand while she climbed into the truck.

Chuy and Esteban waited till Terésa had gathered her black dress in behind her. Then Esteban followed his aunt into the cab and Chuy pushed the door closed after them and went around to the driver’s side and got in beside his wife. He started his engine, put his truck in reverse, and backed out into the dirt lane. They rode with the windows open. Terésa wanted the fresh air, even if it was hot.

They went down their lane and angled across Entrada Oeste and crossed over the Acequia Mayor as they passed the old mission church. Beside Rico Lupe’s bar at the end of Carril Espinoso they waited for a southbound car to pass, then turned left on Los Huertos Road and went north through the village.

Their destination was just past the village center on the east side of the road. The sign at the entrance spelled the name out in thick solid metal letters that were legible at a good distance—

Nuestra Señora de la Asunción

Chuy searched his mind for the meaning of “asunción”. His first thought was always “ascension.” He knew that was right in one way but wrong in every other. He was considering asking Terésa for maybe the hundredth time when the meaning came back to him. Now he could translate the entire name—

Our Lady of the Assumption

He took his foot off the gas and let momentum carry them forward. Another moment had to pass before he could recall that the Assumption was when the Virgin Mary went bodily into heaven. Her entire being, both physical and spiritual, *ascended* as one. And there was the way that his first thought was partly correct. But failed at the greater meaning.

He eased on the brakes and the truck slowed. When they drew near to the entrance he pressed the brakes harder and turned the wheel and they rolled down a slight incline off the road and into the parking lot.

Chuy remembered the image he had as a boy of the Virgin flying up into the clouds. This memory made him smile. Then a hint of bitterness stole across his face as Chuy compared the church teachings about the death of the mother of Christ to how life had ended for everyone he had known who had gone before him.

There were a single vehicle in the lot, a white van from the florists, parked in front near the doors. Chuy pulled in beside it. Everyone stepped back out into the heat and adjusted their somber clothes, then started up the walkway toward the church. Esteban fell in behind his aunt and uncle.

Chuy followed Terésa and watched the back of her brown neck. Which was bordered in black both above and below. On top her black hair was piled onto her head and below came the neckline of her flowing black dress. Chuy marveled at his beautiful wife as he followed her through the glass doors in the center of the glass wall that fronted the church entrance hall.

The hall was flanked by two chapels. Beyond the hall was the sanctuary.

They entered the chapel on the left.

And found Father Vincente waiting. He was a dark muscular man with thick features in a heavy face. The Father used both hands to present Chuy with a rectangular metal can. The can was slate gray with black and white filigreed borders around the bottom and top and around the rim of the lid.

Chuy took the can and stared down at it.

“So there she is,” Chuy said.

He looked at Father Vincente. The priest nodded. Then the Father turned and gestured to a small altar flanked by two narrow stands of flowers. The florist was adjusting the arrangement on the right.

“We could put her remains on the altar,” the Father said.

His voice was warm and mellow. He spoke with the rhythms and inflections of a native Spanish speaker. Chuy nodded and didn’t move. Father Vincente gestured at the metal can.

“Would you like me to do that?” he said.

Chuy hesitated before he nodded again.

Then he held out his sister’s ashes.

### 2

Chuy dreamt that a great flood came during the night and filled Los Huertos with mud. Then the night disappeared and it was day and the flood never happened. But now he could fly. He followed the river all the way down to the sea. Where he walked on the sand with Esteban and they ate fish on the beach with the waves lapping at their feet.

When he awoke these dreams were still with him. But now they were like snapshots in a badly ordered photo album. Gathered together but not telling any story. He could see the mud against the houses where the floodwaters left it. And feel the air beneath his body as he soared above the river. And still smell the salt air. But none of these sensations came in order. They happened all jumbled against each other. Almost all at once.

Then his dreams were gone and he was getting ready for work. And then he was down the valley beside another broken wall. At another expensive home in Las Haciendas. This one not so grand as most the others down here where Chuy kept finding himself employed. He had worked at the estate next door and was told one of the owner’s thoroughbreds was worth half a million dollars. This place where he worked now was modest by comparison. And a little run down. The house could use a coat of paint. The owner was a lawyer or an architect. Chuy couldn’t remember which. He worked from home in an office over his garage. Not a poor man but not so exceedingly rich as many of his neighbors. He owned only one horse and she was old and half blind.

The wall Chuy was here to fix displeased him. Not even made of adobe. Just boring concrete block. Which wasn’t work Chuy liked. But it was work he could do while the monsoons soaked the valley. When mud bricks might be ruined by a good cloudburst.

And this was a day that promised rain. Gray clouds covered the sky. Chuy looked up at them and felt their weight and wondered if maybe tonight a great flood might actually come. The valley wanted rain but these clouds were ominous. In his dream half the mountains were washed away by the rampaging waters and jagged stumps left behind. He looked over at the Jitomates and was glad they were still there. And hoped they would remain so when tomorrow came. And for all the tomorrows that would ever come.

Then Chuy went to work. And time began to march in regular ordered steps. Two hours passed and Chuy could feel them gone behind him. When he stopped working he couldn’t say why. The time had come to stop and he obeyed. Then Chuy had a sense something bad had happened. Somewhere away from here but close to the heart. He felt this bad thing squirming in the center of his chest.

To hide from this bad thing he went back to work. But it kept squirming there inside of him. And then he felt someone approaching. He looked up to see the man who lived here walking toward him. Wearing suit pants and a dress shirt buttoned all the way up but no tie and no jacket. Apparently he had been interrupted while dressing. Given that he was halfway through putting on a suit when the morning was half done maybe he was a lawyer who had a meeting or a court date. And not an architect. Since architects were less likely to wear suits when they left the office. Sometimes they even wore work clothes because they got dirty tramping about construction sites.

Chuy hadn’t expected to see this man today. He had planned to see him tomorrow. When he expected to be finished with the wall. To make sure the man was happy with Chuy’s work. And most importantly to get paid.

The man walked with his head down. Which did not seem good. As he drew near Chuy saw the man held something in his hand. When the man lifted his head and saw Chuy was watching him he raised his hand and what it held.

“You have a phone call,” the man said.

Which Chuy knew could not be good. Not the kind of call that would bring the man the who owned this place out here half-dressed with his cell phone in his hand and someone waiting at the other end.

The man stopped in front of Chuy and held out his phone.

“It’s your wife.”

Which Chuy expected. Since Terésa was the only one who knew where he was. And most likely to track him down where he worked. And most likely to deliver bad news. Chuy reached for the phone and glanced down at the featherweight bit of plastic and metal in his hand before he looked at the man who gave it to him.

“Thank you,” Chuy said. “I’m sorry to drag you out here.”

The man shook his head.

“No problem.”

Chuy glanced at the phone again before he raised it to his ear. In the brief time consumed by that motion Chuy became certain the bad news was his sister. Because his sister was always the bad news. Which made him so blindingly furious that he forgot the man who stood before him. Who was paying him to be here fixing this wall. And had come out here half-dressed so Chuy could hear this bad news.

When the phone was next to his head Chuy snapped into it—

“So it’s Frescura again?”

Terésa hesitated before she answered—

“Yes.”

Now Chuy had no chance of concealing his anger. It was too powerful. It swept over him like the flood that knocked down the mountains. His voice bit the air like a whip—

“What is it this time? Is she back in jail?”

### 3

Esteban appeared in the chapel doorway. He called to Chuy—

“Rico is here.”

Chuy pulled his eyes away from the gray can atop the altar. He turned to his nephew and nodded once, then turned back and frowned at the flowers when he noticed the florist was gone. He glanced back at the gray can before he crossed the chapel to where Esteban waited.

Out in the entrance hall Chuy stood beside his nephew and watched through the glass wall as Rico Lupe parked his long red vintage convertible beside Chuy’s truck. Rico stepped out of his car and his blue tie gleamed against his white shirt. He swung his door shut, lifted a dark gray suit jacket from the back seat and pulled it on, then came up the cement walk and in through the doors. Where the two men embraced and said nothing.

Over his friend’s shoulder and out through the glass Chuy saw a small woman walking north along the road. He released Rico with a pat on the back, then moved close to the doors and watched the woman’s progress. Something told him this woman was Mexican. Maybe the cut of her black dress. Or the way that she carried herself. A blue sedan passed her and turned in at the church. Chuy saw his son-in-law Wyatt behind the wheel and his daughter Marbella in the passenger seat and behind Marbella, in her car seat, his granddaughter Karina. Chuy’s eyes returned to the woman walking at the edge of the road. He nodded when she turned into the church parking lot. His hunch was now confirmed. He knew who she had to be.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Chuy said.

He went through the glass doors and out into the heat and along the cement walk down to the parking lot. He met Marbella and her family as they climbed from their car. Chuy hugged his daughter and granddaughter and shook his son-in-law’s hand. The woman coming across the parking lot watched them and slowed as she approached. Chuy told his daughter and her family to go on inside, that he would be along in a minute.

He met the Mexican woman not far from the parked cars. The woman gave a little bow and Chuy returned it. He extended his hand and the woman took it in both of hers. Her hands were almost as rough as Chuy’s.

“Gracias,” Chuy said. “Gracias… para venir.”

Thank you for coming.

Then he struggled to understand the woman’s reply. He managed to turn “por supuesto” and “mi pésame” into *of course* and *my condolences*. But the woman said many other words he didn’t understand. When she finished speaking she still clutched Chuy’s hand. He turned slightly and extended his free hand toward the church.

“Por favor,” he said.

The woman released her grip and they started across the parking lot. Chuy turned to his guest.

“Me llamo Chuy Sandoval.”

“Sí. Tu hermana te mencionó. Soy Nohemia Bermejo.”

Yes. Your sister mentioned you. I’m Nohemia Bermejo.

Chuy was surprised to hear that Frescura had spoken of him. His discomfort made him turn away. He saw Terésa was standing at the glass doors watching them. He turned back to his guest when he thought of some words to cover his embarrassment.

“Es agradable… encontrarle. Por último.”

It’s nice to meet you. Finally.

Nohemia smiled and nodded in return.

“Sí. Es muy agradable.”

Yes. It’s very nice.

Then Nohemia was the one who seemed uncomfortable.

They were quiet as they stepped along the cement walk. Chuy spent those moments wondering what Frescura had said about him to her coworkers. He couldn’t imagine it was anything good.

He whispered to Terésa as they entered the church—

“She’s from the hotel. From when it happened.”

Then he saw she already knew. And told himself of course Terésa would have figured that out. He introduced them and Terésa took charge of their guest. While she escorted Nohemia Bermejo into the chapel the two women spoke in Spanish that was beyond Chuy, too fast and too supple. He caught a word here and there and together those words made no sense.

Esteban appeared beside him.

“Who’s that?” Esteban said.

Chuy watched Terésa and the Mexican woman enter the chapel.

“Nohemia Bermejo,” he said.

He turned to his nephew.

“She works at the hotel.”

“Is she the one who waited with you?”

Chuy remembered finding Nohemia in the lobby and following her onto the breezeway.

“Yes,” Chuy said. “That’s her.”

Esteban nodded.

“It’s good of her to be here,” he said.

He frowned at his uncle.

“How did she get here?”

Chuy could see the woman’s journey from the city to the village.

“Probably took the bus. Then walked from the bus stop.”

“Wow. In this heat. That’s a hike.”

“About two miles.”

“Wow,” Esteban said again.

He looked out through the glass into the parking lot.

“She probably needs some water,” Esteban said.

He turned and disappeared into the chapel. Chuy watched Esteban go and felt a little ashamed that he hadn’t thought of their guest’s thirst. And asked himself once again how it came to be that selfish and inconsiderate Frescura gave birth to someone so decent and thoughtful.

The air conditioning chose that moment to switch on. Cold air blew down on him. Chuy looked up at the ceiling and saw the vent was directly above his head. He stepped out of the draft. Then watched a station wagon slow as it approached the church parking lot. For a second he wondered who this car would deliver to his sister’s funeral.

Then he was back on the hotel breezeway with Nohemia Bermejo. He heard the traffic crash and boom on the highway. And the voices of the policemen murmuring inside the room.

### 4

The exit ramp was steep and narrow. Chuy braked hard to keep his truck behind the stop sign at the avenue. He waited for a city bus to float past then made a right behind the bus and another quick right into the parking lot entrance and went across the gray asphalt. Before him was a long flat-roofed hotel set parallel to the avenue and dressed in white brick with an iron-railed breezeway along the second floor. Three cars waited near the glass-fronted lobby and another three or four were scattered across the lot.

Chuy added his truck to the cluster by the lobby and cut his engine. Then stepped out into the gray heat. Low clouds that looked like ink spilled in water churned across the sky. Traffic roared and pounded up on the raised highway and made the air thick with exhaust.

The lobby was even emptier than the parking lot. No one stood behind the desk. No one was seated on the worn sofas and chairs. The red carpet was torn and scuffed. Chuy glanced up and saw a few tiles were missing from the high shadowed ceiling.

He heard soft footsteps and turned toward them. A small woman was walking away from him down a darkened hallway. She wore the same pale green uniform Chuy had seen on his sister.

“Excuse me,” he called out.

The woman turned around. The whites of her eyes gleamed in her dark face.

“I’m looking for Frescura Sandoval?” Chuy said.

The woman came toward him. Her face was knotted up.

“Busco a mi hermana,” Chuy tried.

I’m looking for my sister.

The woman stopped and her face broke open.

“¿Sí?” she said.

“Mi hermana no es bien.”

My sister is not well.

The woman stared and bit her lip.

“Una mujer llamó,” Chuy said. “De aquí. Ella habló. Con mi esposa.”

A woman called. From here. She talked. With my wife.

The Mexican woman nodded, then lowered her head and continued forward. As she went past the woman gestured for Chuy to follow. She led him back across the lobby and out the glass doors, back into the gray light and the hot city air clotted with exhaust, back into the endless roar from the highway. Thunder came from down the valley as Chuy followed the Mexican woman up a flight of stairs to the breezeway on the second floor.

At the top of the stairs motion below caught Chuy’s eye and he turned toward it. A police cruiser was coming across the parking lot. An unmarked brown sedan followed close behind. The two cars parked side-by-side, in the middle of the lot, about fifty feet from the lobby doors. Chuy saw the Mexican woman was leaving him behind and took a few quick steps to catch up. They were about halfway down the breezeway when a siren wail started to the north, beyond the highway that split the city, telling Chuy that an ambulance was coming down the avenue toward his sister.

They arrived at an open door. The Mexican woman moved aside and stood at the railing looking down at the police. Chuy stepped into the door frame and peered into the room. The interior was dark. He saw only shadows. Behind him the siren grew louder.

His eyes adjusted and details emerged. Now Chuy saw the dim form of a woman sprawled across an unmade double bed, the skirt of her pale green dress hiked up to the middle of her thighs. From this distance, at this angle, in his present state of mind, Chuy could not be sure that this woman was his sister. He was about to step inside when a voice boomed out from down in the parking lot—

“Hey!”

Chuy turned around and moved to the railing and stood beside the Mexican woman. A little Spanish man in an ugly brown suit pointed up at them.

“Don’t go in there!” the little cop yelled. “That’s a crime scene!”

Another plainclothesman joined the little cop in the ugly suit. This one was also Spanish but taller and burly with a broad placid face. He did up the buttons on the double-breasted jacket of his suit and the cloth pulled tight across his belly. The little cop jerked his hand up toward Chuy and the Mexican woman while he shouted at his partner. He did not make himself as loud as before so his voice was silenced up on the breezeway by the roar of the highway and the wail of the siren. Then thunder came across the valley and for an instant Chuy heard all this noise as one gigantic horrifying bellow. The awful shouting of an angry God.

Then the siren blasted away all other sound as the ambulance emerged from the underpass beneath the highway. The driver’s door of the marked police car swung open and a round-bellied Anglo dressed in navy blue stepped out onto the pavement. He stood beside his cruiser facing the approaching ambulance as it veered into the parking lot. The cop put his cap on his blond head and tucked his thumbs under his gun belt beneath the roll of fat at his waist. The loud little cop in the ugly brown suit still yelled at his burly partner, who shook his head and looked away. There was an instant of illusory silence when the ambulance came to a stop beside the policemen and their cars and the siren finally cut off.

Then the roar of the highway filled Chuy’s ears again. Two EMTs, a tall lean black man and a small redheaded Anglo woman, piled out of the ambulance. The little loudmouthed plainclothes cop yelled to them and pointed up at Chuy and the Mexican woman. The EMTs grabbed equipment from the back of the ambulance and ran toward the steps the led up onto the breezeway. The cops walked behind them. The little one was still yelling. His hands jerked in the air.

The EMTs charged up the steps and along the breezeway and into the room. Chuy watched them through the open door. He couldn’t understand what was said between them but he knew it was not good when the urgency went out of their actions. His heart had been pounding but now it stumbled and felt sluggish before it resumed a steady beat. The tall black man said a few words in a low voice to the small redheaded Anglo woman, then got on his radio and talked in jargon to whoever listened at the other end.

The cops came single file along the breezeway toward the open door. The loud little cop came first. He and the uniformed officer ignored Chuy and the Mexican woman. The other plainclothesman, the burly Spanish man with the broad face, came last and nodded at Chuy and the Mexican woman as he went past. They both frowned and nodded back.

When all the cops were inside, standing around the bed and the still woman with her pale green skirt hiked up, the loud one said—

“See. I told you this was the room.”

Chuy didn’t hear the burly cop’s answer.

The EMTs started packing up their gear.

“No good?” the loud cop said.

The black EMT stopped and shook his head. The redheaded woman said—

“She’s cold. No vitals.”

The air disappeared from Chuy’s lungs and he wondered why. The EMT hadn’t said anything he didn’t already know. The Mexican woman clutched his arm. He looked down at her stricken face and watched tears well in her blinking eyes. The loud one spoke again—

“Wha’ cha think it was?”

The black EMT answered.

“You want my guess?”

“That’s why I asked.”

“Prob’ly Mexican brown. It usually is.”

The loud one nodded.

“Yeah. That’s what I’m thinkin’ too.”

He turned to his partner and was about to speak when a radio crackled. The emergency workers gathered inside the room all focused their attention on a distorted and disembodied voice that said nothing Chuy could understand. The black EMT lifted the device to his face and answered, using a code that meant nothing to the uninitiated. When the black man lowered the radio he looked at his partner and sighed.

“It’s all fun and games today,” he said.

The EMTs grabbed up their equipment and hurried from the room. They sprinted along the breezeway, down the stairs, and across the asphalt to their ambulance. Chuy and the Mexican woman covered their ears when the siren came blasting on.

### 5

Chuy saw how it would be when Little Joe Torres arrived alone and lumbered over and stuck out his hand and avoided eye contact while he mumbled—

“Sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” Chuy said. “Thank you for coming.”

He shook the fat man’s fleshy hand and imagined the nasty things Little Joe’s wife must have said about him coming here. If he even told her where he was going. Tina Torres and Frescura had hated each other all the way back to the seventh grade. Their feud began with a vicious brawl over some boy. Chuy tried to remember who the boy was and wondered if the man that boy had become would be here today. Then Chuy smiled while he considered needling Little Joe by asking after his wife.

Chuy understood how the women felt. His sister had done nothing to make them like her and plenty to make them not. At least the ones who lived decent lives. Her favorite trick to make them mad was the one she used so effectively on Tina Torres—she reminded the wives at every opportunity that she had been with their husbands first. Even if that wasn’t true.

So the decent women would not forget all she had said and done to them over the years. And the kind of women that Frescura made her life among, the ones who drank and drugged and slept around like she did, they were not the kind you could count on to show up when their presence was wanted. And most definitely not when they were needed.

So Chuy was not surprised to see mostly men.

But the men he saw were not without surprises.

Old boyfriends of Frescura appeared in droves. Men Chuy barely knew and in most cases never liked and usually had not seen in years. He wondered how word of her death managed to reach them. And that more of them were not in jail. And was surprised to be glad that they came.

*The more the merrier*, he thought.

A thought that almost made him laugh.

Other men appeared that Chuy knew only in passing. At first he didn’t see that these men were connected to each other. He figured out what was going on after an old man with a cane was assisted through the glass doors. The wizened old señor made his way over to Chuy and offered his gnarled hand and pronounced in a surprisingly strong and clear voice—

“Siento mucho su pesar.”

I am so sorry for your grief.

An old regionalism Chuy would hear only a few times today. At funerals when he was young this phrase would have been on every Spanish mourner’s lips. Like everything else from the old ways these words were disappearing. Maybe this elderly señor would be the one to take these words with him into the grave when he finally passed on. And Chuy would miss them both when they were gone.

“Gracias, señor,” Chuy said. “Gracias.”

Then he watched the old man work his cane as he tottered off to join some others almost as ancient as himself who had congregated in one corner of the entrance hall. Chuy recognized them as a group he often saw seated together on Saturday afternoons at Rico’s bar.

That was when Chuy noticed how many here were regulars at Rico’s. And knew that his old friend had made sure there was a good turnout to send Chuy’s sister on her way. Chuy watched Rico talking with one of his regulars and resolved to thank him for his kindness when all this was over and they found a moment alone. He was lost enough in this thought to be startled when Esteban appeared at his elbow and said—

“They’re not coming. Why am I surprised?”

Chuy had no idea who his nephew was talking about. Then was taken aback when he turned and saw how much hurt and anger was written on the boy’s face. He put a hand on Esteban’s shoulder.

“What’s the matter? Who are you talking about?”

“The ones I called. They promised they would be here.”

Frescura had two friends that Esteban had met. The only women would come around to see her. When the police asked about his mother he mentioned these women and the police had brought them in for questioning. The first one he called cursed him out for it. But when she learned why the boy was calling she became contrite and began to weep. The second women was polite from the outset but only semi-coherent and Esteban was certain she was plastered. They both swore they would attend the funeral. That Esteban could count on it. They would be there for their friend. Nothing would stop them.

“They gave their word. So where are they?”

Chuy was trying to think of something he could say to ease Esteban’s distress when Terésa came up behind them. She put one hand on Chuy’s arm and the other on Esteban’s shoulder.

“We should start,” she said.

Chuy looked at Esteban. The boy sighed and frowned. Then he nodded.

“Yeah,” Esteban said. “We should start.”

He shook his head.

“I can’t believe they’re not coming.”

Chuy pulled his nephew close.

“It’s all right,” Chuy said. “It’s on them. Nothing we can do.”

He released his nephew and looked into the boy’s face.

“Are you ready to do this?”

Esteban nodded.

“Yeah. Definitely.”

He swallowed and took a deep breath. He nodded some more.

“Let’s do it.”

Chuy peered into Esteban’s eyes.

“You’re sure.”

Esteban managed to smile.

“I’m sure, Tío. I’m good. Thanks.”

Chuy turned to his wife.

“Okay,” he said. “We’re ready.”

Terésa led Chuy and Esteban into the chapel and across the room to the pew down in front where Marbella and Wyatt and Karina sat waiting. Behind them Rico passed through the room urging the mourners into their seats. When he was done he came and sat with the Sandovals. Father Vincente stood before the altar scanning the room while he waited for the crowd to be seated and become quiet. They spoke in lowered voices and their motions rustled and thumped while they settled into the pews.

### 6

The fat uniformed Anglo cop stood blocking the open doorway. He cocked his head back over his shoulder, toward the others inside. Just as he started to speak a semi roared as it downshifted into the off ramp. His voice was lost and he shut his mouth. When the truck had passed he started over—

“The detectives want you to wait. They have some questions they wanna ask.”

The Mexican woman looked at Chuy.

“Esperamos,” Chuy said.

We wait.

The Mexican woman nodded and said something Chuy didn’t understand. Chuy looked at the fat cop. His face was pudgy and pale.

“So they’re detectives,” Chuy said. “The other two.”

The cop nodded. His eyes flicked back and forth between Chuy and the Mexican woman. Chuy frowned.

“We’re waiting already,” Chuy said. “What makes you think we’re gonna leave?”

The fat cop smirked and stuck his thumbs in his gun belt.

“I don’t think,” he said. “That’s not my job.”

Then he turned and lumbered off, thumbs still in his belt, elbows canted out past his bulk. Chuy watched his first few waddling steps then turned away from the fat man’s progress. Out on the highway the incessant traffic chased and jostled through the gray light. When the fat man in blue appeared at the bottom of the stairs Chuy watched him cross the asphalt and climb into his patrol car. A moment later the cruiser wheeled away.

Then Chuy and the Mexican woman waited. Thunder came again and it was closer now. A breeze stirred up and the heat began to break. The next blast of thunder came almost on top of them. The Mexican woman startled, then looked at Chuy and smiled. She turned away when the thunder echoed off the mountains. The breeze became a light wind and the air it blew now was turning cool. Chuy knew the rain would follow soon. It started up on the highway first, then a moment later it was on the exit ramp, then it marched across the parking lot.

When the rain came against the hotel it fell in hard sheets. To escape being soaked Chuy and the Mexican woman had to stand flat up against the wall. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed. Hail bounced off the breezeway floor. The hail didn’t last long. Soon it was gone and the slashing rain fell by itself again. The air was almost cold. The Mexican woman rubbed her hands on her bare arms.

The loud little cop appeared in the open doorway. Having the frame around him emphasized how small he was. He looked out at the rain and shook his head. He had a rodent’s face, all nose and jaw and teeth. His eyes were dark points set close together. He shouted to be heard over the rain and his big voice rattled along the breezeway—

“We need the water, but this?”

He shrugged and shook his head again.

“Sure bitches things up.”

The Mexican woman turned to Chuy. Her face showed disgust. She sighed through her teeth and turned back toward the rain.

The cop stepped out onto the breezeway. He looked up at Chuy.

“Who’re you?”

“Chuy Sandoval.”

The cop tilted his head back, toward the room behind him.

“¿Tu esposa?”

Your wife?

Chuy shook his head.

“My sister.”

“¿Drogadicta?”

Drug addict?

Chuy frowned and pulled his head back. He shook his head.

“I don’t think so.”

“You two close?”

Chuy hated this little rat-man. He took a deep breath and shook his head again.

“No.”

The cop pointed at Chuy with his chin.

“Let’s see some ID.”

Chuy took out his wallet and found his driver’s license and passed it over. The little cop took Chuy’s license, stared at it for a moment, then passed it back. He pulled a little blue notebook from inside his ugly brown suit jacket and scribbled in it.

“Address and phone number.”

Chuy considered saying that information was on his license and the little man should have copied it down. Instead he provided the requested information.

“Why’re you here?” the cop said.

Chuy felt slapped by the man’s loud voice. It took him a moment to collect his thoughts and answer the question.

“Someone called my wife. A woman who works here. She said my sister was sick.”

The cop pointed at the Mexican woman.

“Her?” he said. “She called your wife?”

Chuy shook his head.

“I don’t know who called.”

The voice of the other detective came from inside the room.

“Señor Sandoval,” he said.

The little rat-man looked over his shoulder, then retreated inside. The burly cop came out and took the little one’s place. He looked at the Mexican woman, then turned his broad face toward Chuy.

“Do you think you’re okay to identify her?” the burly cop said.

Chuy stared at the man and his question. Then pointed at the open doorway. He kept his hand in the air while he said—

“You want me to go inside?”

The detective nodded once. His broad grave face went slowly up and slowly down.

“If you would. Just for a moment.”

Chuy glanced into the room. Then nodded at the detective.

“Yeah. Okay.”

The burly cop gestured at the open door.

“Please,” he said.

Chuy crossed the breezeway and stepped through the open door.

He stopped just inside. And avoided looking at the form on the bed. All the lights were on. The shadows were pushed back into the corners. The little rat-cop stood at the foot of the bed. Chuy watched him scribbling in his notebook. He glanced at Chuy and went back to his notes. Chuy watched him for another moment and hated him some more.

Then Chuy continued across the room and stopped beside the bed. Where he made himself look down at the inert form sprawled before him. For an instant she was a stranger. Then Chuy saw Frescura, his little sister, splayed out and motionless. His knees threatened to quit.

He wanted to bend over her and tug that green skirt down.

His voice was thick in his throat.

“Yeah. That’s her. My sister.”

He turned to the burly cop.

The detective bowed his head.

“Gracias, señor.”

Chuy nodded once and turned back to Frescura. He looked for a syringe but didn’t see one. Not in her arm or on the bed. Not on the nightstand either. Her hair was neat and brushed, swept carefully to one side. Frescura was often a mess but other than the hiked-up skirt and her askew angle across the bed she looked almost presentable in her death pose.

He tried to imagine her last moments. Chuy pictured her going about the hotel doing her job. Coming in here to clean the room.

But then what?

Instead of vacuuming she sat down on the bed and took heroin?

Then the loud little cop barked out on the breezeway—

“¿Dónde está el carrito?”

Where’s the cart?

The Mexican woman’s answer was lost in the roar of the highway and the lashing of the rain. Chuy knew there was no cart on the breezeway. He put himself back out there and remembered it wide open. No cart full of cleaning supplies waiting outside this room or anywhere in sight.

“¡El carrito!” the loud one said. “La limpiar suministra. Para ella trabaja.”

The cart! Cleaning supplies. For her work.

The Mexican woman raised her voice—

“¡Piso inferior! Ella nunca lo tomó.”

Downstairs! She never took it.

Chuy scowled at his sister.

He wanted her to be alive so he could tell her how no good she was.

And how no good she had always been.

So this is how it ends for you.

You didn’t even come here to work.

You just came here to do what got you dead.

### 7

Everyone was silent now. The chapel had grown still. All eyes were turned forward. Toward the priest and the flowers and the can of ashes upon the altar. Father Vincente spread his arms wide and announced—

“My brothers and sisters. Fellow children of God. We are gathered here today to mark the passing of Frescura Estefania Peñalves Sandoval.”

The priest’s voice was big and round and rich and soothing. His voice filled the chapel and welcomed everyone and told them everything was as it must be. His voice said that death was part of life. And that no one should feel awkward in its presence.

The Father lowered his arms and clasped his hands together.

“I never met Frescura.”

He gestured toward the pew in front where the Sandovals sat together.

“But I do know her brother. Who asked something of me that no one in his situation has ever asked before.”

The priest clasped his hand together again.

“Chuy asked me to speak frankly about his sister. So that her life can be seen and remembered as it truly was.”

There was movement and shuffling.

The Father waited till the room was quiet again.

“He also asked me not to speak for too long. Because Frescura would not have liked that.”

A murmur passed through the chapel.

“And he asked that I not treat her memory with false reverence. Because she would dislike that as well.”

Another murmur, a little louder, with a few soft laughs buried under it.

“And he asked me not to quote anything from the Bible—because she *really* wouldn’t like *that*.”

Gentle laughter swelled and faded.

“Chuy also asked me, if I could, as he put it—”

The Father held his hands open.

“—be a little funny.”

Someone laughed in the back of the chapel. Father Vincente looked toward the sound, his eyebrows raised. He waited for a moment, then said—

“Apparently Frescura was not a person who cared for ceremony or convention.”

A muffled voice came from the back of the room—

“You got that right.”

Heads turned toward the voice and faces showed confusion at who had spoken. Many people laughed. Father Vincente smiled slightly and waited. When the room had quieted again he continued—

“After he gave me these instructions, Chuy told me about his sister. To be honest, after what he said about Frescura, I was reluctant to do as he asked. It seemed possible I could be defrocked for what he wanted me to say.”

Someone stifled a laugh and someone else muffled a cough.

“Maybe even excommunicated,” the Father said.

Several men laughed out loud.

The Father paused while the laughter came and went.

“But Chuy is a good man. And at a time like this, I feel it is my duty to honor his request. For despite what he asked me to say, and how he asked me to say it, I know that the death of his sister has caused him tremendous pain.”

The chapel was silent again. Chuy was surprised by Father Vincente calling him a good man. He had never heard anything good said about him by a priest. And never expected to. Then the Father said—

“How do you say goodbye to the ones who gave you trouble?”

He paused again.

“That is a problem as old as humanity.”

The Father gestured toward Chuy.

“But before I talk about Frescura, I would like to tell you a little about her brother. How I have come to know him.”

The Father paused.

“Which is not because he comes here often.”

Laughter came from the back of the room and rolled forward through the crowd. The Father did not wait for it to finish—

“As most of you probably already know. He never attends Mass.”

The Father raised a hand and held a finger up in the air.

“So there is at least one trait we can say Chuy and Frescura shared.”

He spread his hands out at his waist.

“You can’t accuse them of being pious.”

Someone in the back found this uproarious. Others around him joined in. The Father waited till they had spent themselves some. Then he extended a hand toward Chuy.

“I only see Chuy here on days like this one.”

He raised his hand higher and gestured at the crowd.

“Looking around I see many who are the same way.”

He lowered his hand and his eyes went from face to face.

“You come to church for the events that mark the progress of a life. Christenings when a life is new. Confirmations when a life is united with Christ. Weddings when one life is united with another. And as we are gathered here today, for funerals when a life comes to its end. And a soul is separated from the living.”

The Father raised a hand with his palm toward his audience.

“Please do not think that I am scolding you.”

He lowered his raised hand and folded both hands together. A moment later he gestured at Chuy.

“And especially do not think that I disapprove of Chuy’s conduct. Maybe as a priest I shouldn’t say this. But there are things far more important than going to church. Coming to Mass and hearing the word of our Lord is wasted time if you don’t put His teachings into action. We must live the holy gospel. Not just read it.”

He gestured again at Chuy.

“As this good man does. His nephew Esteban has lost his mother. Chuy and his good wife Terésa have taken Esteban into their home. And two winters ago there was an old woman here in the village whose casita needed repair. Señora Enriquez. Maybe some of you remember. A storm put a tree limb through her window. Broke it all to pieces. Damaged the wall. I asked if anyone in the congregation could help. I said that we could raise the money to buy a new window if someone would donate the labor to install it. And to fix the wall. Somehow word of this reached Chuy. Even though he never comes here. And a few days later it was done.”

The Father smiled and shook his head.

“I had to argue with him for some time before he would take the money for the window.”

 A man near the back snorted when he laughed.

The Father smiled at Chuy.

“Maybe this wasn’t fair of me. To put you on the spot like this. But like I said, you’re never here. So I wanted to take this chance to make an example of you while you are.”

“It’s all right,” Chuy said.

Again this struck one person as funny before any others began to laugh. Then when it did the laughter rolled around the room.

When the laughter had died down Father Vincente nodded at Chuy.

“Good,” the Father said. “I’m glad you think so.”

And that made the crowd laugh again. Father Vincente smiled and folded his hands together behind his back. When the commotion had settled down to just a loud murmur he put his one finger back up in the air. He left it there till everyone was silent. Then the Father said—

“Now I’m going to switch to a little Latin.”

The raised hand came down.

“But don’t worry. I’m not starting the old Mass.”

Laughter came again from the back of the room. Father Vincente raised both hands in the air and directed his voice up at the ceiling. He chanted his Latin and it boomed through the chapel and drowned out the laughter—

“De mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum est.”

He let his hands down again and remained silent while his eyes went over the faces turned toward him.

“Let nothing be said of the dead but what is good. Or as we are told while still children, do not speak ill of the dead. A commandment that is even older than the Romans and their Latin. We know that idea goes back at least to Ancient Greece.”

The Father shrugged.

“But I don’t know any Ancient Greek. So I had to stop with the Romans.”

Smiles came to a few of the faces turned toward the priest.

Father Vincente smiled himself and went on—

“So for a very long time our forebears have said that only praise should be offered to the deceased. And we have compressed that thought into a command.”

He pointed a finger at his audience and frowned. His heavy brow crowded down upon his eyes.

“Do not speak ill of the dead!” he barked out.

He let his hand down slowly.

“Which implies that to speak honestly of the dead can be dangerous for the living. And it is true that speaking the truth often puts one at risk. Throughout human history that has been true.”

Father Vincente smiled.

“But we also say that the truth will set you free.”

His smile grew till it filled his dark heavy face.

“So today we will defy the exhortations of our forebears. Today we will speak honestly of the late Frescura Sandoval. We will not shy away from mentioning her flaws and her failures.”

The Father’s eyes went over the crowd gathered in the chapel, then rose to a high spot on the far wall. He stared at this fixed point and his smile melted away. His expression became open and exalted, as if he saw the face of God before him. More than a few seated in the chapel stole glances over their shoulders looking to see what held the priest’s rapt attention. When the Father spoke his voice rang out—

“And we will hope that when our time comes, that those who gather to remember us—as we are gathered here today to remember Frescura—that those who gather to remember us will show our departed souls the same respect as we will show hers. And will not tell lies about us by omitting the painful truths.”

Father Vincente paused. Some seated in the chapel looked around them, searching the faces of others for how they reacted to what the Father had just said. Feet shuffled and bodies were shifted. Then the room became silent again. The priest’s eyes remained fixed on the far wall. When the Father continued he spoke in a softer voice—

“For flattery is cheap and worthless.”

He lowered his gaze to the crowd. His voice came softer still—

“But truth is precious and dear.”

He clasped both hands together before his chest.

“So now I will tell you the things Chuy asked me to say about his sister Frescura.”

He looked around the room, frowning now, then raised that single finger back into the air.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Esteban laughed hard and convulsively. When Chuy turned toward his nephew Esteban choked down on his laughter. Then Chuy smiled and nodded and relief smoothed the boy’s taught face.

Father Vincente pressed his hands together.

“But perhaps I am being unnecessarily dramatic.”

He spread his hands wide.

“Perhaps what I have to tell you will not surprise anyone who *knew* Frescura—”

The Father stopped when loud laughter came from several men. Chuy joined them. The Father waited, then raised his voice to be heard when the laughter did not cease.

“—because there seems to be common agreement about her character and behavior. After all, she left an arrest record to prove it.”

Now most everyone joined in. Terésa and Marbella both laughed even louder than Chuy. Father Vincente smiled, then folded his hands together across his belly and waited till the laughter had passed. Then the priest spoke quietly, almost in a hush. But despite this his voice was forceful, even stern. The chapel grew quieter with every word.

“Chuy said that Frescura was a selfish woman. And that she was often mean. It especially hurt Chuy that his sister was mean to her good son, Esteban. Chuy told me that Frescura was wanton. And that she drank excessively. That she smoked marijuana. Chuy said there are only a few good things he can say about his sister—and each and every one of these good things came at a price. At a cost to herself and to others. He said that Frescura could be funny, but that her humor was always mean. It always had a victim and always took a bite. Chuy said that his sister was independent, that she lived her life as she saw fit, without looking to others for how she should live—but her choice was to indulge herself, at the expense of her own well-being, and at the expense of those around her. Especially at the expense of her son. Chuy also said that Frescura was very alive. She was vital. But she used her great energy to destroy her life. Her own vitality devoured her.”

Father Vincente lowered his head. A moment passed and the room was silent. He spoke again while still looking down—

“Finally I will leave you with the irony of Frescura’s name.”

He raised his head before he continued. He scanned the room as he spoke.

“For those of you who are not Spanish speakers, or if your Spanish is a little rusty, the meaning of ‘frescura’ is ‘freshness’.”

A sharp laugh came from the middle of the room and was quickly stifled. The Father’s eyes found the culprit and a slight smile passed over his face. He raised his hands and his eyes returned to the far wall across the chapel.

“I will say no more about Frescura Sandoval.”

Father Vincente lowered his hands and folded them together.

“For I have said too much already. May it please God to rest her troubled soul.”

### 8

In the flat light seeping through the clouds gathered overheard Chuy could see through the tall plate glass windows at the front of the supermarket. He spotted his nephew at the end of a checkout lane rapidly stuffing groceries into white plastic bags. Esteban wore the dark blue smock employees pulled on over their street clothes.

Chuy went in through the automatic doors and found the customer service station. He spoke to an older Anglo woman who stood behind the counter—

“Excuse me. Are you the manager?”

The woman shook her head and turned away and Chuy thought she was being rude. Then he heard the PA system whine and saw the Anglo woman was bent over a microphone. Her voice came booming out over the speakers mounted in the high ceiling—

“Will the manager please report to customer service. Manager to customer service please.”

Then the PA system whined again and clicked off.

“Thank you,” Chuy said.

The woman smiled at him.

“You’re welcome, sir. He should be here in a few minutes. I think he’s in the back checking stock.”

The woman returned to her work. She was doing something down behind the counter where Chuy couldn’t see. He heard her crumple a piece of paper and toss it into the trash. He put his hands in his pockets and waited.

Chuy was about to ask the woman behind the counter to try again when a portly Spanish man appeared at the far end of the aisle. He stopped beside Chuy and looked at the Anglo woman. He had a pen in the top pocket of his white short-sleeved shirt and another tucked behind his ear. The Anglo woman nodded at Chuy and the Spanish man turned toward him.

“¿Sí señor?” the manager said.

“My nephew works here. Esteban Sandoval.”

The manager nodded. He pointed toward the registers at the front.

“He’s bagging groceries,” the manager said.

“I need to talk to him.”

Chuy glanced at the Anglo woman. He saw her eyes were down on her work behind the counter but he knew she was listening.

“Una tragedia en la familia,” Chuy said. “Soy su tío.”

A tragedy in the family. I am his uncle.

As the words came out of his mouth Chuy realized that even someone who only spoke English could probably understand the first part of what he said. Chuy glanced at the Anglo woman again and found she was watching him. She put her eyes back down on her work and made herself busy.

“Lo siento,” the manager said. “Sígame por favor.”

I’m sorry. Please follow me.

The manager led Chuy down to the front and along the aisle between the tall plate glass windows and the busy bank of registers. Checkout clerks clacked away and groceries went down the conveyers to the baggers and loaded bags went into waiting carts. Shoppers waited too, some staring, some looking at magazines, some suspiciously eying the clerks. Chuy and the manager found Esteban at his station, wrestling a loaded bag into a shopping cart that was almost full.

“Esteban,” the manager said. “Tu tío está de aquí verle.”

Your uncle is here to see you.

Esteban froze when he saw Chuy.

“Go ahead,” the manager said. “I’ll take over.”

Esteban stared at his uncle.

“Okay,” he said.

Then he turned to the manager.

“Gracias, Señor Martinez.”

“Of course.”

Esteban moved out of the way and the manager went to work.

“What’s going on?” Esteban said.

Chuy put a hand on his nephew’s shoulder.

“Let’s talk outside.”

Esteban nodded. Then followed his uncle across the front of the supermarket and out through the automatic doors. Where under the thickening clouds at midafternoon it looked like evening. Sensors had switched on the street lights over the parking lot. Gusts of wind made them dance. Traffic roared out on the road, half of it with their headlights on. Everyone was in a hurry to get where they were going before the storm hit. Shoppers scurried to their cars with their groceries and into the store with their wants and needs.

Esteban followed Chuy away from the automatic doors and along the concrete walkway that fronted the store. When Chuy stopped and turned to his nephew all that came out was—

“Listen.”

Then he couldn’t speak. His throat was closed tight. He scowled while he tried to figure out what to say next. If he could manage to say anything.

Esteban stepped closer.

“Something happened to her,” Esteban said. “Right?”

Chuy forced himself to speak. His voice came out thick—

“She’s gone.”

He watched as Esteban blinked and turned pale. Chuy was about to ask his nephew if he needed to sit down or have some water when Esteban said—

“You mean she’s dead.”

His words connected like a punch. Chuy had to move his feet to get steady again. When he recovered Chuy nodded once at his nephew.

“Yes,” Chuy said. “She’s dead.”

Then he looked up at the gray sky and fought an urge to sit down on the damp concrete. He felt like the wind blowing ahead of the storm could pick him up and toss him around.

Then Esteban said—

“I dreamt this.”

And Chuy was steady again. His feet were fixed beneath him and the earth was solid under his feet. He watched his nephew as Esteban continued—

“About a week ago. I had a dream you came here and told me this. It woke me up in the middle of the night.”

Chuy’s nerves burned from the soles of his feet to the crown of his skull.

Esteban shook his head.

“I laid there for I don’t know how long. Then I made myself go see. If she was still alive. That she hadn’t… I don’t know. Choked on her own puke or something. I found her snoring in front of the TV.”

Uncle and nephew stared at each other. For an instant Chuy was back in his own dream from the night before. When the flood came and went and then he flew down the Río Huérfano to walk on the beach with Esteban. But then that instant had passed and he was listening to his nephew ask him—

“Did I make this happen?”

Chuy stood up straight. He shook his head.

“No. You did not make this happen.”

He put his hands on Esteban’s shoulders.

“You just saw what was coming. You didn’t cause it.”

“Then why did I see it? Was I supposed to stop it?”

“How could you stop it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You couldn’t stop it. There’s nothing you could do.”

“Then why did I have that dream?”

Chuy tightened his grip on his nephew. He stared into Esteban’s eyes. And gave his nephew the only explanation he could believe in. For his own dream and for Esteban’s.

“So you would be ready,” Chuy said. “So you could be strong. Her death was coming. You needed to be ready. To have a warning. You were warned. Now you have to be strong.”

A moment passed and then the boy’s face cleared. His color came back.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m okay.”

“You’re okay?”

Esteban nodded.

“I’m ready. I’m strong.”

He frowned at his uncle.

“You’re right. I knew this was coming.”

He paused.

“I’m ready, Tío.”

“Good.”

“Tell me how my mother died.”

Chuy felt this question like a knife in his belly. He stood motionless while the pain came and went. Then he took his hands from Esteban’s shoulders and stuffed them into his pockets.

### 9

As afternoon fell into evening clouds rose above the mountains and cool air moved south along the river. Golden light from the lowering sun formed beams and shadows across the great valley. Outside the small home of Chuy and Terésa Sandoval a party of five gathered in the dirt lane. They exchanged a few words in muted voices before setting off on foot across the old village. All still wore the somber clothes they dressed in for the funeral but now the men went without their stifling jackets. Esteban Sandoval led the way. Before him in both hands he carried the gray can of his mother’s ashes. On his right walked his uncle Chuy. On his left was his uncle’s best friend Rico Lupe. His aunt Terésa and cousin Marbella followed close behind.

When the procession arrived at Entrada Oeste it angled past the empty old mission church onto Carril Espinoso. Then passed beneath the cottonwoods when it crossed the Acequia Mayor. Where they could hear the water running through the mother ditch, to the bean fields and pepper fields and orchards and vineyards and horse and cattle pastures and broad grassy yards of old Los Huertos. They passed Rico’s bar, closed today in memory of the sister of an old friend, the proprietor walking among them. They crossed Los Huertos Road and went down a dirt lane that entered the bosque, then took a path that wound through the cottonwoods and out into the brush along the Río Huérfano. When they reached the river they turned north, and stopped when they arrived at a stretch of open sand, cut to a thin strip by the high waters from the monsoon rains. The brown water ran up into the brush at both ends of this little beach. The setting sun stretched long shadows from the cottonwoods back behind them to halfway across the wide river.

The group was silent as Esteban opened the can of Frescura’s ashes. There was a small whoosh as air rushed inside—the contents had been still almost hot when the can was filled and the lid put in place and a vacuum had formed as the air inside cooled. Esteban found there was a plastic bag inside, and he enlisted his uncle to hold the can while he undid the heavy twist tie that sealed his mother’s remains. When Frescura’s ashes were open to the air Chuy passed the can back to Esteban, then held out his hands cupped together. Esteban poured ashes into Chuy’s hands. Chuy stood at the water’s edge for a long time without speaking. Then he said—

“Somos sangres, mi hermana. Adiós.”

We are blood, my sister. Goodbye.

Chuy tossed Frescura’s ashes and she went in two directions. A breeze lifted the dust and blew a gray cloud out over the river, turning white where it rose up into the sunlight. The heavier and darker ashes settled in an arc across the brown water. Chuy took a moment to watch his sister’s remains disappear.

When he turned away Terésa stepped up next to Esteban. When her cupped hands were filled she said—

“Adiós, Frescura. Descanse en paz, chica. Vaya con Dios.”

Goodbye, Frescura. Rest in peace, girl. Go with God.

And she tossed Frescura’s ashes into the river. Marbella stepped forward next.

“Tía Frescura, the last time we spoke—I wish I had known it would be the last time. We… ah, I don’t how to say it.”

Tears started down Marbella’s cheeks.

“We never got along. I wish we did. May you rest in peace now, Tía. I know you didn’t have much peace in this life.”

And she tossed Frescura’s ashes into the river. As Marbella turned away from the water Rico Lupe stepped up next to Esteban.

“I knew you since you were a girl,” Rico said. “I can’t believe you’re gone. Descansa en paz, Frescura.”

When Rico had flung his share of ashes into the river and turned away Chuy took the gray can from Esteban and poured the last of his sister’s remains into her son’s cupped hands. A cloud of dust blew away as Chuy upended the can.

Esteban bowed his head and was silent for a long time.

“Goodbye, Mamá. I’m not going to pretend this isn’t—”

His body shook when the sobs started. Chuy stepped forward and put a hand on the boy’s back. Then Esteban was solid again.

“Just goodbye. Till we meet again.”

Esteban carefully scattered his mother’s ashes across the brown water. The ashes formed a long mottled gray smear. The mourners stood and watched the last of Frescura’s ashes disappear.

“She sure loved the river,” Esteban said.

Chuy nodded. He remembered how when they were children he often found his sister down here, wading in the shallows along the banks, or sitting and staring at the water.

*You sure love the water*, he said to her once.

*No*, she replied. *I love this river.*

It took Chuy a moment to catch her meaning. To understand the difference between loving water and loving this river. This Río Huérfano.

*Why?* he had said to her.

She took her time in answering.

*No reason*, she said. *I just do.*

“No reason,” Chuy said. “I just do.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“That’s what she said to me once. When I asked her why she loved the river. ‘No reason,’ she said. ‘I just do’.”

Esteban snorted and grinned. He shook his head.

“That was her,” he said.

Esteban carefully put the lid back on, looked down at the can for a moment, then pulled his arm back and tossed it out over the water. The can landed with a splash and floated downstream. Chuy frowned at the can, then turned and frowned at his nephew.

“Esteban, man—that’s littering,” Chuy said.

Everyone watched the can float away.

“Yes it is,” Esteban said. “And can you think of a better way to remember her?”

Everyone laughed then, and the laughter built on itself, and then it began to fall away. When they were almost silent another wave of laughter began. When they were done laughing Chuy looked across the great valley to the Jitomate Mountains. Their broad stone face was crimson in the setting sun. Above the ridge the clouds had thickened and a veil of rain had appeared.

“The mountains are beautiful,” Chuy said.

He hadn’t meant to speak. His own voice startled him. Everyone looked across the valley. They turned just in time to see lightning stab the ridge.

“They sure are,” Terésa said.

Chuy smiled at his wife. The river gurgled and whispered at their feet.

“I’m starving,” Esteban said.

And again everyone laughed. Without saying anything more they went back along the path and turned away from the mountains and the river. Under the cottonwoods of the bosque they each quietly brushed the traces of Frescura’s ashes from their hands.

As the small procession returned west across Los Huertos, the storm clouds they had seen to the east, off in the distance over the Jitomate Mountains, followed behind them across the great valley. The storm that began as a few clouds over the towering ridge as the day drew to its end gathered strength as it moved down off the mountains.

First the storm soaked the foothills. Then it drenched the valley floor. The rain gathered in the arroyos and washes and diversion culverts that cut across the valley and the city and flowed down into the rising Río Huérfano.

The river rose. And rose again. As the rain pelted the surface of the waters, and the river boiled with the currents feeding into it, Frescura Sandoval’s ashes were churned into the turbulence.

On this black monsoon night she became part of the river she loved.

## The Blue Fountain

### 1

From behind the counter inside the glass-fronted convenience store a young heavyset pueblo woman apologetically informed Rico that their payment system was offline. Which meant she could only accept cash. He stood across from her dressed in his best suit of deep charcoal gray and a crisp white shirt and a garnet-red tie and pushed his hands deep into his pockets while he rocked back onto the heels of his sharp-toed and freshly polished gleamingly black cowboy boots.

He nodded when the young woman finished speaking. Then turned to look out through a sheet of plate glass at his long red convertible waiting with its top down on this cloudless evening. He watched the lustrous paint and the glistening chrome glow in the warm falling light while he considered taking this minor obstacle as a major omen. He told himself he could turn back to the clerk and smile while he thanked her then lie that unfortunately he did not have enough cash. Then say goodbye and go back outside and get back in his car and turn around and drive back home.

One two three. Simple as that.

Instead Rico put his boots flat down upon the linoleum floor and pulled out his wallet and from his wallet brought out two twenty dollar bills which he handed across the counter as he told the young woman he was going to fill his tank. Out at the pump Rico watched the gauges as the numbers of dollars and gallons ticked upward and did his best to ignore the deafening traffic that roared through the intersection. Then he retraced his steps back inside and received the change the clerk doled out to him. As he returned to his car he slid the bills he had received into his wallet then let the coins slide down along his fingers into his pants pocket.

The traffic light was red when he pulled out to the intersection. He almost went right back toward Los Huertos. For a moment his hand hovered beside his turn signal.

Then the light changed and he rolled forward.

### 2

Again he avoided the highways and took Las Haciendas Boulevard into the city where he rode the side streets past the University then drove slowly along a block lined with shops and restaurants and cafés and bars with apartments upstairs behind black iron railings on narrow balconies that fronted French doors. And again people streamed along the sidewalks but tonight they did not duck beneath the balconies and awnings because tonight the summer rains did not fall.

There was an empty parking space directly in front of the restaurant. At the corner of the alleyway that ran back alongside the building. Rico pulled in, cut his engine, stepped from his car and closed the door. He went around the front and up onto the sidewalk. While he waited for a break in the stream of pedestrians Rico admired the restaurant’s facade.

Tall windows set in pink stucco walls framed a wide arched entranceway that was framed in red brick. It was the entranceway Rico admired most. In a long parallel curve over the archway, a blue neon sign spelled out *La Fuente Azul*. There were black iron gates, pulled back inside, that could be closed to shut the entranceway from the street. Rico admired the red tile on the floor and the blue tile up the walls and across the arched ceiling. And at the back, a wide pair of elegant glass-paneled doors, which he could imagine being pulled open by a liveried doorman. It was an entranceway for another era, an era Rico felt he should have known and would have liked better.

The break he was waiting for appeared. Rico ducked through the throng and into the entranceway for La Fuente Azul. He followed a well-dressed white-haired Anglo couple through the glass doors. The expansive room hummed. Animated diners filled all the tables in sight, with waiters and waitresses swarming between them. The white-haired Anglo woman stood directly in front of Rico, complaining loudly about something “the chancellor” had done. Rico assumed she and her spouse were University faculty. He eavesdropped for a moment longer but could make no sense of what they said. When the woman swept a hand up under her hair, Rico caught the smell of her perfume. He found it harsh and piercing, a little like cinnamon and witch hazel. He stepped off to one side, to move away from the scent.

A poster stood on an easel beside the captain’s station. It was a color version of the photograph Rico had seen in the newspaper, blown up to be as big as the newspaper itself. The beautiful young woman he had met in his bar now stood front and center, hands on her hips, in a sweeping dress of black and red, with silver along the bodice, white rimming the skirts and sleeves, a red rose in her black hair, her white teeth gleaming.

She looked like she owned the world.

Below the photograph and the name of the ensemble the poster said—

Featuring Chela Varga!

Rico frowned at the poster and shook his head.

What makes you think she wants anything to do with you?

### 3

A crisp Spanish waiter led the white-haired Anglo couple away to their table. When they moved the woman’s perfume hit Rico’s nose again and he turned away from the sting of it. Then stepped up to the captain’s station and smiled at the young man who stood behind the podium. Rico expected to be recognized. He planned to be impressed if he was addressed by name. The young man turned his face up to Rico’s and without a moment’s hesitation smiled broadly and said—

“Good evening, Señor Lupe. It is good to see you again.”

Rico smiled.

“Thank you, Luis. It’s good to see you again too.”

The captain offered a shallow bow in Rico’s direction.

“Thank *you*, sir. It is kind of you to say so. How have you been, sir? If I may be so bold.”

Rico dipped his head.

“I have been well, thank you. I hope the same is true for you?”

“Yes, very well, sir. Thank you for asking.”

The captain gestured at the open reservation book.

“I see we have a reservation for two tonight.”

He leaned forward slightly.

“Would the other member of your party be Señorita Varga?”

Rico laughed and nodded.

“You’re going to go far in this business.”

The captain bowed slightly.

“Thank you again, sir. And again, if I may be so bold, I had hoped you would return to…”

The young captain smiled while he found the right words.

“…continue your quest.”

Rico smiled and nodded.

“My quest continues.”

The captain bowed again.

“Very *good*, sir.”

The captain usually turned the arriving diners over to a passing waiter or waitress. But as he had done the first time they met, Luis Molina López personally escorted Rico Lupe back toward the stage. They took a different route than the first time, going straight back through the middle of the room.

And in the center of the grand room, already impressive with its high white walls and lean white pillars, its celestial tinned ceiling and its expanse of red floors, Rico was surprised to encounter a large fountain elegantly made of cobalt blue tile. His mind went blank for a moment, searching for the question that had now been answered, then Rico realized that the restaurant was named for this centerpiece—La Fuente Azul, The Blue Fountain. As he stepped past Rico looked down at the coins beneath the water, then around the room and up at the high ceiling, and wondered again if the building was originally a hotel. He could imagine great scenes of romance and intrigue acted out in a hotel lobby that centered on a fountain as beautiful and blue as the one he found here.

### 4

The captain brought Rico to a table beside the stage. Rico took it as a good omen that this was a different table, in a better location, than the one where he had waited on the night the mariachis never arrived. And again, as before, the young captain from Honduras who had grown up in San Diego refused the twenty dollars Rico offered, with a quick broad smile and a low wave.

“Think of me as a fellow knight assisting your noble quest,” the captain said. “Honor does not permit me to take your money.”

Rico smiled.

“And if I’m tilting at windmills? How noble will it be then?”

“Even nobler, sir. In my estimation.”

“Then I’ll over-tip the waiter.”

Luis Molina López smiled and bowed.

“An excellent solution.”

They shook hands. The captain turned back toward his responsibilities at the captain’s station. Rico took his seat, facing the stage. He leaned into his chair, draped an arm across the table and folded one leg over another. He had just settled in when a waiter appeared at his side and spoke in a voice that was deep and rumbling.

“Would you like something to drink, sir? While you wait for the other member of your party.”

Rico was ready to admit that he was alone and only made reservations for two because he knew he would never get near the stage with a reservation for one, and that he might not get a reservation at all. He was ready to confess that he was here to win back the heart of a beautiful woman that he lost in a terrible misunderstanding.

But when he looked up there was something in the big waiter’s square face that Rico did not like. So he limited his words to the business at hand.

“I would,” Rico said.

“What can I bring you, sir?”

“A bottle of your best Argentinian Malbec.”

“Do you have a vintner in mind, sir?”

“Whatever you suggest.”

“Very good, sir.”

The waiter bowed. Rico would have liked if the big man acted happier at this invitation to be gouged. When he lumbered off Rico studied his departing bulk. Then a busboy appeared and filled Rico’s water glass, the ice clinking and clacking as it tumbled down. He was young and slight, with big dewy eyes and skin the color of caramel. Rico watched the busboy at his task and remembered what it was like to be young and work in a place like this, a large thriving restaurant with live mariachis, a place for first dates and anniversary dinners, for loud groups of friends, a place to take your relatives visiting from far away, a place for graduation parties and birthday celebrations. Rico had waited tables at a place like this when he was young and still new to the city.

The busboy finished with Rico’s glass and stepped over to a neighboring table where he refilled the glasses of a young Anglo couple that was smiling and laughing and talking nonstop. They ignored the busboy and he studied them surreptitiously. Rico watched the busboy pour and glance at the Anglo couple and wondered how long he had held this job, if he would be promoted to waiter, if he would stay in the business or drift into something else. The busboy finished and moved on, disappearing among the diners.

Rico turned toward the table on his other side and saw a middle-aged Spanish couple talking quietly. The man laughed at something the woman said and she smiled, then the man reached across the table for her hand. Rico guessed they had been together since childhood. Then he wondered if maybe he was wrong, if maybe they were having a torrid affair after years of pained mutual longing. But Rico knew from his many years in the business that places like this were too popular and public for anything but the most brazen of adulterers. And this couple did not strike him as the brazen sort. If their love were illicit he believed they would be hiding in a dim dark little place tucked away from the teeming crowds.

He lifted his water glass and remembered the one time that he was a brazen adulterer, many years ago, when he was young and foolish. He sat at his table next to the stage, glancing at the two couples on either side of him, and remembered a date he went on long ago, to a place like this one. The young woman was a lot Irish and a little Spanish, the red-headed, hazel-eyed wife of a fighter pilot who was off in Vietnam. All these years later and Rico was still ashamed. The red-headed temptress had led him into behavior he had not considered himself capable of. He could forgive her part in it, but not his own. She had a good excuse—she was crazy. He wasn’t. He was young when she seduced him but he knew better. The only consolation he could take was that he had never done it again.

And then Rico remembered another date at a place like this. He finally shook himself loose of the red-headed siren when he fell in love with a beautiful young woman from the village of Los Huertos. A girl of incandescent spirit. Unfortunately she did not share Rico’s feelings. But he found an unexpected ally in the girl’s fearsome and dreaded mother, so soon he was out on a date with the reluctant young woman. He remembered that there had been an Anglo bachelor party at the restaurant that night, and he had to explain to his lovely date exactly what went on at a bachelor party. Fortunately for Rico, before his thoughts could continue any further, before the pain and longing of his old unrequited love could find him across all the years, old pain that would remind him what grief awaited if tonight’s mission failed, the big waiter returned with his bottle of wine.

### 5

Rico frowned at the wide back of the departing waiter, trying to determine what he did not like about the man. These thoughts halted when Rico heard guitars flutter on a minor chord. The sound seemed to come from the stage and he looked expectantly in that direction. Then the guitars fluttered again, and the music seemed to come from all around. When a trumpet sounded a subdued note, and the guitars followed, with the guitarrón coming in a dramatic beat behind, Rico realized the mariachis were approaching him from the front of the restaurant. He turned in his seat just as they began a lap around the blue fountain. They had arrived through the front door and were parading through the restaurant on their way to the stage.

And then he saw her. Their star.

She was last in the procession and wore a different outfit than the one in the poster, with more red and less black. She thrummed a chord on her guitar and began to sing. Rico saw how she held her instrument and realized she was left-handed. There were two other women in the group, also strumming guitars, and they opened their voices too.

Chela Varga’s face was bright with concentration. She did not see Rico Lupe watching her as she circled the fountain then continued toward the stage—not even when she passed so close that her skirt brushed Rico’s knee. As he watched Chela Varga mount the stage his heart climbed into his throat.

The big waiter selected this moment to return.

“Shall we continue to wait for your other party, sir?”

His deep rumbling voice overwhelmed the mariachi. The diners at the neighboring tables all glanced in his direction. Rico had yet to look at his menu, which lay next to his plate, undisturbed.

“I will dine alone,” Rico said.

A look of displeasure flashed across the waiter’s face. Rico lifted his menu.

“Another moment, please.”

“Very good, sir.”

The waiter continued down the aisle, away from the stage, toward the front of the room and out of sight. Rico’s eyes went back up onto the stage, where Chela Varga was gently strumming her guitar and softly blending voices with the lead violinist. He was also the leader of the ensemble, a stout man with silvering hair at his temples, wearing silver-framed glasses and a close-cropped beard and mustache. There were touches of silver in his beard. Rico thought the violinist looked familiar and wondered if they had worked in the same restaurant when they were both younger men. The violinist stood with his instrument down at his side, and he and Chela leaned toward each other, with their eyes closed. In Rico’s agitated state, the beauty of the sound dampened his eyes. He blinked and forced his attention to the menu. The busboy appeared and swept away the second place setting, the one that would not be used.

Rico knew the big waiter would return soon, to pester him again. He had no appetite, but he decided to order the most expensive dish, hoping that would appease the churlish waiter and buy Rico some peace. But that plate proved to include lobster, and Rico found lobster disgusting. He settled instead on an enormous slab of beefsteak, which was both expensive and would justify a long stay at his table, as he slowly sawed through it. That was when Rico realized he would need both an appetizer before and maybe a dessert after to buy his table long enough to gain a chance of speaking with Chela. He glanced at his watch. He guessed the mariachis would play for at least an hour before they took intermission.

Rico put his menu down and returned his eyes to the stage. Chela was still lost in the music, not singing at the moment, thrumming out chords as she watched the guitarrón player, a tall thin young man. The mariachis brought their first song to a stirring conclusion and applause swept across the room. Chela smiled and her eyes flashed. She laughed at something the violinist said. A wolf whistle came from behind Rico, off to his right. Another followed. The stout violinist lifted his instrument to his chin and reeled off a string of notes that quieted the room.

The big waiter was back at Rico’s elbow.

“What may I bring you these evening, sir?”

The waiter’s booming voice brought more glances. The other mariachis joined the violinist and their music began again. Rico lifted his menu. He ordered the most expensive appetizer, a dozen clams sautéed with garlic, and the enormous steak.

“Very good, sir. And how would you like your steak, sir?”

The waiter’s tone was unchanged. Rico could hear that he was not mollified and that there would be no truce between them. Rico told the waiter he would like his steak medium rare and did not look at the big man till he lumbered off to Rico’s left, around the stage and toward the kitchen. When Rico brought his eyes away from the waiter’s wide back, and returned his gaze to the stage, he found that Chela Varga was watching him. His heart seized in his chest, then pounded against his ribs. He smiled at the beautiful young woman.

She lifted her chin and looked away.

### 6

Rico discovered that he had not touched his glass of wine. He lifted the glass to his lips and the warmth of it spread through his body and helped to calm his nerves. Rico took another sip and set the glass down. It was an excellent bottle and a shame he could not enjoy it. It seemed even more of a shame that he could not share a glass of this delicious wine with the beautiful and talented Chela Varga.

She had yet to look at him again. She seemed to put her eyes everywhere in the room except for the table he occupied right in front of her. Her head was back and her voice filled the air. It seemed to fill Rico’s heart and soul. He had been overwhelmed by her beauty and now there was her artistry to contend with. He sat in his chair by the little round table and felt that his longing could not be more overpowering and his suffering could not be more complete. He wished he had never let Chuy convince him to come here and knew he could never have stayed away. He felt that somehow his life would turn on this evening, that from now on everything would be different, either better or worse. A cold shiver wracked his spine. He turned to his glass again and felt the warmth of the wine slide down his throat and into his belly. He looked at the glass and spun it in his hands.

Oh well. I can always get drunk.

He looked at his glass and knew he could drink all night and feel nothing but dead. No amount of wine would lift his spirits or his soul. He put his glass down again and the big waiter reappeared. He delivered Rico’s appetizer with a glare and a flourish and continued down the aisle, away from the stage, out of Rico’s sight. Rico looked at the cooked clams steaming before him and wished he could disappear.

### 7

“Are the clams not to your liking, sir?”

Rico had not tasted them yet. He had speared one with his fork and left the fork across the plate, the skewered clam dripping garlic and sauce onto the white tablecloth. Rico frowned at the plate.

“They’re fine,” he lied.

The big waiter turned and left, heading back toward the kitchen. Rico raised his wine glass and drained the final sip, then he lifted the fork to his mouth and managed to get the clam past his lips. All he could taste was garlic and salt. He chewed and swallowed and set the fork back down.

He lifted his water glass and gulped half its contents. The busboy appeared and refilled it. Rico had to stop him from taking the empty wine glass with him when he left. Rico poured himself another glass and left it untasted.

The trumpeter blew a note that lifted Rico’s scalp. He looked to the stage again just as Chela began to sing. Her voice was almost as loud as the trumpet. She swung her guitar down to her side and stood with her feet apart and her head and shoulders back, her bosom lifting forward. She looked magnificent. Rico prayed for a word with her when intermission came. When she finished her passage applause swept the room and Rico beat his hands together. He blinked eyes that were wet again. His heart pounded and pain stabbed at one lung. He winced and stopped clapping.

He glanced at his watch. The arithmetic did not come readily but eventually he calculated that twenty-five minutes had passed. He guessed he had at least another half an hour to wait.

The waiter drew near again. Rico watched him slam a martini onto a table and somehow the contents remained inert. The big man was a magician. Rico stabbed another clam to stop the waiter from asking any more questions. The fork was on its way to his mouth when the big man lumbered away. Rico lowered the fork and draped it across the plate. The second clam dripped garlic and sauce next to the spot soiled by the first clam.

Rico raised his eyes back to the stage. The music lowered and Chela began to sing again. Again her guitar dropped down to her side. She stepped forward, then stood with her feet apart again, her shoulders and head back again, her bosom lifted forward again. But this time her hands did not fall down by her sides. Her left hand clutched the guitar at her hip and her right hand was raised to the side of her face. Her voice quaked the air and Rico felt washed clean by it. The tears ran out of his eyes and when he blinked his eyes stung. Chela finished her passage and as her head fell forward applause came loud and hard. The wolf whistler sounded out his approval and another wave of applause came, even louder than the first. Rico beat his hands till they were red and stinging.

And then she looked at him. When the applause had passed, with her head still hanging down, Chela Varga looked at Rico Lupe, her eyes slanting up and out from under her lowered brow. Rico blinked and tears clouded his vision and for a moment he could see nothing but a smear of red and black where Chela stood. He ran a hand across his face and blinked till his vision cleared again. He saw her lift her guitar back into her arms. She fumbled on her first chord, paused till she found the rhythm, then Chela turned away.

### 8

“Are you finished with your appetizer sir?”

The big waiter was back at Rico’s elbow. Rico glanced at his watch and nodded. The waiter snatched up the dish and retreated with it. Rico watched the waiter’s back and saw him look down at the plate and do something with his free hand. Rico guessed the waiter was moving the fork and the speared but uneaten clam into the center of the plate, with all the other clams, so the fork would be less likely to fall. The waiter’s head came up and his speed increased. As he rounded the corner of the stage toward the kitchen, he shot a glance back over his shoulder in Rico’s direction.

With my luck that’s his favorite dish. What a pain in the ass.

Rico frowned as the waiter disappeared, then he looked back toward the stage. The mariachis had just begun another song, with the instruments working a swaying pattern. The two other women in the group were standing at the front of the stage, strumming their guitars. They began singing together, in harmony, then the violinist added his voice, and then Chela joined in. The four voices swelled and rose and filled the air, then held a long chord and faded away. The instruments came crashing down on a long descending line and the trumpeter blasted out a volley of notes.

Rico lifted his wine glass as the swaying pattern began again. Now Chela stepped to the front of the stage. Rico lowered his glass as she began to sing. As the other singers joined her, she increased her attack on the guitar, then the four voices rose and swelled again, but now with Chela’s voice loud and dominant, bemoaning the betrayal of a long ago hero by his duplicitous lover, and as the voices trailed off, again the instruments came crashing down. Now it was the violinist’s turn to reel off a short furious burst of sound. Chela moved away from the front of the stage and Rico was disappointed that she had not looked his way again. The violinist moved to the foreground and the swaying pattern resumed.

Rico’s eyes caught movement and tracked to his left. The big waiter was at the edge of the stage, carrying a large platter. Rico watched the waiter approach and guessed he was witnessing the arrival of his enormous steak. The violinist began to sing. The two women joined him. The waiter arrived at Rico’s table just as Chela’s voice soared above the others. The big man flung down the platter and Rico met his steak. Which was the size of a comprehensive dictionary and sizzling loudly while it spat grease that singed the back of Rico’s hand. The waiter gave a small bow and continued down the aisle. The singers drew out their long notes and the instruments pounded down on the descending figure. The trumpeter took another turn at blasting out a quick short burst of notes. This time the guitarrón player underpinned the trumpet with a burst of his own, followed by a flurry of guitars, with the high voice of the viheula standing out above the others. Rico saw that one of the backing violinists and the viola player were grinning at each other.

The swaying pattern returned, pitched higher, the tempo a little quicker. Just as the two women began singing again, high and plaintive, the big waiter reappeared at Rico’s side.

“Is the steak not to your liking sir?”

Rico snorted and spread his hands.

“I haven’t even tried it yet!” he wailed.

Heads turned at the neighboring tables. Rico felt eyes on him from the stage. The waiter lumbered off as the mariachis broke into a rollicking chorus. Rico lifted his knife and slowly sawed into the enormous steak.

“Son of a bitch,” he mumbled.

### 9

Intermission finally arrived. Rico had consumed less than a tenth of the prodigious slab of meat. His third glass of wine sat untouched before him. He watched as the mariachis exited stage right, descending a short flight of stairs, rounding a corner and disappearing from sight. Chela was next-to-last off the stage, coming down before the young guitarrón player who insisted she go ahead of him. Rico watched as she stopped the guitarrón player at the bottom of the steps and spoke to him, then handed him her guitar. She nodded and smiled, said something more to the young man and patted him on the shoulder, then she started across the front of the stage. All eyes were on Chela Varga as she approached Rico’s table. He stood and stepped around to pull out the other chair. She lifted her skirts and descended into the seat as Rico pushed it in. He sat back down across from her.

“So you found me,” Chela said.

“I found you.”

“Was that hard?”

“Not when your photograph appeared in the newspaper.”

Chela nodded.

“Did you think I might come here?” Rico said.

Chela shrugged. Her dress rustled.

“It occurred to me.”

“Did you want me to?”

She shrugged again.

“Yes and no.”

“Are you still mad at me?”

She looked away for a second or two.

“Yes and no.”

She frowned and canted her head to one side.

“Who *was* that awful woman?”

It took Rico a moment to understand and remember.

*The collie*, Rico thought.

He was trying to phrase his answer when Chela raised her hand.

“Don’t tell me,” she said. “I don’t want to know.”

There was an awkward pause. Rico struggled for something to say.

Chela looked at Rico’s plate.

“That’s a big steak.”

“It’s huge. Would you like some?”

“No thank you. I don’t seem to have an appetite right now.”

“Me either.”

“Then why did you order that enormous steak?”

“I was hoping to make the waiter happy.”

Chela frowned and turned her head to one side.

“Why?”

“I’m dining alone. At a table down front. I thought if I ordered a big meal he might be nicer to me.”

“And did you succeed in making him happy?”

“No. But I am not convinced he is ever happy.”

Chela laughed.

“You might be right there.”

### 10

The big waiter appeared on cue. He came stomping up the aisle and swung around in front of the table, between it and the stage, and between Rico and Chela. Chela glanced up at him, then looked at Rico.

“Speak of the devil,” she said.

The waiter leaned down toward her.

“Is the gentleman bothering you, señorita?”

Chela frowned up at the waiter.

“If the gentleman was bothering me why would I sit with him?”

The waiter rocked back on his heels, bowed slightly, and moved on.

“An admirer,” Rico said.

“Yes. And he’s a big pain in the ass.”

“You probably have many admirers.”

“A few.”

“Are they all a pain in the ass?”

“No. They’re not all like him. There’s you. For example. You’re not like him.”

“So I’m not a pain in the ass?”

“Not yet. But you could be. If you keep showing up where I work.”

“I didn’t have much choice.”

“You could have left me alone.”

“I tried that. It wasn’t working.”

“I have another admirer. He’s not a pain in the ass either. He is rich and handsome and he sends me roses.”

Rico lifted his glass of wine and sipped from it. He studied Chela over the glass and took his time settling it back down onto the table. He swallowed again before he spoke.

“And how do you feel about this rich and handsome man who sends you roses?”

“I find him tolerable enough.”

She put her chin in the air.

“He asked me to marry him.”

Rico turned to the stage and blinked at its emptiness. He had feared he had a rival. The dread of it had been an ache in his gut.

Chela raised a hand to brush her hair from her face. The motion drew Rico’s eyes back to her. He saw it was her left hand she had raised and as she lowered it back down he noticed that no diamond glinted.

“I don’t see a ring.”

“There’s a ring.”

“Then where is it?”

“That’s really none of your business.”

“You’re right. Forgive me for asking.”

“It needs to be resized.”

“It’s none of my business.”

“And still I’m telling you.”

“Why.”

“It was his grandmother’s. She had tiny hands.”

“Not the ring. I don’t care about the ring.”

“I don’t know why I’m telling you.”

Rico smiled. He let her watch him smiling for a moment.

“Maybe you’re telling me because you know marrying him would be a mistake.”

Chela shrugged. When she was done she made a face.

“Maybe I don’t know anything. Not about him and certainly not about you. Maybe I should swear off men altogether.”

“Maybe you should marry me instead.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I said yes. We’ve set a date.”

“That’s no reason.”

“It is to me.”

### 11

Rico found that everything had gone out of him. He blinked across the small table at the beautiful Chela Varga and failed to understand what had just happened. Why all of his hope had just vanished. He told himself he should keep pressing her. She was mad at him and was making him suffer. But she would come around if he persisted.

Then he asked himself if he should. If he had any right to tie this woman down to him. She was so much younger. So very spectacular. So very ready to take flight and soar. She deserved so much better than a half-broken-down old barkeep. Chasing her was selfish and maybe even cruel.

Then for the first time in his life Rico wondered if it would have been better never to be born. If he had only lived just to meet Chela Varga and keep losing her. Maybe not living at all would be better than that.

There was a rushing sound in his ears. He blinked and his vision was cloudy. He pasted a smile onto his face that didn’t stay there.

“Well,” he said.

He used an unsteady hand to reach for his wine and lifted the glass to his lips. He gulped and the glass became half empty. He lowered the glass a little too quickly and it clunked onto the table top and the remaining wine sloshed within the glass. He tried to smile again but he could only grimace.

“I guess that’s it then,” he said.

The wine he gulped burned in his throat and belly and his breath was short. Rico wondered how he would get to his feet and make his exit. His hand was still on the table, his fingers held loose around the stem of his glass. Chela reached out and touched the back of his hand and Rico inhaled sharply.

“Will I ever see you again?” Chela said.

Rico stared at her. Then shook his head in a small slow motion.

“I hope not. I don’t think I could stand it.”

“Maybe with time—”

“I’m running out of time.”

After a moment Chela nodded. She took her touch away and Rico’s hand went cold.

“That’s how I felt,” Chela said. “That I was running out of time.”

Rico swallowed and his throat was dry. He looked down at his wine and decided against finishing it. He raised his eyes to Chela and there was nothing he could to do to make his face look pleasant.

“Tell me about it when you’re my age,” Rico said.

He was surprised at the bitterness he heard in his own voice.

Chela raised her chin again.

“There’s no need to get short with me. And please don’t sit here and feel sorry for yourself. I can’t stand to see you like that.”

She turned away from him and faced the empty stage. Rico ran his eyes over her lovely profile. Then rose from the table and looked down at her. His feet were solid enough beneath him. He knew he could navigate across the big room and out to his car. From there he wasn’t too sure.

He tried to think of what he should say. He loved her more than ever at this terrible moment. He decided there was nothing to say and that he didn’t want to say anything at all. He only wanted to be gone. He took his wallet from his pocket and left a stack of bills on the table. Then looked down at Chela as he put his wallet away again.

Then Rico turned and left. He walked slowly. Each step was an act of will. He stumbled into a chair. He stopped to apologize to the man seated in it. Then got moving again.

### 12

At the blue fountain two young lovers were rummaging in their pockets and purse. Rico watched their shining faces through his clouded vision. His heart broke when he wished them all the happiness they wanted to wish for themselves. If they could only find a coin.

He stopped and reached into his pocket. He brought out a quarter, a nickel, and an old tarnished penny. The coins the clerk had given him back at the gas station at the start of this difficult evening. He looked down at the coins in his hand and thought that here at least was one good thing that would come of this. That he could help these two enjoy a special moment. He wondered if that was the real reason God had sent him out on this otherwise pointless and painful excursion. So he could be a bit player in tonight’s real story. Since his story did not seem to be going anywhere.

He wanted what the young couple had. To be young again and believe in a long shared future full of love. Since he couldn’t have that he wanted to keep wishing for what he feared he would never have. Which was to share real love with a good woman. For however briefly God would allow it.

But he was tired of wishing. And now he was done with it. Those days were behind him.

He stepped over and offered his coins to the young man.

“Allow me,” Rico said.

His voice felt like sandpaper. The young couple beamed at him.

“Thank you, sir,” the young man said.

When they were behind him he heard the coins splash into the water.

Rico listened to their laughter and his heart broke again.

## Los Vados

### 1

Rico stood looking down at his jacket, which he had laid out on the motel room bed, and wished he had brought a different suit. This one, the charcoal gray suit that was his best, and had been his favorite, now reminded him of his failure to win Chela Varga. Back in Los Huertos he had convinced himself this association would not last. Instead it had grown stronger.

He polished a spot from one of his dress shoes and laced them on. He hated how they felt and wanted to switch to his boots. But what was the point of owning shoes like these if you didn’t wear them to funerals?

He pulled on the suit jacket. The drape was ruined by something caught at an angle within the inside pocket. He reached in and pulled out a business card. Squinted down at the card and read—

Luis Molina López. Captain. La Fuente Azul.

All the disappointment from the night he received this card rushed back at him. Just as sharp and insistent as when it happened. The card swam away from him when his eyes filled with tears.

He didn’t have time for this. He had to push all that away and keep moving. Get his ass out the door and into his car and over to the church. Where he would confront another set of reasons for being miserable.

He dropped the business card onto the bed. Wiped his eyes with his hands and went into the bathroom for a towel and dried his hands and the fresh tears that had filled his eyes again. Then stood with the towel pressed against his face impatiently waiting for his tears to stop.

### 2

Low heavy gray skies and cold enough for an overcoat. Rico chastised himself for not bringing one. He knew what Los Vados could be like in November. He was cold sitting in the breeze leaking through the convertible top while his engine still refused to yield heat. Which it of course only finally did sending warm air through the vents just as his destination appeared before him. Seeing Saint Genevieve again made Rico want to turn around and go back to the motel and grab his things and get the hell out of there.

But Eddie Mendez had already seen him. Eddie stood at the curb waving his hand up over his head. As if Rico might miss the only church in sight along the avenue. And even though Rico had repeatedly assured Eddie that he was familiar with Saint Genevieve.

*I moved away*, he had wanted to tell Eddie. *I don’t have amnesia*.

They knew each other back in high school. Eddie was a year older. Went off to Vietnam. Stayed in the Army and came out with a small pension. Knocked around at a few things. School janitor. Security guard. Then settled in as an orderly at an old folks home here in Los Vados. Which was where he and Rico met up again. When Rico went to visit Gene Kinney.

Eddie finally lowered his hand as Rico pulled up beside him. Eddie pointed to his right while he directed Rico to a parking lot around the corner. Rico nodded and didn’t mention that he already knew where to park. That the lot around the corner was the same one where he parked this same car when he drove his parents to this same church after his brother died. All of which he was remembering far too vividly.

His was the third car in the lot. Rico parked and sat picturing just the three of them inside at the service. Only Eddie and himself and the priest. The priest would be someone Rico had never met before. So he would be stuck in there with a stranger and Eddie.

When Rico got out Eddie was approaching. His eyes were on the car.

“What a beauty. You take great care of it.”

“Thanks.”

Eddie did a lap around the convertible. Then stood beside Rico and put his hands in his pockets. He shook his head and let out a long whistle.

“They don’t make em like this anymore.”

*Why should they?* Rico wanted to say. *New cars are a lot more reliable.*

Eddie looked at this and that. Admiring one thing and then another.

Rico lost what little interest he had in Eddie’s activities. He looked over at the church. His mind went ahead to what waited inside. And wanted very much to be past it already.

“I remember when he bought it,” Eddie said.

Rico snapped his head around to see Eddie grimacing at him.

“Shit. Forgive me, brother. I meant the car. Not the other thing.”

Rico stared. Then he nodded.

He looked away again.

Off into the future where this was done happening.

### 3

Rico made an addition to his arithmetic when they encountered an old woman waiting inside. So tiny and bent down she was barely above the floor. Eddie introduced her but the reverberation in the empty nave swallowed her name. It was either Mrs. Johnson or Mrs. Jensen. The nave also swallowed what the old woman said as Eddie nodded along.

Rico turned away and examined the interior of Saint Genevieve. Nothing had changed much. Maybe the colors had washed out some. Maybe everything was a little shabbier. But maybe he just saw those things because he expected to. Hard to know after all these years.

He turned back to Eddie and the old woman. Caught a chance to excuse himself and didn’t wait for a response. He would be spending enough time inside once the service started. Meanwhile he could use some fresh air. Even if that fresh air came from under these grim skies. And was almost too cold without a coat. Never enough fresh air these days.

Rico stood at the top of the steps looking down at the curb and remembered seeing his uncle Bernardo’s car parked there. All these years later and he was still furious at his uncle. As if the bullshit Bernardo pulled had just happened yesterday.

Father Quiñones had said there would be a parking space reserved for them in front of the church. But when they arrived the curb was full. Rico seethed as he drove his parents in his brother’s car around the corner to the lot he had used when he came looking for the priest to arrange this service. Since his parents were in no condition to do anything. But this hadn’t been the time or place to say anything. So he had choked his anger down.

His mother leaned on his arm as they climbed the concrete steps. His father came limping up behind them. The nave was half full. As they made their way down the aisle they passed as many new faces as familiar ones. The familiar faces offered condolences.

The new ones stared at Rico.

He recoiled when a man’s voice off to his left said—

“El muerto. ¿Tenía un gemelo?”

The dead one. He had a twin?

### 4

Rico doubted a pew would be waiting for them. The priest had also promised a parking space out in front and what had become of that? But this promise the priest had kept. Rico helped his mother sit then waited as his father joined them. Rico sat beside his mother. They remained silent while the mourners continued to gather. The three in a row all lost within themselves.

When Father Quiñones began to speak Rico heard nothing the priest said. He was too distracted by thinking maybe this would be over sooner than he expected and wouldn’t be so bad after all. Then he tried listening and couldn’t catch the thread of what the priest was saying.

And then couldn’t believe what he was hearing when Father Quiñones called on Bernardo. Rico realized with disgust that their worthless Tío Bernardo, whom Guillermo had despised, would offer a eulogy.

He heard nothing Bernardo said. He was too consumed with indignation. Other people also spoke, including Guillermo’s boss from the garage at the state university, but when it was over Rico could recall nothing anyone said about his brother. He didn’t even know who else had spoken. There was a long blank from when Guillermo’s boss stepped up to the front of the church and when Father Quiñones brought the service to a close.

The Father asked that the mourners remain seated while the family exited the church and alluded to the great burden they carried with them. The priest had told Rico to expect this conclusion to the service. When it came he was cognizant enough to rise on cue and help his mother to her feet.

Then they turned and Rico saw that Saint Genevieve overflowed. Mourners filled every pew and the throng that stood in the back spilled out the doors. Slowly Rico led his parents down the aisle and as they approached the doors the standing throng parted to allow them through. Out on the steps more were gathered and more still down on the sidewalk below.

For the first time Rico saw the full impression his brother had made on the people of Los Vados. Later he would learn that mourners came from all over the state and beyond. Among them were three professors at the main campus of the university up in Tijeras who befriended Guillermo when they studied in Los Vados and frequented the taverna where he had his second job. Another man who had once worked with Guillermo at the university garage rode a motorcycle all the way from Alabama.

Rico almost broke when he saw how much people cared for his brother. But he had his parents to think of. They needed him to stay strong and get them through this.

Like Guillermo used to do.

And then Rico recognized Bernardo’s car. Which put his almost breaking decisively behind him. His uncle’s sedan was parked right in front of the church. Next to a sign on the sidewalk marking that space as reserved for the family of the bereaved.

Apparently Bernardo thought that meant him.

### 5

Rico had to greatly revise his arithmetic when a bus arrived from the old folks home. Eddie and Rico propped doors open so the mourners could file inside. Orderlies and nurses assisted their charges down out of the bus and across the sidewalk and up the steps and in the entrance. Those in wheelchairs were rolled around the corner to the handicapped access on the side street.

When they were all inside Eddie and Rico closed the doors and Rico followed Eddie inside. Mrs. Johnson/Jensen was in the third pew from the back. She gestured at Eddie. He went and sat beside her. She craned her head up and began speaking into his ear. Eddie nodded along.

Rico sat in the back row. He watched the priest and thought Father Mulroney seemed very assured and competent for someone so young. He couldn’t be over thirty. Eddie had mentioned the young Father was the second priest to take over after Father Quiñones.

Who had been dead how many years now? Fifteen? Twenty? Drove home from the hospital after administering the last rites to an aged parishioner and had a heart attack in his parked car outside the rectory. Rico remembered this and decided God must have really wanted Father Quiñones dead. How else to explain the heart attack not happening while the priest was still at the hospital?

Rico wondered if Father Quiñones had predilections displeasing to God. And remembered when such a thought would have been shocking. Rico had never been religious but had grown up believing priests were good men. And like so many other innocent assumptions that one was gone.

Rico watched young Father Mulroney and considered again his precocious assurance. Maybe his confidence came from the darkness instead of the light?

*Enough*, Rico told himself. *Just stop.*

### 6

Bernardo caught up with them on the sidewalk at the bottom of the steps. Right in front of his damned car parked where Guillermo’s convertible should be waiting for them. Bernardo peeled his sister away from Rico and made a big show of consoling her. Rico and his father stood to one side waiting.

Rico couldn’t look at his uncle. He put his eyes everywhere else. On the sidewalk. On his father’s shoes. Up at the bell tower of the church.

On the burly Anglo man who appeared in front of him.

The man shoved out a hand. Rico shook it.

“Sorry bout your brother,” the man said. “I worked with Guillermo at the garage.”

The man shook his head.

“Never knew he had a twin.”

Rico shook his head.

“We weren’t twins.”

“Ya don’t say.”

“He was two years older.”

“Well ya coulda fooled me. Damned if you ain’t his spittin’ image.”

Rico could have pointed out that he was an inch taller than his older brother, and ten pounds heavier, with broader shoulders, and had a wider face with more pronounced cheek bones. He could have but he didn’t because few people could see those things if they already knew Guillermo. Rico was used to people looking at him and seeing his beloved older brother. It never bothered him when Guillermo was alive.

Why should it start bothering him now?

But it did bother him now.

It bothered him a hell of a lot.

### 7

The mourners from the old folks home had all been loaded back on their bus. Father Mulroney had been thanked. Mrs. Johnson/Jensen had disappeared. Rico was wondering why he hadn’t left already. If he went now he could make the drive home tonight. And not wake up again here in Los Vados.

Then Eddie suggested a drink and Rico regretted lingering. Because he knew there was more to it. That Eddie wanted to tell him something. And Gene would have wanted Rico to listen.

So off they went up the avenue. To a bar Eddie knew a block over. While they walked Eddie lauded Gene Kinney. He did a good job of it. Rico didn’t have anything to add. He shoved his hands in his pockets and nodded along with what Eddie said while he wished he had brought his damned coat.

Eddie suggested they take a booth. Then suggested they drink Scotch because that was what Gene drank. Eddie proposed a toast to Gene.

Then they sat and said nothing. Rico took in Eddie’s silence and knew from his numerous years dealing with people who were drinking because they had something they needed to say that eventually something would be said by the presently mute Eddie Mendez. The only question was when. Which could depend on how drunk Eddie needed to be in order to say it. Rico hoped that would prove to be not drunk at all. Just a little warmed up.

Meanwhile there was nothing to do but wait it out. So Rico let his thoughts loose on what he had remembered back at the church and wondered if his Tío Bernardo was still alive. He let himself hope Bernardo was dead then felt a fist of guilt clamp around his heart.

He knew how much that would pain his mother. To have her son wishing for her brother’s death. Even if she could not deny her brother was worthless. Not that his mother was still around to make her denials or displeasures known. But when considering the welfare of his mother’s brother Rico could not prevent the version of her that lived on inside his head from passing judgment on his thoughts.

He considered how long his mother had been dead. And pondered the great breadth of years that had gone by. And all the death those years had brought. And how the years kept right on going. And how the people he knew kept right on dying. And how his turn was looming out there somewhere in the unseen darkness that was his future.

Rico looked into his whiskey and hoped he didn’t wind up crying in it.

### 8

Eddie raised his glass and drank. Put his glass back down and kept his hand on it. Used his fingers to spin his glass. Let his breath hiss out from the back of his throat.

Rico was still staring into his whiskey.

“I got something I need to tell ya,” Eddie said.

Rico’s head came up.

Show time.

He envisioned a quick resolution. Back in his car. Back on the road. He could be home before midnight.

“I saw your brother,” Eddie said. “Over there.”

Rico couldn’t do anything with that.

Over where? Like what, on the other side?

You saw my brother’s ghost?

Rico frowned.

Please don’t be fucking nuts.

“It was at some air base. I can’t remember the name. But I could barely keep the names straight even when I was over there. Other guys got the hang of it.”

Eddie shook his head.

“Not me. It was all gobbledygook.”

He winced.

“Jeez I sound like some racist bastard.”

He’s talking about Vietnam.

Rico asked himself if he had missed something. Some hint along the way that Eddie could go this direction. Nothing came to mind.

He watched Eddie stare down into his drink.

Give him a moment.

The moment passed.

“So you saw him at this air base.”

Eddie nodded.

“Yeah.”

He raised his head and looked at Rico.

“Actually. He saw me.”

Rico knew that sometimes all you should do is listen. Other times you need to participate. And he knew Eddie wanted help. Rico said—

“He saw you?”

“Yeah. He called out my name.”

“Okay.”

“I gotta tell ya. If he hadn’t.”

Eddie shook his head.

“I never would have recognized him.”

“Why’s that?”

Eddie stared into Rico’s eyes.

“It changed him.”

Eddie kept staring.

Rico nodded.

“I take it not for the better.”

“No.”

Eddie blinked. He looked away.

Rico gave him another moment.

“Tell me how he changed.”

Eddie shook his head.

“Maybe I shouldna—”

“No way, Eddie. You can’t stop now.”

Eddie sighed.

“I know.”

Rico leaned forward.

“This is my brother we’re talking about.”

“I know. I know. I should’ve told you a long time ago.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Iiii—”

Eddie grimaced.

“What?” Rico said.

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Just spit it out. You’ll feel better.”

“I forgot.”

Rico nodded.

“Okay. You forgot.”

Eddie downed the rest of his Scotch. He signaled for another round.

Rico watched him. Eddie avoided Rico’s eyes.

“Shit happens, Eddie. You were in a fucking war.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So you forgot. Then what?”

“Then I was back. Home on leave. Like five years later. Maybe six. I was talking to my little sister.”

Eddie’s eyebrows went up. He nodded.

“And you know what. She was pregnant. The second time. So that was six years later. She was talking about high school. You remember how she is, she’s still like that, a motormouth. Can’t stop once she gets started. So she’s going on about some crap or another happened back then. Like anyone gives a shit. I’m barely listening. Next thing I know she’s onto how her and half the other girls all had this crush on you. And like a lightbulb, ya know? Just pop. And I remember your brother. Seeing him over there.”

Eddie stared with his mouth open.

“And my sister stopped talking. Right in the middle of whatever stupid shit she was saying. She said what the hell just happened to you, Eddie.”

### 9

Rico carried their empty glasses over, paid for the full ones, and brought them back to the booth. He put the glasses down on the table and tumbled back into his seat. He didn’t know if Eddie was still frozen in that moment back when his sister was pregnant the second time. Or had moved onto something else that kept him unsettled. But apparently he was still stuck in the past. He still had his mouth open and was still staring.

“You all right, Eddie?”

Eddie blinked. He looked down and saw the fresh drinks.

“This was supposed to be on me.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks.”

Eddie reached for his glass. Raised it to his mouth and stopped. Then held it up in the air.

“We should drink this one to Guillermo.”

Rico’s eyes stung. He blinked and they were wet.

He raised his glass.

“To Guillermo,” Rico said.

“He was a good man. Everybody loved him.”

Rico almost missed when they knocked their glasses together. He couldn’t see very well. He opened his throat and let the Scotch burn down it.

Eddie lowered his glass and wiped his mouth.

“I tried to find you.”

Rico had lost the context. He needed a second to remember where Eddie had put them. That he had been talking to his little sister.

“No one knew where you went,” Eddie said.

Rico narrowed his eyes. It was true Rico hadn’t said many goodbyes when he put Los Vados behind him. But there were people who knew where he went. Enough of them were people Eddie knew. And Los Vados liked to talk. Rico was certain a lot of people knew where he went.

But he decided to let Eddie have his rope.

Eddie gestured across the table.

“The only thing anyone could tell me was you used to wait tables at a place downtown. I went over there. Talked to the owner. I told her I had to tell you something. But I don’t think she believed me. I think she thought I was after you. She wouldn’t tell me anything.”

Eddie snorted.

“Can’t blame her. I looked pretty rough. No one wanted much to do with me.”

“Why were you trying to find me?”

Eddie blinked.

“To tell you I saw your brother?”

Rico knew this answer that Eddie had phrased as a question wasn’t really a question and wasn’t really an answer. He knew Eddie had not gone looking for him half their lifetimes ago just to say he saw Guillermo in Vietnam. Eddie didn’t know either of them well enough for that. If he saw Rico he would tell him. If he didn’t he wouldn’t. Simple as that.

So Eddie still wasn’t ready yet. For this thing he had to say. The something he needed to get out of him that brought them to this booth in this bar up the avenue from Saint Genevieve all these years later on the day of Gene Kinney’s funeral. Eddie would have to inch toward it some more.

So Rico kept pushing him along.

“What about my parents? You didn’t ask them where I was?”

“I was afraid to. I figured you left town like that, maybe that was something they didn’t wanna talk about. Then after that lady shut me down? Your old boss? Seemed like you were in trouble.”

Eddie shook his head.

“Your parents didn’t need me coming around.”

He raised a hand and pulled a face.

“Especially after Guillermo and all.”

He shook his head again.

“I didn’t wanna stir things up for them.”

“What kind of trouble did you think I was in?”

Eddie smiled. He raised his eyebrows.

“What?” Rico said.

“Come on. Knowing you?”

Rico frowned. Eddie kept smiling.

“What?” Rico said again.

Eddie shrugged.

“I figured you got some girl pregnant.”

Rico rolled his head off to the side. His hissed breath between his teeth.

Eddie laughed.

Then he looked down into his whiskey.

### 10

The door opened and voices came toward them. A man on a cell phone speaking English and two women conversing in Spanish. The women laughed as they went past. The man remained near the door finishing his call then followed behind. He caught up with the women and Rico watched them take a booth against the back wall. The man spoke and the women laughed again.

Eddie was still staring into his booze.

“So I couldn’t find you.”

Bullshit.

“And then my leave was up. Next time I was back I asked around again. Someone heard you were up north. Someone else said you were in Colorado. Another guy said you went to Texas and got married.”

Eddie raised his head. He smiled at Rico.

“I was pretty sure that dude was all mixed up. That it wasn’t you went to Texas. Or got married.”

It would be really great if you stopped lying.

“So you were doing all that, asking everyone where I went, working so hard to find me, just to tell me you saw my brother?”

Eddie stopped smiling. He shook his head.

“No.”

“So what was it?”

Eddie stared.

Rico watched Eddie stare.

Eddie nodded once.

“Let me tell you something else first.”

How fucking long is this going to take?

“Okay. I’m all ears.”

Eddie lifted his glass and looked at it. Put it to his mouth and drank. Put it back down and looked at it again.

“I wrote a letter to my mother. The same day I saw your brother. She kept it. I looked at the date. Then I went over to the library. Found your brother’s obituary.”

“Shit.”

Eddie stopped. He frowned at Rico.

“You okay?”

“Just keep going.”

Eddie looked at his drink again.

“So the day I saw him.”

Eddie reached out and touched his glass. Tapped a finger on the rim.

“That was two days before he died. And the way he looked.”

Eddie raised his eyes and looked at Rico.

“I have to tell you this, brother. I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I wish I didn’t. But it’s been stuck in my gut all these years.”

Fuck your guts.

“Tell it.”

“The way he looked. Guillermo. It was fucking awful, man. I saw other guys got messed up. Like they lost their souls. But I never saw that look on anyone else. Not over there. With him, that was the first time I saw it. And the only time I ever saw it on anyone so young. Now I see it all the time. With the old people at the home.”

“What are you saying, Eddie? Spit it out.”

Eddie opened his mouth. Nothing happened. He closed it again.

The women in the booth against the back wall laughed hysterically.

Rico and Eddie stared at each other.

Rico sat up straight.

“He knew,” Rico said.

Eddie nodded.

“Guillermo knew he was going to die,” Rico said.

“I didn’t know. When I saw him. But later. When I figured out that I ran into him so close before him dying an’ all.”

Eddie raised a hand and pushed his palm toward Rico as he said—

“But I shoulda known.”

He pulled his hand back and pushed it forward again—

“Just like I shoulda told you a long time ago.”

Eddie put his hand down.

“Because Guillermo said something.”

Rico felt the room closing in.

“He gave me a message. For you.”

Rico’s ears were ringing.

“He said, ‘Tell my brother I’m sorry’.”

### 11

They were in the kitchen. Rico was watching his parents. His parents were watching Guillermo. Their faces were drawn tight.

Guillermo sighed. He turned away and looked out the kitchen door.

Toward his car waiting outside.

“I don’t want a big scene at the train station. Let’s just do it here. Rico can go with me and bring my car back.”

Pilar and Sotero frowned at each other. Then turned back to their oldest son and stared at him again. Pilar pinched her mouth tight and sighed through her nose. Sotero was breathing loudly. A muscle twitched in his cheek. He filled his lungs and nodded once.

“Okay. If that’s how you want.”

“That’s how I want.”

And how Rico wanted too. He had been dreading what would happen when the train pulled into the station. He knew their mother would start wailing. Maybe their father would pass out again.

They followed Guillermo out into the dirt yard. Sotero and Pilar hugged their son and wept on his shoulders and Guillermo told them not to cry. Then broke down and sobbed in his mother’s arms. That only lasted for a moment but while it did Rico felt he might pass out.

After everyone stopped weeping for a few moments no one spoke.

Then Guillermo said—

“Okay.”

He wiped a hand across his face.

“It’s time.”

He lifted his bag from the dirt at his feet and dropped it into the back seat of his convertible and got behind the wheel. Rico climbed in beside him while Sotero and Pilar went around to the driver’s side of the car.

Pilar took her son’s left hand in both of hers.

“Vuelve a mi,” she said.

Return to me.

Guillermo squeezed his mother’s hands and kissed them and pushed them back to her.

“Estoy en las manos de Dios.”

I am in the hands of God.

Hearing those words made Rico feel hollow. He coughed against the back of his hand and his throat went dry and its ache cut down past his heart and out into his lungs.

### 12

Rico watched his brother drive. He kept trying to put his eyes elsewhere but they kept finding their way back to Guillermo. Rico wanted to say something but everything he could think seemed stupid.

They were halfway to the train station before Guillermo spoke.

“Don’t try to take care of them.”

Rico frowned.

Take care of who?

“That’s the mistake I made. I tried to take care of them. But you can’t. It never works.”

Rico remembered what he saw through the door of their parents’ bedroom. About an hour before they left. The money Guillermo insisted their father take from him.

Guillermo slumped back into his seat. He drove with one hand hooked over the wheel. He shook his head at the road ahead of them.

“I don’t know what it is.”

He turned to Rico.

“You know how much I love them.”

Rico frowned and nodded. Guillermo put his eyes on the road again.

“There’s something about our parents, hermanito.”

Guillermo shook his head.

“They just don’t have any luck.”

These words hit Rico like an unexpected blow. He blinked and tried to absorb the shock. Guillermo looked at him again.

“Every time they start to get ahead, something happens.”

They stopped at a red light. When it turned green Guillermo went left.

“Start your own life. As fast as you can. Don’t stick around any longer than you have to. There’s nothing here for you. Get the hell out of here and start a real life somewhere else.”

Rico remembered his father’s hand clutching the money.

It made him feel sick.

### 13

They rumbled over the train tracks. Guillermo made another turn and they entered the parking lot for the train station and came to a stop outside the stout adobe building that was a half century old and slowly disintegrating as the railroad slowly went bankrupt. The sun-bleached walls had needed mud for decades.

Guillermo cut the engine.

“Let’s say goodbye here. You don’t have to wait with me.”

“It’s okay. I can wait.”

Guillermo frowned.

“No offense, little brother. But I don’t want you to.”

Nothing his brother wanted could have offended Rico. At that moment all he wanted was whatever Guillermo wanted.

“Okay,” Rico said. “Sure.”

He watched Guillermo slide out from behind the wheel. Then stepped out onto the potholed dirt and went around to the driver’s side of the long red car. Where the two brothers stood facing each other.

The two brothers who were so often mistaken for twins. A mistake enabled by Rico always being bigger for his age. Although over the past year he had become noticeably taller than his brother. And had always been a little more handsome. A little prettier without being any less masculine.

Guillermo was more intense. Always looking coiled and ready to spring.

And now he sprung forward and folded Rico into his arms. Crushed his younger brother against his chest. Pounded him on the back.

“Take care, mi hermanito. You take good care of yourself.”

Then Guillermo released Rico and stepped back. He turned and looked away along the tracks that ran up the valley. Rico wanted to say something but no words came to him. So he waited silently and wondered what his brother was thinking and prayed for his brother to speak.

Finally Guillermo turned back to Rico. He put a grin on his face and his chin up the air. He did his best to look menacing but the effect was ruined by the tenderness in his eyes. His voice was rough—

“And you take damn good care of my car.”

Rico knew he was supposed to laugh. But he could not. All he could do was put a crooked smile on his face and blink back the tears that came without warning so his brother did not swim before him in a watery pool. He put out his hand and Guillermo gripped it hard. The two brothers stared at each other eyes with their smiles pulled tight across their sharp cheekbones.

Then Guillermo released his brother’s hand and snatched up his bag from the back seat of his car and without looking back Guillermo went to the door of the train station and he pulled it open and then Guillermo was gone.

### 14

Rico watched Eddie raise his glass and sip from it. Then watched Eddie return his glass carefully to the table. With a tender delicacy.

He waited for Eddie to explain. To say something more.

But that didn’t happen.

“Sorry for what?” Rico said.

Eddie shrugged. He was still looking at his glass.

“He didn’t say. That was it. Just that he was sorry.”

He brought his eyes up to Rico.

“I thought maybe you would know.”

Rico shook his head.

Eddie nodded.

“Young men are stupid as shit. And I was *young*, man. All full up with the stupid for being so young. The war hadn’t even touched me yet. I was still playing at it. Like a dumb kid in some big crazy game. Like the people around me weren’t really dying. I was just an idiot. Just a complete fucking idiot.”

Eddie raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

“And like an idiot I tried to laugh it off. Acted like Guillermo just told the funniest joke in the whole goddamn world.”

“What did he do?”

“He looked at me like I was a complete fucking idiot.”

Rico snorted. He knew that look. Guillermo was a master of it.

“Why didn’t you tell me when I first came around to see Gene? Kind of explains how you reacted.”

“How did I react?”

“Like you saw a ghost.”

“Because you two look a hell of a lot alike.”

“Yeah. There’s that. But because of this too.”

“Yes. Because of this too.”

“Okay.”

“I wanted to tell you.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“Gene talked me out of it.”

Rico went numb. His ears started ringing again.

“He did what?”

“He knew you. Your brother too. Way better than I did. I mean, you only come down here to see him. Not for no one else. I even asked you once. Why you were here. You said only to see Gene. So what was I to think? He said I should leave it alone. Not dig all that shit up. Let you be. You had moved on. Made a life for yourself.”

No wife. No kids. No family left alive.

I live alone and run a bar.

Rico had always respected and admired Gene Kinney. Enough so that like Eddie he too had deferred to the older man. Assumed he was wiser. Had given Gene’s opinion more weight than his own. He believed that Eddie had let Gene discourage him from doing what Eddie didn’t want to do. Even if Eddie suspected Gene was wrong.

Rico poked his chin at Eddie.

“There’s more.”

“Yeah. There’s more.”

“So let’s hear it.”

Eddie nodded. He took a deep breath.

“Gene was smart. I figured he knew better. And he helped me out. Kept my head screwed on straight. And then later I owed him. After my divorce and all that. He pulled me through all that shit when no one else could. So out of respect for him, for what he did for me, I did what he asked of me.”

“You kept your mouth shut.”

“I felt I had to. I owed him.”

“So why tell me now? Just to make yourself feel better?”

“Okay. Yeah. I’ll cop to it. That’s one reason. But not the only.”

“So lay it on me, Eddie. Why are you doing this.”

“Guillermo and me. We wore the same uniform in the same fucked up war. Because of that, I owe it to him. Gene wasn’t there. He didn’t know what that shit was like. And Gene is gone now. What he wanted and what I owe him, that don’t matter so much no more. Respect for the dead. But it’s the living got to deal with this fucked up world.”

Eddie stared over Rico’s shoulder. He appeared to have gone far away.

When he came back again Rico nodded at him.

“This world is a serious bitch,” Rico said. “True enough. And you’re right, Gene was smart. Smarter than me in a whole lot of ways.”

“You and me both.”

Rico pointed at Eddie.

“But he was wrong about this. And you knew he was wrong. My brother asked you to tell me. And you knew when he asked that he was going to die. And that he knew he was going to die.”

Eddie shrank away from Rico’s accusing finger.

Rico jabbed it at him.

“You don’t refuse the last wish of a dying man.”

“I’m sorry, brother. I didn’t know. Not back then.”

“You knew later. You just said so. You knew when I was coming around to see Gene.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“You should have told me a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry. I was confused. There’s another reason. Why I’m telling you now.”

“Yeah? What’s that.”

“I’m never going to see you again.”

Not an answer Rico could have predicted. But probably true.

He didn’t how to respond.

“Gene was why you came back,” Eddie said. “With him gone, you’re done with this place. I mean, you left for a reason, am I right?”

### 15

The people in the back were being loud. The man was talking and the women were laughing and then the woman with the loudest voice rattled off something in Spanish and the three of them went into convulsions. The man pounded the table and the bartender turned to frown at them.

“Am I right?” Eddie said.

Rico looked at him.

“About what.”

“About you being done with this place.”

“I was done with this place a long time ago.”

“Can I ask why?”

Rico frowned at Eddie.

“No.”

Eddie nodded.

“Sorry. Forget I asked.”

Rico turned away. He watched the man from the booth in the back approach the bar and place an order for another round and wanted this encounter with Eddie Mendez to have never happened. Then remembered being back at Saint Genevieve when Eddie suggested a drink and wanting to decline.

Rico snorted and shook his head.

“What?” Eddie said.

“What the fuck is more like it. You know what’s really great about this, Eddie? You and me, right now? What’s so very great about this is I’m only here because I thought Gene would want me to be. That he would want me to listen to you. Because clear as fucking daylight you had something you wanted to tell me. So I’m hearing this shit because I thought that’s what Gene would have wanted. But if you’re telling me the truth, then Gene would have wanted me to do what I wanted to do, which was get in my car and go the fuck home.”

“He told me not to tell you. I swear.”

“Yeah. I believe you. But now that I think about it, maybe he had a point. I mean, why the fuck *are* you telling me this shit now? What the fuck am I supposed to do with it? All these years later. And why the fuck are you making mad at Gene on the day of his funeral? Thanks for that. Thanks a fucking lot, Eddie. Good job. Well done.”

“I’m sorry, brother.”

“Please.”

“There’s something else, brother.”

Rico grimaced. Eddie leaned forward.

“There’s something else I should have said. When I saw you again. That I’m sorry for your loss. I know it was a long time ago. But I should have said it. Please forgive me, brother.”

Rico threw his hand across the table and stabbed it at Eddie’s face. He was almost as surprised as Eddie to see his index finger two inches from the other man’s nose. Then his words exploded out—

“Stop the fucking *brother* shit. You are *not* my brother. *Guillermo* was my brother. And Guillermo is *dead*. All my dead brother asked your sorry ass to do was give me a simple message. But you couldn’t find me? Half this fucking town knew where I was. I can name a dozen people off the top of my head that you and I both knew in high school who knew where the hell I went. So don’t give me this bullshit you couldn’t find me. And when you did finally see me again, when I was standing there right in front of you, and you had a goddamn chance to tell me, you spent another fifteen goddamn years sucking on it like a fucking baby with a fucking pacifier.”

Rico lowered his hand.

“So don’t you *dare* call me your brother.”

### 16

It seemed warmer outside. Rico decided that was the booze. He looked up at the sky and it was still grim. He was about ten yards down the sidewalk when he felt Eddie fall in behind him. He listened and heard footsteps. Eddie was a noisy walker. Rico had noticed that before. His racket had filled the church when he stomped around in there.

Out of respect for Gene he almost turned around. He guessed Eddie would try to apologize. As if Rico’s outburst had been his fault. That made Rico feel bad for a moment. But then he remembered why he lost his temper. And got mad all over again. He decided Eddie and Gene could both go to hell.

When he arrived at his car Rico looked back toward the corner and expected to see Eddie approaching. Eddie’s car was next to his in the church lot. But the side street remained empty. Rico thought maybe Eddie had slowed down to avoid meeting him here. Or stopped somewhere along the way. Then Eddie appeared but instead of coming down the side street he continued straight along the avenue. As if he was returning to Saint Genevieve.

Rico wondered if Eddie was going to pray. Seemed like something Brother Eddie might do. After having a new asshole reamed for him.

Rico watched Eddie disappear past the corner of the church. He had come and gone without a glance in Rico’s direction. Which Rico found infuriating.

“Fuck you, Eddie Mendez.”

He watched the corner. Eddie did not reappear.

“And fuck you, Gene Kinney.”

That one hurt to say. But he didn’t take it back.

“And fuck me while we’re at it. Fuck the lot of us. Since we’re a sorry bunch of fuckers who are all fucked anyway. Gene, you poor bastard, right now you’re the most fucked. But don’t worry, not for long, my friend. Eddie and I will be there with you soon enough. Then we’ll all be a bunch of dead goddamn sorry motherfuckers.”

Rico waited for he didn’t know what. For Eddie to pop his head around the corner. For Gene to rise from the dead. When nothing happened he fell into his car and slammed the door.

### 17

There was no reason to go where he went. All those many years ago when he worked there the place only served breakfast and lunch. Like all the other downtown places they catered to the business crowd. Afterhours trade didn’t exist in the business district. So there was no reason to believe the place was still there or open for dinner.

But Rico wasn’t making his decisions based on reason and fact.

And things had changed. The business district had died in the years right after Rico left and was just now coming back to life. The place where he had served clerks and secretaries and businessmen and government officials during the working day was what now passed for a hip retro joint in a place as unhip as Los Vados. Rico hit the brakes when he rounded the corner and saw the sign. In florid gold neon script paled by the gray dusk coming down beneath the gray skies he read—

La Niña de Oro

The same name as when he worked here. Apparently still up and running after all these years? But he had never seen that sign before.

Everyone translated the name as The Golden Girl. With the sole exception being the owner. Who insisted the proper translation was The Girl of Gold. Because that was the name of a ship that brought one of her ancestors to the New World. A swashbuckler who fled Spain after an affair with a royal wife. When she offered this explanation people nodded. Sometimes they said *ah!* As if no more need be said.

No one ever said *what?*

Rico wanted to. He had wanted to stop the owner and request clarification. But he was young and unsure and everyone else seemed to know what she meant and he did not want to seem the fool.

A horn bleated behind him. He worked the pedals and gears and got the car rolling again. Worked them some more when he found a place to park. In the spot right outside the familiar glass door.

Rico stood on the sidewalk looking up at the sign. There was no point in putting neon on a daytime joint. At best it would be switched on for an hour or so in the morning. When the early risers filed in for breakfast or coffee. Waste of money to buy such a sign back when he was on the staff.

He stepped in through the familiar glass door beneath the unfamiliar sign and found inside the counter still remained but everything else was new. The booths were gone. Vintage chromed tables and chairs filled the floor but they weren’t the ones from back in his day. The walls had been stripped of their pinstriped pink paper. Which Rico had hated when he worked here but was now disappointed to see gone. The walls were painted a pale blue that he did not consider much of an improvement.

A young Anglo girl called out to him. She had a nose ring and a tattoo of a rose on her shoulder and wore blue jeans and was spilling out of her blouse.

“Sit anywhere you like,” she said.

He heard Texas in her enunciation. He took a table in the front. The girl brought a menu. She smiled and pointed at a chalkboard behind the counter.

“Specials are on the board.”

She handed Rico the menu. He smiled and took it. Then used it to gesture toward the door.

“The sign. Outside.”

“Isn’t it great? The owners found it in the basement. It was ironic love at first sight. They changed the name of the place so they could use it.”

Rico nodded.

“I see.”

The waitress smiled again. She remained standing over him. She lowered one shoulder and her breasts shifted beneath her blouse. Too much of one became obvious. Her smile became a little daring. Her voice went lower—

“Sharp dresser.”

Rico glanced down at his suit. And saw a way out.

“Oh this old thing. I was just at a funeral. My oldest friend passed on. Poor dear. He had been in the home for quite some time.”

He thought the *poor dear* was inspired. Being a well-groomed pretty man made this an easy sell. But he liked a closer.

He watched her face turn into mud. Then slowly reform.

Her voice was all honey—

“I am so sorry for your loss.”

She spun on her heel. Rico watched her go and wondered if she just naturally moved that way or was always working it.

She was way too young. Not just for him. Just *way* too young. He doubted she was out of high school. And if she was out he doubted she had a diploma.

He remembered the men he grew up around. The kind who would look at a girl dressed and behaving like this one and see that as license to take her. He felt ill on her behalf.

“Fast living,” Rico said.

And wondered why he said it. Why he was talking to himself.

“So shut up already,” he said.

### 18

Green chile chicken enchiladas that were bland and runny. Any decent cook would have been ashamed to serve them. The head cook who worked here back in Rico’s day would have thrown them in the trash. And his beer wasn’t cold enough.

While he ate Rico considered the neon sign. Which somehow wound up down in the basement. He remembered that the owner talked about opening for dinner. But kept talking herself out of it. He wondered if after he left she finally talked herself into it. And that proved to be her undoing. That despite consistently good food and service she could not draw enough business into downtown for dinner. Which would require becoming a destination instead of a convenience.

She was a good woman. And had taught him a lot. He should have stayed in touch. And not just so he would know how her grand neon wound up below ground. Or so he could finally ask why her alternative translation of her restaurant’s name was explained by it being taken from an historical ship.

But he had put this place and the woman who owned it behind him when he left. And he doubted all these years later that she was still alive. She was an older woman when he met her. He looked around at the place where he had worked for her and wondered what the hell he was doing back here.

Then he remembered what the hell he was doing back here. And wished he had one more chance to talk with Gene. They hadn’t seen each other in close to a year. Rico was due for another visit. Then he got the call from Eddie.

Then Rico wondered if Eddie Mendez was full of shit. If his entire story was one big stinking lie. And not just parts of it. He almost wanted to believe that was true.

But Rico never heard Eddie was a liar back in high school. When someone lied too much in Los Vados everyone knew. And the liars he knew started lying when they were kids. The lying could grow worse as they grew up. But in his experience lying adults had been lying children. Which made sense to him. That dishonesty was a defect rooted in childhood. And in childishness.

And then there was Gene. He told Rico that Eddie was a good man. A bit of a sad sack maybe. But decent and trustworthy. Rico knew Eddie had made Gene’s dying years much better than they might have been. If Eddie had been full of shit Gene would have hated him. He never would have tolerated Eddie’s company.

Rico gave up when his plate was half full. None of what was wrong with it could be blamed on the waitress. So she received a generous tip he hoped she would spend on more modest clothing. He went back out the familiar glass door and stood beneath the unfamiliar neon sign. Enough darkness had fallen to make the script pop. He admired the workmanship.

Then Rico got back in his car and went back out into his hometown. Put a few blocks behind him before he asked himself where he was going. Not back to the motel. Too early for sleep. Too early to wait around for sleep. Too early to begin staring at the television before cursing his lack of sleep.

His hands and feet kept working the machinery. Taking him somewhere. Then he crossed one of the north-south boulevards and became aware of the destination he had somehow chosen.

Where else to go?

Back to where it all started.

His old neighborhood. Where he grew up and grew discouraged and then disgusted and was coming up on disaffected when he finally got the hell out.

The old neighborhood had been dusty and barren when he lived here. Out on the edge of town. Almost as many coyotes as there had been people. Now it was crowded and trashed. Gang tags and Mexican flags. He passed a burnt-out sedan on the side of the road.

He came to the intersection where Gene’s gas station used to be. Idled at the stoplight and couldn’t tell if the payday loans joint where the station had been was still in business. The darkness inside seemed more than just lights out at the end of the day.

Gene Kinney’s Sinclair Service Station. With the dinosaur on the sign. Where Guillermo Lupe became a mechanic. And his younger brother Rico learned he would never become a mechanic.

He didn’t expect to still find it here. He knew the station was long gone. Gene called him when it was bulldozed. Not long after he went into the home. Said he called Rico because he needed to bitch at someone who would actually give a flying fuck.

### 19

He went up the hill on instinct. Feeling his way back. He didn’t remember street names because back then there weren’t any street signs out this far. Just a grid of dirt lanes climbing up the hillside. You gave directions using the number of streets. Three up the hill and four over. The only street name anyone knew was the one they lived on because they knew their own address.

He found his turn. Even paved he was sure of it. But once he turned he was lost. Nothing looked familiar. And it was dark now. He had to rely on what his headlights revealed. Then they revealed enough by showing him the fire hydrant. Which went in the year before he left.

He pulled to a stop. Sat staring at where his house should have been. Beyond the hydrant there was nothing. He cut the wheel and rolled forward and his headlights didn’t hit anything but dirt till they reached the next lot over. Where they fell on the tail end of an RV and most of a garage.

He pulled forward and parked on the dirt. Sat with the engine idling and his lights now full on the RV. Then cut his lights and his engine and reached for the glovebox. He was going to get his flashlight. He stopped when he pictured how suspicious that would look. A flashlight bobbing around out here in the dark on an empty lot.

Then he remembered how his old neighborhood had changed. The gang tags he saw down the hill.

I could bury a body out here and no one would give a shit.

He got his flashlight. Then used it to examine the fire hydrant. Which looked plenty old enough to be the same one. His doubts about having the right lot faded. This had to be it.

He assumed if he poked the light around where he guessed his house had been something would present itself. That did not happen. So he began methodically covering ground while he swept the light before him. And found a corner post. From there traced the outline of his childhood home.

He was shocked by how small it was. And he had known that it was small. But the casita he lived in now all by himself was larger. He had believed they were roughly comparable. If anything he had thought this place might be slightly bigger. But definitely not.

Much had happened in that tiny house. And now it was gone. And had been gone for a good while judging by how little remained of it to prove the little house ever existed.

### 20

He wasn’t ready for the full moon. But the clouds parted and there she was. Gigantically silver-white. Imperiously claiming dominion over the entire sky. Rico stared as if witnessing the most fantastical of manifestations.

“Where the hell did you come from?”

The moon offered no response.

To do so was beneath her.

He watched the moon inch upward. Measured the gap that grew between her and the horizon. He became aware that he was cold. Not all at once. In small increments. First his hands. Then his feet. But he wasn’t ready to leave. So he got moving again. Warmed himself up wandering around while stealing glances at the rising moon.

He arrived at the back of the lot. Turned his flashlight on and ran it across the ground. Thought he could see the outline of where their garden had been. Remembered sitting beside their tomato patch with his father. In the evening a few days after Guillermo died. They could hear Pilar crying inside the house.

He turned his light off and looked up at the moon.

“But that was many moons ago.”

He ached with how profoundly she was not amused.

Rico asked the moon what was wrong with his family. Why his parents were so ill-fated. Struggling and suffering only to die. Like a chipped plate half-filled with stale beans that gets dropped into the dirt and finally broken. Dead when still younger than Rico was now.

He pointed at where their house had been.

“Look at their home! That’s it. Right there. That’s all that’s left. Just a stain on the earth where their house used to be. That was what they worked so hard for. They broke themselves getting it. And had to hang on by their fingernails. Gone! Wiped off the face of the earth. Like it was never here. Like they were never here. Like they were cursed and displeasing to God. Why? What for? What did they ever do? What could they have ever done? A couple of poor fools without a chance in hell. What could they have done that was so bad they had to be completely eliminated? Didn’t they pay already, every single day, the way they suffered? Weren’t their lives hard enough? Wasn’t killing them enough? What made them so bad that everything about them and their lives had to mean nothing?”

Rico pointed up at the moon.

“I bet you would yawn if you could. You’re so goddamn bored of hearing shit like this.”

A breeze chilled him. He put his hand down. Stared at the moon and for an instant he hated her.

Her indifference was crushing.

He turned away from her. Put his flashlight back on. Sent its beam flickering over the earth where their house had been. Turned the light off again.

And asked himself if his parents were dead because of him. He knew they would have lived longer, might even still be alive, if Guillermo had been here to look after them. If the draft board had sent someone else off to the war. He couldn’t say what would have happened if Guillermo had gone but come home again. That depended on how much of his brother died over there. And what parts were the ones that survived.

But what if he had taken his brother’s place as their parents’ caretaker?

Rico turned back to the moon.

“He told me to leave. Not to try and take care of them. He said he tried and it didn’t work.”

By this the moon was amused. He could feel it.

He raised both hands to implore her—

“Guillermo knew he was going to die. Eddie Mendez told me. I think he knew before he left. I knew before he left. So it’s the same as I told Eddie. You don’t ignore a dying man’s wish.”

The moon wanted to laugh.

To laugh so hard the whole sky would shake.

Rico put his hands down and scowled at her.

“What do you know.”

This moon, she had no mercy.

This moon told him what she knew—

You’re right about your brother. He knew he was going to his death when he left Los Vados. And he was out of his mind with knowing it. When you left here and left your parents behind, you didn’t obey a dying man’s wish. You did what a crazy man told you to do.

So don’t act surprised at how things worked out. Listen to a crazy man and you get nothing. Which is exactly what you have. Nothing. You’re alone and you’re heartbroken. Which you could have done right here in Los Vados. If you were going to leave you should have really left. Put everything about this place completely behind you. Do like you know your brother wanted and made a real life for yourself. One full of love and meaning.

~What have you done with your life, mi hermanito?~

Go on. He’s asking you. Tell your brother what you’ve done.

No? You have no answer for Guillermo?

Then allow me—

Nothing. You’ve done nothing. Absolutely nothing.

For your brother’s sake. To give meaning to all he sacrificed.

You should have done something with your life.

Instead your life is worthless.

And you know it.

### 21

A train whistle came up the valley. Sounding to Rico just as lonesome as it possibly could. While the echoes faded his surroundings slid into darkness. A cloud was moving over the terrible unforgiving moon. Just as the moonlight vanished the whistle came again. Making the plunge into darkness all the more haunting. This second whistle rattled Rico’s spine and shattered his nerves. His pulse throbbed in his throat making the artery jump painfully.

At the third whistle he covered his ears. But even muted it was devastating. Because this whistle took him back to when he was driving away from the train station after he left his brother there. He had heard a whistle coming up the valley then and knew this arriving train was the one that would start Guillermo on his long journey to the war that would kill him. Rico had known at that moment with absolute certainty that his brother would die.

He had cried at knowing this. Driving home in his brother’s beautiful long red convertible. Alone in that car for the first time. The one he had kept with him all these years and was now parked over at the edge of the lot. The empty lot where his childhood home had stood. The home he shared with his brother and had been returning to when he knew his brother would die. The home that was gone in every way imaginable.

He remembered those old tears and told his young self to cry more. That he hadn’t cried enough. That he should cry his heart out for all the pain that was coming at him. Because now Rico had no tears to be wept. He couldn’t allow himself any. He was too disgusted with his idiot self to weep at his many-layered grief. He didn’t feel entitled.

“I messed it all up.”

He should have stayed. Done the right thing and taken care of his foolish parents. Who could never catch a break. And were lost without help. Instead he was selfish and wasted his life pouring drinks and sleeping with too many women. And what was he left with to show for himself? A bar he was in the process of ruining. Because he was sick of running it. Because he was sick of everything his life was made of. The darkened room and the emptied bottles and the soiled glasses and the fouled toilets. The people who came and went and spewed their problems out before him. The women he slept with and grew sick of and was glad to see gone.

But if he had stayed. He knew what that life would have been. He had seen it in flashes as the years went past. When he came back here and only wanted to be gone again. When he had dreams that pushed him around his lonely bed and woke him up before dawn.

In Los Vados he would have married. Out of desperation. There was no other path. He knew that in his bones. And marrying desperately he would have married badly. In their unhappiness he and his wife would have made a mess of their marriage. Like so many he had seen grow increasingly broken in this place since he fled from here.

But maybe that would have been better. How was he to know? At least he wouldn’t have wound up alone. He would probably have children and by now grandchildren. Maybe they would have done better than him. Maybe one or two of them would have gotten it right. And he could look on what they did with their lives and have the satisfaction of being part of their success. Which would be something. And anything was more than nothing. Which was what he had now. Nothing he could a grip on. His life was a ghost slipping through his fingers.

Maybe he had done everything wrong.

The coldness of that thought poured down on him. And in the midst of that chilling flood the clouds parted. Or maybe the bullying moon pushed them aside. Either way there she was again. Not quite so lordly now. Smaller. Less imperious and less threatening. Maybe this moon would be different.

He asked this moon why his love had come and gone. He told the moon how everything had seemed right when they connected. That finding her had meant he made the right choices across the far too many years. That through his choices he had constructed his thread in the unlikely web of events that had improbably brought them together. And that their being together was indisputably and impeccably correct. Like peering into a crystal and feeling sharply in your heart that yes this thing before me is precisely as it should be.

And now everything was wrong. Brutally cruelly cosmologically wrong.

But poor Rico was mistaken about this moon.

She was no different than the one before.

This uncaring moon said to him with her enormous silence—

You don’t even know her.

This one you think you love.

Rico knew that was a lie. He knew the truth was incomprehensible but still no less the truth. He knew he had never known anyone better. And could never love anyone half as much.

He told the moon these things.

Her uncaring filled the entire universe.

But he ignored her immeasurable disinterest.

He spread his arms and implored her—

“What should I do now?”

The moon wanted to roll her vast eyes and turn away from him.

But she was stuck up there in the sky with his irksome questions.

The moon sighed.

So go get her then.

This woman you barely know that you’re so certain you’re in love with.

Go get her and stop whining about it.

Rico raised his hands to the pitiless moon.

“I tried. She won’t have me.”

He did not expect an answer. There was no reason to expect an answer. This was the unsolvable problem that was killing him. No answer had come before and he was certain none would arrive now. Instead of hoping for an answer he was wondering when he would die. Since that seemed to be his only hope for escape from this torment. This idiotic misery that only an idiot like himself could ever become stuck in.

So he was unprepared. When the answer came. Which did not come from the moon. Or from anywhere up in the sky. He heard the answer down here on earth. But not here on earth. And not inside his own head. He thought the voice came from directly behind him. Maybe a few feet away. But maybe a mile away. Which meant he actually couldn’t say where the answer came from. But he knew the voice that spoke the answer. Even though he hadn’t heard that voice in decades.

Rico heard Guillermo say—

Try again.

## Pillars of Heaven

### 1

Rico could not find an advertisement for La Fuente Azul. He refolded his newspaper and put it down on the table and poured himself a cup of coffee. Which he drank staring down at the closed newspaper. When he had emptied his cup he refilled it and resumed staring. Then put the cup down on the counter beside the coffee maker and reached for the newspaper again and returned to the Arts & Leisure section.

Now he looked for Los Corchos Rojos booked somewhere other than La Fuente Azul. Again he found nothing. He finished his second cup and poured a third and drank it leaning against the counter while he contemplated practical matters. The bills on his desk waiting to be paid. The floor beneath his feet that needed mopping. The cobwebs that dangled over his head.

He looked up at the brown webs and hated them. Where did the damn things come from? They were always grimy and always spider-less. Never any spiders in them or lurking nearby. Or any bug corpses dangling within them. If they weren’t for killing bugs what business did they have just showing up and making a mess out of his ceiling?

He hissed at the cobwebs. Made his breath slide out through clenched teeth. He raised his cup and emptied it and set it down beside the sink. Then he stared at the newspaper. And considered the implications of what he did not find within it.

Maybe Los Corchos Rojos were taking some time off.

Maybe they had gone on tour.

Maybe they had broken up. Bands broke up all the time. Even bands who were doing well.

Maybe they parted ways with La Fuente Azul. Perhaps a dispute arose over how much they should be paid. Given the crowds they were drawing they might try to renegotiate their compensation.

If they parted company with their usual employer maybe they hadn’t begun another regular gig yet. Everywhere else would already be booked for some period of time. Maybe for now they were taking private engagements.

Parties. Weddings.

*Weddings*.

Rico felt as if his heart had frozen solid within his chest.

### 2

He watched the clock while he cooked the breakfast he didn’t want and didn’t eat and let go cold before he scraped it into the trash. And while he washed the dishes he had dirtied for no reason and mopped the kitchen floor and used the vacuum to suck up those damned cobwebs. Finally he gave in and called at 9:15 even though he knew that was still way too early.

His phone was an old wall-mounted unit in the kitchen. He sat down at the table after he dialed and was surprised when someone answered. The woman at the other end confirmed he was calling too early—Luis Molina López, the Captain at La Fuente Azul, was not yet in. The woman volunteered that Señor López began his workday at 11:00 along with the rest of the staff.

From this response and her tone Rico inferred that the woman considered the hour of this call to be unreasonable. He thanked her before he risked asking if she knew when Los Corchos Rojos would perform again. The woman replied that she did not. Then the line clicked and went dead.

Apparently that was all from him the woman would tolerate. Rico returned the handset to its cradle and looked at the clock. He told himself two more hours wouldn’t kill him. And set 11:15 as the time when he would try again. To ensure the other staff had arrived and begun their duties. And hoped someone other than the woman he had just spoken with would answer.

He made himself busy again. And resumed watching the clock again. His patience expired at 11:10. He was greatly relieved to hear—

“Good morning and thank you for calling La Fuente Azul. This is Luis speaking. How may I assist you?”

“Hello, Luis. This is Rico Lupe. I hope you might remember me.”

“Of course, Señor Lupe. It’s a pleasure to hear from you. How may I be of assistance?”

“Los Corchos Rojos.”

“Unfortunately they are not on our schedule at the moment.”

“I was wondering about that. May I ask why?”

“I was told the bandleader has a medical issue. Apparently nothing too serious. But he is temporarily out of commission.”

Rico felt good warm blood flowing through his veins again. Replacing the ice water that had filled them previously.

“I see,” Rico said.

“That is what I understand.”

Rico frowned. The warm blood began cooling.

“Is there something else?”

“Not regarding Los Corchos Rojos.”

“Regarding Señorita Varga?”

“Yes.”

Ice was everywhere.

Luis cleared his throat.

“Perhaps you are aware that she is engaged.”

So at least she wasn’t already married. Which was the demon that had chased Rico across the morning. That the band’s performances had been suspended to accommodate their star’s wedding and honeymoon.

The ice began to thaw.

“Yes. I knew that.”

“I heard their plans have changed. That they will marry sooner than had been anticipated.”

A bitter wind came howling out of the north.

“How soon?”

“They haven’t set a date. But they hope by the end of the year.”

“The end of the year?”

“Yes.”

“But it’s already December.”

Luis was silent.

### 3

The first number Rico tried was answered in Spanish by a man who sounded old and extremely drunk. He let Rico say about four words before cursing at him and hanging up. Rico tried again and managed to calm the old man down enough to determine that he didn’t know anyone named Chela Varga. The old drunk added that he didn’t care to know anyone by that name either. Then launched into a diatribe detailing just how much he hated anyone and everyone named anything like that. This time Rico was the one who hung up.

The second number was answered in something resembling English by a young woman who sounded exceptionally Texan. She also did not know anyone named Chela Varga. But, she explained, she’d only had her present number for a month or so, ever since she arrived from Houston. Well not *exactly* Houston, but close enough, and since no one here had ever heard of the town she actually came from? It was *just* so much *easier* to say *Houston*.

The third number Rico tried was disconnected. There weren’t any other numbers listed that he thought might belong to Chela. He could try all of the Vargas. But if any of the listed numbers happened to belong to one of her relatives, he would then have to provide an explanation, to a family member, for why he wanted to contact Chela. A woman who was soon to be married.

Instead he called Luis again. Who called the booking agent for La Fuente Azul and called back with the number for the bandleader of Los Corchos Rojos. Rico thanked him and tried the number.

And winced when he heard the outgoing message. The bandleader said he was having surgery today and wouldn’t be returning calls for at least a couple of days. As he listened to the man’s stately accent Rico remembered him from seeing the group perform. A little hefty with hair silvering at his temples and silver-framed spectacles and touches of silver in his beard. Rico pictured him in costume holding his violin while he recorded his message.

At the end the bandleader gave another number to call in case of emergency. Rico wasn’t prepared for that. He scrambled to write it down but had to call back and listen to the message again. Only once he had the number written down in front of him did Rico ask himself if his situation qualified. And decided that whatever anyone else might think, if ever in his life he had experienced a true emergency this was it.

After three rings Rico lost his nerve. He was about to hang up when a woman answered. Her “hello” sounded worried and distracted. Which told Rico he had just called the bandleader’s wife. And that he had no right to bother her.

“I’m sorry,” Rico said. “I must have the wrong number.”

“Who were you trying to reach?”

Rico hesitated.

“Miguel Armesto.”

The phone crackled. Her heard the woman’s voice muted.

The phone crackled again and a man came on.

“Hello?”

The same stately tone as his outgoing message.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, sir.”

“To whom am I speaking?”

“Rico Lupe. You don’t know me, sir.”

“Then how may I help you?”

“I’m trying to reach Chela Varga.”

“In regards to?”

Rico swallowed.

“A personal matter.”

Silence.

“I see.”

More silence.

“And what is it you want from me?”

“I was hoping you would give her a message.”

“What message?”

“Just my name and number and a request that she call.”

Maybe three full seconds of silence. Rico was trying to think of something he could add that might convince Señor Armesto to help him when in that stately voice the Señor said—

“I’m sorry. What was your name again?”

### 4

Rico was scrubbing his bathroom sink when the telephone rang. He had just turned on the tap to rinse away the cleanser. He left the water running and ran to the kitchen. He snatched the handset with a dripping hand.

“Hello?”

“Señor Lupe?”

A woman’s voice. But not the woman he wanted.

“Yes?”

“We spoke before? When you called for my husband.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“He tried to deliver your message. But there was no answer.”

Rico told himself to say something. That did not happen.

Señora Armesto tried to help him—

“Maybe she forgot to charge her phone.”

“Right. Yes.”

“He’s going into surgery. My husband.”

“Of course. How thoughtless of me. I’m very sorry to bother you.”

“It’s nothing. Chela should be here later. In a couple of hours. I can give her your message then.”

“Thank you. I would really appreciate that.”

“Of course. I have to go now.”

“My best wishes for your husband.”

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

The line clicked and Señora Armesto was gone. Rico took the handset from his ear and stared at it. He didn’t move till the line clicked again and the little speaker leaked out a dial tone. Rico said to the electronic hum—

“Poor woman must think I’m one crazy asshole.”

He put the handset back in its cradle. Then heard the water still running in the bathroom sink. He walked slowly toward the sound and looked down at the splashing water before he reached for the faucet and stopped the flow. As the last of the water span down the drain he said—

“But shouldn’t the call have gone to voicemail?”

He sighed deeply.

“If her phone wasn’t charged?”

He watched a fat droplet roll down the white porcelain and disappear.

Then turned to the bathtub and resumed his scrubbing.

An hour passed. Then another.

The phone did not ring.

### 5

His casita was spotless when he pulled the front door shut behind him. The couple of hours Señora Armesto mentioned had now passed. If Chela kept her appointment she would be at the hospital. And if Señora Armesto remembered her promise Chela would know, or would soon find out, that Rico was trying to reach her.

But maybe Señora Armesto had forgotten. Who could blame her? Or hadn’t found a chance to pass his message. Maybe the surgery had gone poorly and Rico’s request had been buried by more urgent matters.

If he only knew which hospital. Then he could find Chela there. But the only person he knew to ask was Señora Armesto. And bothering her again was out of the question. He had already troubled the Armestos far more than he was comfortable with.

He could call every hospital and ask. But would they tell him? Or would he have to claim a bogus connection to the patient Miguel Armesto in order to satisfy the hospital personnel that his request was legitimate? A request that was in fact not only of questionable morality but could conceivably even be criminal. Weren’t their federal laws to protect the privacy of an individual’s medical information? Wouldn’t that apply to whether someone was having surgery at a given facility?

He pulled out his keys to unlock the back door of the bar. They slipped from his hand and dropped onto the ground. He stared down at them. His back hurt when he bent over. His keys escaped his fingers and he had to reach for them a second time. Then he tried the wrong key. Which he hadn’t done in years. Finally he got the door unlocked and went through the storeroom with his head down. He only raised it again when he was standing behind the bar.

He pictured himself driving around to the local hospitals. Circling through the parking lots, looking for Chela’s car. Which he had seen only once. And in the dark of an overwhelming midnight. When every iota of his attention was focused on the woman driving the car and not on the car itself.

If he could find her car—which would be a small miracle—then he would have to wait beside it. For however long it took her to appear. And when she did his presence would most likely be unwelcome. Ambushing her like that. How desperate and unhinged that would seem.

And besides he might be looking for the wrong car. Since Chela might not have driven herself to the hospital. Not if her fiancé was worth a damn.

### 6

Rico watched a middle-aged Spanish man raise a hand to cover a yawn and thought that everyone in here was too quiet. Not to mention overly clean and well-dressed. There was an absence of loud groups of men dirtied by their labors. He told himself that was what bothered him. And tried to pretend he was satisfied with this explanation.

Then Rico admitted there was nothing remarkable about a slow quiet start. Especially in the middle of the week. That what was wrong today was not the absence of tables full of boisterous grunts. That something else he hadn’t identified was disturbing him. He looked around for what it was and couldn’t find it.

Then he imagined how a few tables full of grunts would change this room. One alone might not do it. But two or three probably would. These subdued office workers wouldn’t linger over their drinks like they did now. Instead they would drink up and be gone. If those louds tables were loud enough then some would leave their drinks unfinished and hurry out of here.

Rico decided the present mood better suited his own. So he stopped asking himself why something seemed wrong and turned his attention to what needed doing. Went to the sink and washed the glasses waiting there. Wiped down the trays and stacked them beneath the bar. Crossed the room to the galvanized switchbox beside the door and turned on his sign.

He hesitated before he pulled the door open and stepped outside. Where he claimed that need for fresh air which had become so persistent lately as his excuse for abandoning his station. Although he had stood out back getting fresh air for a good five minutes not more than forty minutes ago. His need for another dose had not yet become all that compelling. And lately he had been seeking an inordinate amount of fresh air during working hours. A truth that made him frown when he confronted it.

And since he didn’t want to confront this concern he replaced it with one that was more tolerable. He listened to the hum emanating from his sign. Which always hummed noticeably when he first turned it on. But maybe that hum was louder and lasted longer than it used to. And maybe there was a higher whining resonance creeping in. Which could mean the neon apparatus would require a new part soon. And if he had to guess he would expect this part to be called a transformer. Since everything that hummed seemed to be called a transformer. He told himself he should call the guy who made his sign and get him out here to have a look.

Then Rico remembered that the guy who made his sign was dead. From lung cancer four years ago. A new guy owned the sign business now. A guy Rico did not like nearly as much as the one who had died. In fact he really didn’t like the new guy at all. Maybe calling him could wait till the sign stopped working. A few days without a functioning sign would be no big deal. Or maybe it was time to find another new sign guy. But that wasn’t what Rico wanted. What he wanted was for the guy who made his sign to not be dead.

Rico loved his sign. Even on the worst days his bar had given him he had never resented or regretted this glorious piece of craftsmanship. Not because his name was on it. But because he loved neon in general and this neon in particular. The execution was flawless. There was an artistry and a balance to the design that seemed sacred. It always had and he was certain it always would. His love of his sign had slowly become a constant in a world he felt was changing in ways he didn’t like and didn’t understand and couldn’t do a damn thing about.

Rico sighed and lowered his eyes. The shadows had grown up around him as the evening darkened. He blinked and rubbed his eyes and blinked again. The shadows did not yield. The humming still seemed too loud. Rico conceded that he had no choice but to find a new sign guy now that he had admitted he really couldn’t stand the one who had taken over from the dead man.

He shook his head up at his sign.

Why couldn’t that asshole be the one who died?

### 7

He was at the cash register ringing up bills. One hand over the keys and the other holding a smeared check he couldn’t read. Feeling like he was sliding down into water that wanted to drown him. Hating this moment and all the other moments that still stretched out ahead of him between now and when this interminable shift would finally end. And yet also fearing the moment when the room would be empty and he would be alone in it.

Which was why at first he welcomed the voice that came at him. Demanding his attention. Pulling him up from the poisonous well of these thoughts. Out of the hole that was boring deep inside his head. Which was an increasingly dangerous space to occupy.

So when a man’s voice called out—

“Hey Rico!”

—he only heard the imperative being thrown at him. He didn’t identify the voice that had thrown it. Or detect the snidely familiar tone employed in the throwing.

But then that tone kicked Rico in the face. He turned cold all over and his heart started to pound. Now he knew who had shouted his name. When he raised his head his eyes went straight to the shouter. Who wore a smile that made Rico want to peel off the face that wore it.

Rico remembered from checking his ID that this jackass was twenty-five years old. Old enough to be a man but nowhere near becoming one. A juvenile Anglo jerkoff who would always be a juvenile Anglo jerkoff.

Rico knew what was coming next. This insufferable little shitbitch had now downed enough booze to really let his shitbitch shine. He was going to order another round for him and his pals and be the biggest dickhead he possibly could doing it. Rico should have cut them off an hour ago. Dealt with their bullshit before it got out of hand. But his head had been too far up his own ass for him to do his job.

The Anglo jerkoff raised his empty glass. Grinned as he waggled the glass back and forth. Lots of gleaming white teeth in that insinuating sneer. Which Rico consumingly hated. Completely and utterly despised. He hated that grin and those teeth with everything he had. They required smashing.

Rico told himself—

This does not end well.

And started to pull back. Almost gained control over his mounting temper.

But then the Anglo asshole waggled both his head and his glass. While still wearing that detestable sneer. And Rico pictured his fist smashing into that sneer. He liked that image very much.

Then the Anglo fuckhead whined. In a cartoonish Mexican accent—

“¡Más margaritas por favor!”

His jackass friends cackled. The ringleader kept his sneer pointed at Rico. Then nodded once before he threw his head back and made that same godawful hacking sound Rico had heard and hated earlier.

He let them have their laugh. Waited till they were quieted down and all looking at him again. Stupid smiles on their idiot faces. Eager to see how the beaner bartender would react.

Rico raised his long arm over the bar. Extended a long finger and pointed it at the ringleader. Then Rico said—

“Hey asshole.”

He didn’t say it very loud. But the room fell silent. Every head turned toward him. Rico jabbed his finger when he said—

“Take your shitbag friends.”

He swept his arm across the room. Heads ducked along the way. As if that pointing finger was the barrel of a gun.

His arm stopped when he was pointing at the door. Rico nodded once at the ringleader. Then jabbed his finger at the door when he said—

“And get your sorry asses the fuck out of my bar.”

### 8

Black silhouettes moved against the lights glaring from the squad cars. There were two of them parked at the edge of the lot facing toward each other. One on each side of Rico’s sign blocking exit and entry. White headlights glaring and the red and blue roof lights swirling. While radios crackled and voices overlapped. A man spoke and a woman told him to shut up.

Rico’s sign glowed like a beacon of serenity above the chaos. Drawing his eyes and thoughts up and away. He couldn’t hear the hum over all the noise made by the police and the young men they were arresting. Maybe the hum wasn’t so bad after all. Maybe he only imagined that the hum had grown louder. Despite having convinced himself otherwise.

As if in response the sign flickered.

Rico’s heart skipped a beat. He had never seen his sign flicker when it was fully operational. Only when he had just turned it on or turned it off. That flicker felt like a bad omen. He consciously decided to stop looking at his sign and to stop seeing portents. Then stared at his sign for a moment longer before pushing his eyes downward.

The scene before him hadn’t changed much. The same cutout figures made the same cutout motions. He saw a puff of breath from one of the cutout policemen and realized he was cold. He thought maybe he should go inside and start cleaning up. Since he wasn’t doing anything useful out here.

One of the silhouettes started toward him. Grew in two dimensions before popping into three as it emerged from the flattening light and shadow. Now he could see this was a young woman in uniform. And he knew there was only one woman in the Los Huertos Police Department.

“Sorry about this, Becca.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

She pointed at his right hand. Which was wrapped in a bar mop. The white cotton was stained red.

“What happened there?”

“Blocked a glass someone tossed.”

“Is it bad?”

Rico shook his head.

“Not as bad as it looks.”

“You need stitches?”

“No. I’m fine. Thanks.”

“So what the hell happened?”

Good question. What the hell have you done?

Rico told Officer Rebecca Gomez that he had with perhaps not the greatest diplomacy informed the five young Anglo men that their presence was no longer welcome in his bar. And that when the five young Anglo men refused his invitation to depart the six young Spanish men volunteered to escort them from the premises. In response to which one of the young Anglo men punched one of the young Spanish men.

After that there was general mayhem. During which the table where the five young Anglo men had been seated was flipped over. Along with most of the chairs. One of which Rico had seen broken on someone’s back. Just before that glass was thrown at his head and shattered when he deflected it.

“Ooo-eee,” Officer Rebecca Gomez said.

She clicked her tongue and shook her head.

“Sounds like things got out of hand quick.”

“Yeah. They sure did.”

“I can’t remember the last time something like this happened here.”

Rico rolled his head forward. Looked down at his boots. Took a deep breath.

Brought his head back up again.

“That would be because it never has.”

“Never this bad, or—?”

“Nothing like this. Not even close.”

“You telling me you’ve never had a single fight?”

“Just a scuffle now and then. That’s it.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. Ask your chief.”

“Wow.”

Officer Gomez canted her head to one side.

“So what was different about tonight?”

Everything.

Nothing.

Deep sigh.

Me.

Rico shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

“Never had a fight in how many years?”

“Twenty-five.”

Rico frowned. That number seemed to making the rounds tonight. He knew it had been in his head earlier but couldn’t remember why.

“Something wrong?” Officer Gomez said.

Rico shook his head. But he also kept frowning.

“No.”

Officer Gomez frowned back at him.

“You’re sure.”

“Yes.”

Rico remembered that the Anglo jackass was twenty-five.

Just as old as Rico’s bar.

He made himself smile.

“I’m sure. Everything’s fine.”

### 9

On his back in his rumpled bed Rico heard his newspaper thump onto the ground. He listened to the white Dodge pickup that delivered it move off up the lane. Pictured the older Spanish man sitting straight-backed behind the wheel. And wondered what became of the sunbaked Anglo woman in the rusted-out jeep with the menagerie of mutts piled in around her who used to come by at whatever time the mood seemed to strike her. She had been replaced by the older Spanish man in the white Dodge who went by at the crack of dawn a few months ago. He doubted whatever caused this transition was beneficial for the sunbaked Anglo woman. Or by extension her mutts. He wished them all well. They had been a reliably unreliable fixture in the local routine for many years.

He put coffee on. Splashed water on his face. Rinsed out his mouth. Used a comb to rake his hair. Pulled on clothes and a jacket and stepped outside.

Seeing his parking lot reminded him of what happened here last night. The police cars with their flashing lights. Silhouettes moving before him. Officer Rebecca Gomez respectfully choosing not to challenge his lie when he said nothing was wrong. He asked himself how he could have gotten this far into his morning before last night’s shitstorm came back to him.

“Fuck me,” was how he answered himself.

He retrieved his newspaper and carried it back inside. Where he hesitated for a moment before sliding it unopened into the trash. He sat at his table over a cup of coffee and tried to convince himself he was the kind of person who could show up at Chela’s wedding and object to the couple being joined in holy matrimony. And not the kind of person who would instead forever hold his peace. He remembered weddings he attended trying to imagine how that would unfold. But could not recall a priest actually saying those things. He decided that was probably because it only happened on TV and in movies. Or maybe just not at Catholic ceremonies.

Not that it mattered since he wasn’t going to do that anyway. And without Los Corchos Rojos currently booked anywhere—and the only way to reach Chela being through her hospitalized bandleader—or his poor wife—both of whom he definitely wasn’t going to bother anymore—

Rico decided the best possible outcome for him would be a brief marriage for Chela. Which he didn’t wish for her. And sure couldn’t count on.

He told himself he needed to face reality.

Then remembered hearing Guillermo’s voice down in Los Vados.

A chill went up his spine.

But the chill passed.

And nothing was changed by it.

### 10

Rico woke up sweating. Daylight filled the room. He thought this was a new morning and wondered what happened to the old one. Not to mention the day that should have come after it. Then he saw he was wearing his jacket. And beneath it was fully dressed. Shoes and all. He didn’t remember laying back down.

He stood up and peeled his jacket off and tossed it on the bed. His shirt was damp. Soaked at the arm pits and back of the neck. He took it off and threw it down beside his jacket.

His throat was dry. He went to the kitchen for water. His second cup of coffee was on the table. Untouched and cold. He checked the clock. He had slept away the rest of the morning. It was noon.

He gulped down two glasses of water and returned to his bedroom. Stripped naked and left his clothes piled on the bed. Went back through the kitchen to the bathroom. Ran the shower hot and got under it. Stood there and let the steaming water pour over him. He didn’t wash. Just stared and breathed. Slow deep regular breathing. Pull the air in. Hold it. Push the air out.

Then he started scrubbing. And while he scrubbed contemplated the disaster of the previous evening. Which definitely required him to reevaluate.

Pretty much everything was requiring him to reevaluate.

You need a plan. That’s the only way out of this mess.

Maybe it’s time to quit running a bar.

He had never intended to spend his life as a barkeep. And now here he was with most his life gone and still at it. A thought that was powerful enough to make him stop scrubbing and stand with the hot water streaming onto his back and lather covering his chest while he frowned at the tiled wall.

And while he was frowning and staring a peculiar and seemingly irrelevant memory surfaced and took hold wouldn’t let go. From the evening before. When he watched a middle-aged Spanish man raise a hand to cover a yawn. Right after Rico noticed his clientele was quieter than usual. Cleaner and better-dressed. He had felt something was off. What he hadn’t noticed at that moment when he was trying to determine what was bothering him was that the man he was watching was the only other Spanish person in the room. Just him and Rico. Everyone else was Anglo.

And that night he had his first fight. Started by an Anglo.

It had happened. The change had come.

Right under his nose while he thought he was watching.

The crowd yesterday evening wasn’t unusual—it was the *new* usual.

More Anglo than Spanish. More white collar than blue. All the changes going on around Los Huertos had finally swirled down into the middle of the old village and swept up his humble bar.

And he had looked right at it and hadn’t see it.

Rico resumed washing. Rinsed the soap off his chest and lathered up his arm pits for a second time. Couldn’t wash them too much after they pushed out all that sweat while he slept away the morning.

For years now he had told himself that when this time came he would sell his bar and move away. He always imagined that would mean moving up to Los Pilares. He hadn’t thought too much about what he might do up there. He had figured he would cross that bridge when he came to it. Well now all of sudden here was that damned bridge. How would he make a living if he sold his bar and moved up to Los Pilares?

And maybe first he should ask himself if he really wanted to do that. Just because he had idly daydreamed about it for all these years didn’t mean he actually wanted to do that now that he had to do something.

So he asked himself. Did he really want to leave his business and his friends and move up to the mountains? Especially his friends. Especially Chuy. And Chuy’s family. Who were effectively Rico’s family. He wouldn’t see much of them. Not matter how hard he tried.

Up at Los Pilares he didn’t know anybody.

And Chela Varga would be very far away.

Rico groaned and shook his head.

“Get real, man. She’s gonna be married.”

### 11

For the rest of his shower Rico scrubbed furiously. Every part of him was washed at least twice. Even his hair. And while he scrubbed and rescrubbed Rico resolved to make a change. To do something new with what was left of his life. While he still had some life left in him to do it with. After last night he had to consider that if he didn’t stop running his bar soon he was likely to run it into the ground. And himself along with it. He couldn’t keep standing there slinging drinks with Chela out there married to some other guy. He might as well dig out his old revolver and shoot himself in the head.

By the time Rico was clean—very much exceedingly clean—and had dried off and redressed in fresh clothes and had picked up the dirty clothes in his bedroom and poured out the cold coffee and made a fresh pot he had a plan. He reviewed and revised his plan while he cooked the breakfast that he ate at what was actually a late lunchtime and while he cleaned up the mess that he had made cooking and eating.

Then he got on the phone and got his plan started. He called his lawyer and his accountant and Luis Molina López.

His last call was to Chuy.

“I’m thinking about making some changes. So I might want you to build me a stage.”

“Okay. What happened last night?”

Rico saw should have anticipated this question. Of course word would spread quickly. But that wasn’t anything he wanted to talk about.

“I just asked you to build me a stage. You don’t want the job?”

“I won’t let you pay me so it’s not a job. Besides, you said might. You *might* want me to build you a stage.”

“I’m still working things out. Don’t you want to hear what I’ve got in mind?”

“Not as much as I want to know what happened last night. Since whatever happened last night is behind this.”

“Bust my balls why don’t you.”

“Whenever they need it.”

“How did you hear?”

“Terésa ran into Becca Gomez.”

“Yeah? Where was that.”

“Over at the store. Now quit your damned stalling and tell me what the hell happened before I come over there and beat it out of you.”

Rico was at a loss. He had no answer. Not even a bad one.

What the hell did happen last night?

And more to the point—

How the hell did you let that happen?

“You still there?” Chuy said.

“Yeah.”

“You okay?”

Rico almost lied and said he was fine.

Because he wanted to believe that he was fine.

“I will be.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Yeah. It isn’t.”

Rico sighed and closed his eyes.

“But it’s the best I’ve got.”

### 12

Rico locked his casita and put his bag in his car. He went into his storeroom and retrieved a carved wooden sign that he carried into the barroom and out the front door. He hung the sign from a hook on the black metal that he had installed for this purpose.

The sign depicted a man seated on the ground slumbering against a tree. On his head was a giant sombrero and in his hands was a fishing pole. Beneath the dozing fisherman it said “Fuimos de Pesca”.

Rico examined the napping Mexican while he remembered how very much Alma Galván had hated this sign. She was with him when he bought it. And demanded that he not. She indignantly insisted that it was a travesty against their people. Her sputtering outrage was what made him definitely want to buy it. He laughed at her while she fumed. Which added to her fury. All of which happened shortly before they stopped seeing each other.

For no reason he could explain Rico made a fist and rapped three times on the wooden sign. Then went back inside and locked the front door and exited through the storage room and locked the back door. He crossed the lot to his long red car and climbed in and turned north on Los Huertos Road.

While he drove Rico’s thoughts returned to Alma Galván. He noted that the first trip they made together was in this same car with the same destination. The roads between here and there had changed greatly since then. As had the long red convertible despite its pristine appearance. To keep it roadworthy and presentable innumerable parts had been replaced and the paint and chrome replenished and restored. Rico decided despite appearances the old Impala had changed more than he had.

But not as much as Alma.

Death was the biggest change you could make.

“Couldn’t have happened to a nicer girl.”

He regretted the words as he was saying them. Sure she had been a hell-bitch and their time together a horror show. But speaking ill of the dead was not to be undertaken lightly.

He snorted.

Undertaken lightly.

Alma would have rolled her eyes at that.

He stopped at a red light and sat there frowning. It struck him as odd to be preoccupied with Alma. Odd and unwanted. With the far more urgent and important things going on that he should be preoccupied with. And after her leaving him in peace for all these years.

Why was that she-devil haunting him now?

The light turned green and the car behind him immediately honked. Rico glared into his overhead mirror and took his time getting going again. He used his mirrors to track the car that honked and was glad to see it turn.

“That’s it,” Rico said. “I’ll go this way. And you go fuck yourself.”

So why was Alma on his mind today? It couldn’t be just because he was going to Los Pilares. He had made this trip a hundred times since they went together. And they only went together the one time.

Maybe because he needed a powerful distraction. Something with enough bite to help him ignore the enormous disaster that loomed before him. The impending marriage of Chela Varga. If he thought about that too much he would surely go off his head.

He knew that was a lot of it.

But also not all of it.

So why else might Alma be haunting him?

Then he remembered his disturbing encounter with her daughter. And saw that this trip to Los Pilares wasn’t just another return visit. This was the first time he had returned to Los Pilares since he learned that his inimitable and formidable ex-lover, the woman with whom he first visited Los Pilares, was now deceased.

That was something.

Reason enough for her to be active in his thoughts.

So he would let Alma Galván have her way.

*There’s no arguing with the dead*, Rico told himself.

### 13

Rico had come here to escape more times than he cared to admit. And more than he could count because all those escapes were not anything he cared to remember. Los Pilares del Cielo was his refuge of choice when he wanted to leave something behind. And that something had always been a woman.

But never *the* woman. That was a first.

Even if she wasn’t the first woman who had owned his heart.

But the first woman had owned it such a long time ago. Way back when he believed love was not only possible but preordained. That belief had defined his first lifetime. Which ended without his realization. One day he saw that he no longer believed love would find him. And couldn’t say when that change had occurred. Partway through what appeared to be a single lifetime that first version of him was replaced by this second. He knew life could do that to a person. He had seen it happen to others. Even those he considered stronger and wiser and saner than himself.

Which meant there was nothing remarkable in his transformation. It was just another common and torturous and solitarily endured metamorphosis in this difficult and bewildering world God had made for us to endure. And no more comprehensible or significant than any other.

But it did make Chela Varga a first in her own right. Since she was the first woman in his second life to own him heart and soul. When he felt that his being so owned was no longer possible. To be owned when you believe in it is one thing. To be owned when you do not is another. It makes being owned all that much more meaningful. And all that much more powerful. And all that much more painful.

Which was why this time Rico had come here not just to escape but to plan an escape. A contingency plan in case his main plan failed. For the time being he would attempt to remain in Los Huertos. Change things up there and see if he could hold fast. If that proved untenable, most likely because it would keep him too much in the vicinity of a married Chela Varga, he would retreat to Los Pilares. So for the first time in all his many years of coming here—all those many years spent dreaming that one day he would live here (but never doing anything to make that happen)—for the first time Rico had business reasons for being here.

Those business reasons brought him to the old resort district of the village built a century and some years ago. Where he parked his long red convertible under an ancient gnarled colossus of a cottonwood. And checked into a hotel that might over the course of the coming year become available for purchase.

### 14

The hotel was beautiful. But it needed work. Far too much of it. The price being floated had to descend considerably before anyone with a straight head would take it on. And the price was too high because the heads of the present owners were on crooked. Which meant it would be a long time before the price would become reasonable. Because that would only happen when the present owners had their heads realigned by impending insolvency.

Which made Rico sad. Because the owners were nice people. A couple of old hippies from Milwaukee. Who were only guilty of reaching too far and loving what they couldn’t afford. He felt dishonest not telling them why he was there. But he wasn’t supposed to know about their situation. He was only aware because his accountant had drinks with their accountant and things were shared that really shouldn’t have been.

Rico tried to avoid interacting with the owners. But they ran the place so there was no avoiding them. And no ignoring the financial strain that was eating at their relationship with this place. In his own raw state being around them was excruciating. He made a cursory and he hoped surreptitious inspection of the place out of a sense of duty to follow his plan. Then hid in his room for half an hour before sneaking past the desk and out the front door.

There was a restaurant directly across the street. Rico had known the owner about a decade ago. A man Rico worked for when he first arrived in the city. Who was born up here and had returned to run this place. And would stand Rico drinks when he came around. But that man was dead now. Which made Rico just another customer.

He sat at the corner of the bar facing toward the street. Two stools were on his right. Twelve were lined up ahead of him on the long side of the bar. Another three stools were down at the other end. A total of eighteen. He knew because he counted them. Which he did every time he came in here. Or sat at any bar anywhere. Years in the trade.

He ordered a beer and the bartender was prompt with it and the beer was icy cold. He took his time with his beer and tried to decide if he had an appetite.

And if moving up here was something he could do.

If it came to that.

If he needed this much distance from a married Chela Varga.

### 15

He was asking himself that very question when she came through the door. Plumbing the depths of his soul trying to divine if he could remain in the vicinity of Chela when she became the wife of another man. Since he was thinking about her so profoundly and intensely at that moment he naturally assumed his mind was playing tricks on him. Turning some woman who merely resembled Chela into the real thing.

But then she stopped and glanced around. And Rico was electrified. When she saw him she drew in her breath. Her eyes widened as her shoulders went back and her bosom was thrust forward. All of which was almost more than Rico could take. He thought he might pass out.

She hesitated for a moment. Then started toward him.

The sounds in the room became muffled. Each step she took seemed to require a good five minutes. Eventually she arrived and took the seat on his left. Across the corner of the bar. She took his hand into both of hers. His left hand, the one that was closest.

He waited for his heart to stop clobbering his ribs.

“What’re you doing here?”

“We’ll get to that. Just give me a minute.”

“How did you find me?”

Chela used her head to gesture toward the front of the restaurant. She kept her hands wrapped around his.

“I saw your car across the street.”

Rico nodded. How she came to be here so that his car being across the street could lead Chela into this place didn’t matter. That was enough for now.

She looked down at their hands while she spoke.

Chela told Rico that when they last saw each other, on that painful evening at La Fuente Azul, she had watched him walk away. And saw him stop and offer his coins to the young couple at the fountain. She was deeply moved by his act of kindness. That despite what he was suffering at that moment he could put his own pain aside to help these two young strangers make their time together more special.

In the days that followed she recalled this small but wonderful thing he had done. More than anything they said to each other. Slowly and reluctantly she was forced to admit that the man she was engaged to would never have done anything so selfless and decent and caring at that moment. And found herself wishing that instead of remaining rooted like a buried stone in her lonely seat beside the stage watching this special man disappear she had jumped to her feet and chased after him.

When she was finished telling him these things they were silent. Rico wanted to say something but his throat would not cooperate. The poor thing was closed tight as a drum.

Then Chela tapped on his ring finger. Used the tip of her index finger to make three soft beats on the segment before his first knuckle. Where a ring would go if he was wearing one.

“It still didn’t fit,” Chela said.

She enveloped Rico’s hand again.

“The jeweler kept checking my finger size and the ring size and peering at the ring and asking me to try again. Then he started muttering and apologizing. His hands were shaking. Such a nice old man. I felt terrible for him.”

Chela took a deep breath and sighed.

“I can ignore my own lying heart. That stupid thing has fooled me a hundred times. But seeing it like that.”

She pulled his hand up to her lips and kissed it.

Then looked down at it as she spoke.

“I felt like God was calling me an idiot.”

Rico felt free.

He smiled at Chela. Then he laughed.

Rico laughed so hard his stomach ached.

## La Herida

### 1

Chuy thought the ringing telephone meant his sister was back in jail. That she was calling once again to get bailed out in the middle of the night because that was her awful way. He imagined her standing before a pay phone that was mounted on a cinderblock wall. He watched her angry and drunken face while she shook her tangled head of greasy hair. He knew she wanted a cigarette. He was glad she couldn’t have one.

Then Chuy remembered his sister was dead.

Which meant he must be dreaming.

Then he was sitting upright as Terésa handed him the telephone.

“Señor Sandoval. I’m sorry to bother you. This is Officer Rebecca Gomez. With the village police.”

Chuy remembered when Rebecca Gomez was a twelve-year-old with pigtails and he almost hit her with his truck when she rode her bike out in front of him. He had to shake his head to make that go away.

“Yes?”

“I’m afraid there’s been an accident.”

Rebecca Gomez didn’t have to tell him which one. Which accident she referred to. She didn’t need to provide any details about what had happened. Who had been driving. Or where anyone was going.

Chuy already saw the accident.

Just like he saw his dead sister.

### 2

Maybe he had forgotten to turn on the sign. He remembered walking across the room toward the galvanized box mounted beside the front door with the intention of throwing the switch. But he didn’t recall arriving there and actually throwing it. Maybe he was standing here all alone like a fool while everyone who might want to turn in continued past thinking that Rico was still just gone away and his place was closed.

Chuy told himself he should go check the sign and see if it was on. But he remained behind the bar. Because maybe instead he should hear what the empty room was telling him. And get the hell out while he still could. Thank whatever forces were at work that provided him a chance to escape from his own bad idea.

Too late. The door was opening. Chuy thought he had been listening for cars pulling in. Apparently he had stopped doing that. He leaned forward trying not to dread what was about to happen. Who would be the first person he had to deal with? What he would he say to them?

His stomach dropped when the woman appeared. He had hoped he could start easy. With someone he knew. But he had never seen this woman before. And never wanted to again.

She was tiny and birdlike and Spanish. Late middle age. Expensively dressed. An oversized face full of exaggerated features. She paused as the door slid shut behind her. Raised her chin and turned her head slowly as she surveyed her surroundings. Arched an eyebrow and flared her nostrils.

She made Chuy angry just standing there.

Of all the people to send my way.

You give me this one?

She settled her eyes on him. Narrowed them and stared coldly. Then raised her chin higher as she continued forward. She stopped in front of him. But not standing at the bar like a normal person. She stood about five feet back.

That eyebrow went up again.

“You are not handsome.”

There were few things this woman could have said that would have surprised Chuy more. The last thing he expected to hear was an assessment of his own appearance.

He was now completely furious with this woman. His anger cleared his mind.

If she wanted a fight she would have it.

“My wife disagrees.”

The woman pulled her head back. Her movement was abrupt and sharp. She shifted her eyes over Chuy’s face. They seemed to settle on his chin.

“My daughter insists you are remarkably attractive.”

“She probably has better eyesight.”

For a moment she was motionless. Then her head pivoted as her eyes went around the room. When they had completed a circuit they settled on his.

“I see you perfectly.”

She stood taller. Her chin went up higher.

“My daughter is Graciela Consuela Varga.”

“She has my sympathy.”

“You have been seeing her.”

“Have I?”

“You deny it?”

“I deny nothing.”

“Then you admit it.”

“I admit nothing.”

The eyebrow climbed.

“You just admitted that you are married. Which my daughter failed to mention.”

“Perhaps she doesn’t know.”

“You haven’t told her. Disgusting.”

“You’re right. I haven’t told her anything.”

“I demand that you desist seeing my daughter.”

Chuy frowned.

“Desist. That sounds very legal.”

He waved a hand.

“But as you wish. I wouldn’t think of ever bothering you or your daughter. Especially your poor daughter. Given what she already suffers with.”

Chuy gestured toward the door.

“So we’re done. Now you can leave.”

Señora Varga canted her head to one side. Then straightened it as she took a step forward.

Another step followed. Her hand rose.

A bony finger extended toward Chuy.

“You.”

Chuy pointed at himself.

“Me?”

“You are not Rico Lupe.”

“No!”

“You must work for him.”

Chuy put his head to one side. Then to the other.

“I have been known to.”

Señora Varga worked her eyes over Chuy’s face. Looked down at his worn-out work shirt. Turned and looked around the big room. Turned back and scowled across the bar.

“Are you presently in his employment?”

“Not at the moment. No.”

“Then why are you behind his bar?”

“I don’t care to tell you that.”

“Why is he not here?”

“I don’t care to tell you that either.”

“Where is he? I must speak with him immediately.”

“With that no one can assist you.”

“I insist.”

Chuy sighed deeply. His shoulders rose and fell as he filled his lungs and emptied them. He shook his head at the woman standing before him. Then raised both hands and gestured as he said—

“You don’t want to hear this. You’ve never wanted to hear this. And you will never want to hear this.”

He pointed at Señora Varga.

“But there are things in this life even you cannot insist on.”

### 3

An hour after dawn Chuy parked behind a state police cruiser on a bend in the two-lane highway that ascended to Los Pilares del Cielo. The state trooper got out of his car as Chuy stepped down from the cab of his truck. The trooper was a dark-complected Spanish man in his forties. Short and bald and broad-shouldered. They greeted each other and shook hands then walked over to the guardrail.

Where they looked down into the arroyo that opened below.

Chuy thought he was ready for this moment. He had seen what was down there in his mind so powerfully real he thought the power of seeing the real thing would be largely neutralized. But when his eyes told him that yes the red convertible he had known and loved for most of his life was now truly upside down in that eroded gash of scarred yellow earth he felt like a hard fist had landed a harder punch.

He excused himself and stepped away. Stood beside his truck with his eyes closed feeling like he was spinning and might topple over the guardrail and join Rico’s car. When the feeling passed he took a moment to make sure he was steady. Then picked his way slowly back to the state trooper.

Who told him that Rico Lupe died at about 10:00 PM. On his way home from Los Pilares. For reasons unknown he lost control and veered off the road. There was no sign of an accident. A driver approaching from the other direction saw Rico’s headlights dive down into the arroyo and called 911.

Chuy knocked the guardrail with the toe of his boot.

“What about this?”

“Good question. Apparently he went over it.”

“How?”

“Hell if I know.”

The trooper turned and looked back along the road leading down from Los Pilares.

“I’ve been trying to figure that out.”

He turned back again and shook his head.

“But I’ll be damned if I have a clue.”

“Will there be an investigation?”

“There should be. But I doubt it.”

“Let me guess. Too expensive.”

“You got that right. And another thing.”

Now the trooper kicked the guardrail.

“This is new. They won’t want to spend more money figuring out why the money they already spent didn’t entirely deliver.”

“Didn’t entirely? What’s that mean?”

The trooper looked down at Rico’s car.

“This is the first one we’ve had here since the guardrail went in.”

He turned to Chuy.

“Before that was a different story.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard.”

Chuy pointed down into the arroyo. A rusted pickup truck lay on its side about thirty yards past the red convertible. Beyond the pickup were the skeletal remains of an ancient sedan.

“And I can see for myself.”

“That’s not the half of it. Most stop part way down and get pulled up with a winch. What hits the bottom usually gets scavenged. Spare parts and scrap metal. I’m surprised that pickup is still down there.”

“That’s pretty damn creepy.”

“Yeah. Kinda like grave robbing. But hard times in a hard place.”

“People do what they have to.”

“Yes they do. Damn straight they do.”

The state trooper swept a hand at the curve in the road.

“You know what people say? About this bend here.”

“La Solterona. Yeah. I’ve heard the stories.”

“Well you don’t hear them so much anymore.”

The trooper kicked the guardrail again.

“Not since this thing.”

He pointed down into the arroyo.

“Your friend wasn’t just the first to go over. After they put this in. He was the first to go off the road.”

The trooper gestured at the guardrail.

“Take a look at it. Clean as a whistle. Not even a dent.”

Chuy traced his eyes along the length of the formed metal.

“Well goddamn,” Chuy said.

### 4

The second time the door opened Chuy welcomed it. Standing behind the bar he was just the help and to someone like Señora Varga the help caught alone could be abused. He believed having another present to witness her behavior would inhibit her awfulness. Then when she saw that her demands would not be met and that her efforts here would remain wasted she would conclude that her best course of action was a strategic retreat.

Unfortunately the young Spanish man who stepped inside did not alter the dynamic as Chuy hoped. Although his entrance did afford a brief excuse to stifle Señora Varga. She was about to harangue Chuy again when he raised a hand and managed to cut in—

“Please! Señora. Allow me a moment to assist this young man.”

Her chin almost hit the ceiling. But she was silenced.

Unfortunately not for long.

When the newcomer said—

“I’m here to meet with Señor Lupe.”

Señora Varga barked—

“Ha! Good luck to you.”

She stabbed Chuy with glittering eyes.

“What now, fool? You cannot refuse us both. When we share the same simple and reasonable request.”

“Reasonable perhaps in his case.”

“His case is the same as mine.”

“It is not.”

“Idiot. He wants the same thing.”

“He wants to meet with Rico. You want to yell at Rico. Those are very different things.”

“You are as low as this hole I find you in.”

Chuy turned to the young man.

“Are you acquainted with Señor Lupe?”

But Señora Varga was not done—

“Vile. Despicable.”

“I am. We met at my place of employment.”

“Utterly worthless.”

“Is it a business matter then?”

“A curse upon the mother who would subject the world to you.”

“Yes.”

“A piece of complete filth.”

“I see. I wish I could assist you.”

“Totally undeserving to be called human.”

“Could you suggest when I should return?”

“No better than dog vomit.”

Chuy smacked his hand down on the bar.

Señora Varga jumped.

A moment later her chin was back in the air.

“That was—”

“Shut up! God *damn* it, lady. What the hell is wrong with you?”

### 5

The state trooper excused himself to take a call that came over his radio. He stepped back over to his patrol car and slid behind the wheel. The next thing Chuy knew the Ford was spitting gravel from its tires. A few pieces landed at his feet. He watched the cruiser burn away from him toward Los Pilares. Then it crested a rise and was gone.

“All right then,” Chuy said. “Catch you later.”

He did everything he could to avoid looking back down into the arroyo. He knew what he would see when he did. Now that the trooper was gone and it was just him and the wrecked car that had been a fixture in his life since the end of his boyhood. Instead he kept his eyes close and studied the ground around him and saw the tire tracks and boot prints left by the emergency services crew who arrived too late to help Rico.

When he had found all the tracks and prints there were to see and had looked them all over a second time Chuy sighed. Then winced as he reached up to scratch his neck. Then sighed again when he raised his eyes up to the sky and saw one small single lonely white cloud floating high overheard.

Finally he put his eyes back where they had to go. And stared down at the crumpled red convertible. And saw Rico crushed and bloodied and dying inside the car he had carefully nursed across the three decades since his dead brother had left it to him.

Chuy stared at the wreck till his image of Rico’s death faded and was gone. Then he closed his eyes and lowered his head. A semi went roaring past and engulfed Chuy in wind and fumes as he offered up his best hopes for the soul of his lost friend.

### 6

The bar was half full when Chela Varga arrived. She stepped inside and the room noticed. Chuy wondered if this was simply because she was strikingly beautiful. Or due to her growing reputation as a singer. He doubted much of the local crowd gathered here in this local joint out beyond the edge of the city could be active participants in the city’s nightlife. And therefore might recognize one of its rising stars. But he wondered anyway.

And he wondered even though he didn’t care. He wasted time and energy wondering about this because he wanted to be distracted from not having anticipated that Chela would be here. When he decided to do this there was no reason he could think of to suspect she would appear. But after her mother arrived he should have guessed.

And now here she was. With the big room busy noticing.

They took particular notice when Chela confronted her mother—

“What’re you doing here?”

“What do you think?”

“This is none of your business.”

“You made it my business.”

“I never should have told you.”

“Who else should you tell? I’m your mother.”

“I was upset. It was a moment of weakness. Not an invitation to stick your nose in.”

“It’s weak to share things with your own mother?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Well that’s what you said!”

A young Spanish woman held up her cell phone. It took Chuy a moment to realize what she was doing. Then he pictured Esteban showing him the video on some web site. He was about to tell this young woman to stop when Señora Varga pointed and yelled—

“You there! Stop that. This is none of your business!”

Chuy was surprised that Señora Varga was tech savvy enough to know what the young woman was doing. Then remembered he wasn’t exactly tech savvy himself. Then noted here was one thing at least that he and the Señora could agree upon—that what was happening here should not be broadcasted to the larger public. Even if it was happening in a public place. He thought maybe it was a generational thing. How else to account for it? Obviously he and she could not be in agreement about much.

He was about to suggest to the Vargas that they take their dispute elsewhere when he noticed the young woman with the cell phone was not cowed. She did as demanded and put her phone away. But she made a show of doing it. Then smiled around at her friends before she stood up and shouted across the room—

“Then take it somewhere else!”

And now Chuy agreed with this young woman too.

He would have a hell of a time picking sides if it came down it.

The young woman put one hand on her hip and waved the other in the air.

“We don’ all wanna be seein’ your shit. Abuelita.”

“Watch your mouth!”

Chuy felt ashamed when he realized he was enjoying himself. Not much but some. But even some was too much. Now was not the time to be enjoying anything. No matter how little.

Then Chela surprised everyone by jumping in—

“Listen to me sister. I’m only going to say this once. Your candy little ass does not want to tangle with us.”

Chuy looked at the young woman and thought Chela had a point. She was little and she did look pretty damned candy. And now that Chela had pointed this out the young woman also looked frightened.

But she wasn’t backing down. That hand was up and about to wave again—

Chuy bellowed out—

“Stop it! Right now!”

The room went quiet.

Chuy moved down the bar and brought the Rico’s old landline phone up from the shelf beneath the register. He lifted the handset.

“Now keep quiet. All of you. I need to make a call.”

Señora Varga threw her head back.

“Who are you calling?”

“The police.”

“Why?”

Chuy pointed at the three of them. One after the other. Starting with Señora Varga and ending with the young woman.

He didn’t intend to shout. But the words exploded out of him—

“To have you all arrested!”

He thought the room was quiet before. Now it was dead silent.

And all eyes were on him.

Which was something Chuy wanted to have happen. Not exactly right at this moment. But at some point this evening. He wanted to say what must be said and say it once to as many people as possible. Because he could not stand the thought of saying it over and over again. He needed to minimize how many times he had to say it.

So now that this had happened on its own and everyone was waiting to hear what he would say next he had the impulse to just go ahead and say it. Because there would never be a truly good moment. And right now he could have it done. Which would be an enormous relief.

He put the handset back down.

“Okay. Everybody listen up.”

His eyes cut over to Chela. Who presented the one reason not do this.

But he needed it done.

He raised a hand to his mouth and cleared his throat.

Then Chuy stood up straight.

“I know a lot of you are wondering why Rico isn’t here.”

### 7

Chuy considered a U-turn across the highway. What he could see of the road ahead was empty. There was nothing in his mirrors. But something told him not to try it. And reminded him why he was here.

Don’t get yourself killed too.

He checked his mirrors again before continuing toward Los Pilares.

The highway descended out of the curve. As his truck rolled downward he pictured the long red convertible doing the same. For the very last time. After all the many other times Rico Lupe had driven this way.

Chuy wondered what Rico was thinking as he drove. If he suspected what lay ahead. And felt his death close to him. Or approached it unknowingly.

Then Chuy wondered what Rico would have made of his own death. Which led him to remember a conversation they had. Not so very long ago. While they were in the city waiting out a downpour. Parked in the same truck Chuy was driving now. They had talked about death in general and their own deaths in particular. About how they would want to die.

Rico had said he wanted to die up in Los Pilares. Chuy wondered if when he went up there for the last time Rico had been wishing for his death. Given how bad he had been feeling for some time now.

And if maybe his wishes helped hurry his death along.

Instantly Chuy was furious.

“Go fuck yourself. He did not.”

There was a dirt road ahead on his right. While he slowed so he could turn around and get pointed back toward home, despite his sudden rage Chuy remembered his response to that same question, the one they shared in their conversation during the downpour—

Chuy had told Rico that he wanted to die working. With mud on his hands and sweat on his back. Which felt not untrue in the moment. But now just seemed stupid and unthinkingly boastful. With death so real and so close.

Now he had no idea how he wanted to die. Because he didn’t want to die.

He wanted to refuse death.

His own and most especially Rico’s.

Chuy swung into the dirt road and made a quick U-turn. Stopped back out at the edge of the highway, waiting for an old sedan to rattle past, Chuy hoped Rico would have felt the same way. If he was still here and could look back on what he said when they were being a couple of assholes talking bullshit. Chuy hoped Rico would have agreed what they said then was beyond stupid and utterly and completely meaningless. Pure undiluted crap.

Chuy hoped very much that was true.

He made his left turn back out onto the blacktop. Up the slope ahead of him again was the curve in the road so infamous people called it “The Wound”. He had never given that name any thought. Now when he thought about it he also felt it.

He pictured Rico coming this way through the night. Cruising along in the darkness. Following his headlights up this hill.

Did he approach La Herida with trepidation?

Chuy’s truck climbed toward the curve.

Just before he entered the bend he saw her.

Not in the roadway ahead of him. As the legend of La Solterona had it.

But in the past.

Where all our ghosts live.

### 8

Chela Varga made the most horrifying sound that Chuy Sandoval would hear in his entire lifetime. A sound so overwhelming he felt crushed by it. A sound so penetrating he felt impaled on it. A sound as if her soul was being torn out of her body through her vocal chords.

Then Chela Varga turned and left.

When Chuy recovered he looked for Señora Varga. She was gone too.

Soon almost everyone was gone. A stampede went out the doors behind the Vargas. The only two who didn’t move were Chuy and the young man who had arrived right after Señora Varga.

The young man stood across the bar from Chuy and watched the others run away. Then turned to Chuy when they were gone and said—

“That was very difficult.”

“And I handled it like shit.”

The young man shook his head.

“No. I mean. Under the circumstances.”

He grimaced and shook his head again.

“What else could you have done.”

Chuy had a bar mop in his hands. He balled it up and threw it into the sink.

“I shouldn’t have done anything. Being here was crazy.”

The young man nodded.

“You did what you thought best. And now you must want to close up and go home. I won’t keep you.”

He brought out a business card and offered it across the bar.

Chuy stared at the card before he reached out and accepted it. He glanced at the young man before he read what the white cardstock told him—

Luis Molina López. Captain. La Fuente Azul.

He needed a moment to recall why the name of the restaurant was familiar.

His eyes remained on the card when he said—

“This is where you met Rico.”

“Yes.”

Chuy raised his head and examined Luis Molina López.

“You must know Chela Varga.”

“I do.”

“Ever meet her mother before?”

“I had not had the… um. Pleasure.”

Chuy smiled.

“Yeah. Me either.”

He held up the card.

“What’s this for?”

Luis shrugged.

“If you need anything.”

“Like what?”

Luis shrugged again. Then shook his head.

“I have no idea.”

Chuy nodded. He looked at the card again. Then tapped it against his index finger before he slipped it into his shirt pocket.

“Yeah. Well that makes two of us. I’m fresh out of ideas too.”

He looked at the door and remembered what he had just done. Remembered the awful sound that came out of Chela Varga. His stomach lurched. He thought he might be sick. But in a moment the feeling had passed.

Chuy smiled at Luis Molina López.

“Given the kind of ideas I’m having. Maybe being out of them is a good thing. Maybe I should stop having ideas for a little while.”

Luis nodded. He frowned for a moment. Then he nodded again.

“Maybe so. Just for a little while.”

### 9

It was a long number of years ago. The one and only time he ever saw her. In the parking lot outside of Don Pepe’s. That little adobe cave which in a few more years would get knocked down so the new owners could build a brand new restaurant. Which in a few more years would fail. And then sit empty for another few years. Then be bought by Rico Lupe and turned into his bar.

Chuy said goodbye to Don Pepe and the men he had been drinking with and stepped outside intending to walk home. His mother would have dinner on soon and his stomach was rumbling.

Chuy stopped just outside the door. Across the lot Rico was leaning against his gleaming red car. He had his arms folded tight across his chest. But it wasn’t seeing his good friend that halted Chuy. It was the young woman who stood near him. Smiling with a camera in her hand.

Chuy took one look at this girl. One good look then he turned around and went back inside. He had never seen her before and had no idea who she was. But that one look was enough to make his skin crawl.

Back inside he sat down and tried to understand what he had just happened. Then told himself he was wrong to leave his friend alone with someone like that. Especially an attractive young woman like that.

He got up and pulled the door open and stepped back outside.

They were gone. So was Rico’s car.

Chuy was relieved he didn’t have to deal with that girl.

And ashamed at being relieved. Since his friend might still be in danger. If Rico left with that awful girl. But the car that had been parked next to Rico’s was also gone. So there was hope they had gone separate ways.

Chuy meant to ask Rico about her. He never did. Every time he remembered that terrible young woman Rico wasn’t around. Then she slipped out of his thoughts and over the years became forgotten.

Maybe he had banished her from his thoughts. Along with his initial retreat.

Both memories being so unwanted.

But now he knew. Now he knew who she was.

And now Chuy knew why he hated her.

## The Dead Would Laugh

### 1

A low plume of dust trailed out behind the truck and stood like smoke in the golden light. Chuy drove slowly along Entrada Oeste. Both windows were down and Esteban had his face turned out into the cool sweet air. Where they drove the Entrada ran beside the Acequia Mayor, the main ditch of old Los Huertos del Río Huérfano. Water flowed past, running south as the truck went north, and surged loudly through the gates. The sharp tang of it poured in through the open windows.

“I love that smell,” Esteban said.

Chuy smiled and nodded.

“The best smell in the world.”

Then they were quiet again. The truck rolled slowly onward.

They passed an open gate that let water into the Acequia del Medio, which flowed east to the river and roughly divided Los Huertos north and south. Chuy had to pull his eyes away and push them back onto the Entrada. He wanted to stop and get out and wander along that acequia and follow some side ditch off among the fields and pastures and yards that it irrigated. He knew that wandering the interior of his old village he would find things that were good to look at. A field of brilliant green alfalfa. A horse galloping around a pasture. The mountains standing across the valley.

When he was young Chuy knew most every ditch in Los Huertos. But the village had changed and the acequias were far less important to the people who lived here now. Many of the small ditches were just overgrown ruts that hadn’t seen water in decades. There were more walls and fences. And more fences across the ditches with signs telling you to stop and stay out and warning what would happen if you trespassed. Fewer places where you were welcome to come and go. The old wooden gates along the main acequias had all been replaced with metal ones. And now the metal ones were getting old and some were being replaced and others were being abandoned. Very few of the old wooden gates, wide planks that slid up and down within a wooden frame, still remained in use. You only found them on the littlest ditches, the tiny cuts in the earth that fed just one small field or pasture or someone’s backyard.

When Chuy was a boy his family watered their garden from a nameless side ditch that served a half dozen small properties. He would walk their little ditch up to its source at the Acequia de San Teodoro and follow that about a quarter mile to the Acequia Mayor. Which put him on the western edge of Los Huertos. The village lay between the westward bow of the Acequia Mayor and an east-curving sweep of the Río Huérfano. Only a few houses stood where no ditches could be found, on the land beyond the Acequia Mayor that climbed toward the Western Mesa. Many more had been built there since he was a boy, and still more since he had bought one himself. For many years now he and Terésa had owned one of those houses up on the rise. The ones where no ditches could be found.

And since he lived outside the acequias he watered his garden with a hose. Chuy had grown up assuming that when he became a man and a landowner he would also become a parciante, a shareholder in an acequia. And like his father before him he would probably serve as a commissioner, a member of the committee who oversaw the maintenance of the ditch, and collected and administered the funds used for that purpose. Or like his grandfather be elected mayordomo, the one who made sure the acequia remained in good condition and that everyone took only their rightful share of the water that flowed to them all. But when he and Terésa went to buy a place of their own, all the land beside the ditches of Los Huertos had become too expensive for a couple of young newlyweds like themselves.

And now property in the old village was far more costly than it had been all those many years ago when he was just married. Supply and demand had shut Chuy out of the acequias and the old ways that went with them. As he drove through the golden sunlight of that late afternoon on the day October came to its end, going along the Entrada with his nephew seated beside him, and watched the brown river water surge through the ditch gates, Chuy felt his loss of the village waterways and their old customs very keenly.

“They’ll shut the water off soon,” Chuy said.

Esteban turned to him.

“When do they turn it off?”

Chuy shook his head.

“A couple more weeks maybe.”

It hurt that he didn’t know on what day they would shut down the ditches. His father had always known. When the day came Tito Sandoval would go help stop the water for another year. As the men in their family had done for generations. Chuy wanted a place in that line. But the world had come along and decided that line should be broken.

### 2

They turned east off the Entrada and crossed a small bridge over the Acequia Mayor and wound along the lanes on the flatlands of the river bottom. The truck carried them up off the floodplain and onto higher ground where they turned in under the wrought iron archway at the gate of the village cemetery. Here and there among the tombstones relatives and friends of the deceased were tending the graves of their dead. The shouts of small children carried across the cemetery as they played in the yellow-gold leaves fallen from the tall old cottonwoods.

Just past the gate Chuy reached across the dashboard and pointed at a plot of graves heaped with stones.

“You see how these old graves are covered with rocks?” Chuy said.

Esteban looked where his uncle pointed.

“Yeah.”

“You know why they did that?”

“No.”

“The graveyard used to be beside the church. In the middle of the village. Then the river flooded and knocked down the church and tore the graves open and sent the dead floating away. Some of the coffins were sealed up tight like little boats. A few went all the way down to Los Vados.”

Esteban turned to his uncle.

“That’s like what? Two hundred miles?”

“Probably more the way the river goes. I heard there was a woman from down there who married a man from up here. They didn’t get along. She always wanted to go home. So when the flood floated her all the way back down there they let her stay. The story of how she got back is written on her tombstone.”

“No way.”

“That’s what I heard. Maybe it’s bullshit. But anyway. When the flood was over people went down along the river looking for their dead. Some of them were buried near wherever they wound up. Like that woman who got back to Los Vados. The ones they brought back were buried up here. Where it’s higher. The ground is rocky here so they piled the stones they dug up on top of the graves. They figured if the river flooded high enough to reach all the way up here maybe the rocks would keep the dead from floating away again.”

Esteban frowned at the rock-piled graves.

“Did it work?” he said.

“The river never flooded that high. It got wet up here a few times but that’s it.”

A child screamed and they turned toward the sound. The screaming came again but they couldn’t see who it was through the trees.

### 3

The lane was rutted and their progress was slow. They passed an old gray-haired Anglo woman working close on Chuy’s side, bent over raking leaves from a grave. He smiled and waved and she stopped to do the same.

When they were past the old woman Esteban turned to his uncle.

“Anglos celebrate it too?” he said.

“Mostly ones who come from here.”

“I thought they just got drunk and marched in the parade.”

“Yeah. They do that too.”

Esteban nodded at his uncle, then glanced back over his shoulder at the old Anglo woman. She was busy with her raking. Behind them the children were screaming again.

Chuy parked where the lane was wide enough to let another car pass. He stepped out of his truck and slipped his keys into his pocket, glanced around at the few others gathered nearby, squinted up into the light angling through the trees, then went behind his seat and brought out a squat brown bottle and two short glasses. He pushed his door closed with his elbow and started away between the graves with Esteban following behind.

When they stopped beside the one they had come to visit Chuy handed the glasses to his nephew. Then uncorked the brown bottle and held it out over the grave.

“Here’s for you, old friend,” Chuy said. “Drink well.”

He slowly poured liquor onto the ground. Esteban looked at the glasses he held and frowned.

“You don’t use a glass?”

“Juan Bernal doesn’t like a glass.”

A smile twisted Esteban’s mouth.

“He told you that?”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

The boy’s smile vanished.

“Sorry Unc.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

### 4

When the glasses each contained a generous portion of the golden-brown liquor Chuy re-corked the bottle and bent down to set it on the tombstone. He held out his hand and Esteban passed him a glass. Chuy held his glass up and looked at Esteban. The boy blinked before he raised his own glass. Chuy clinked his glass against Esteban’s and the boy blinked again.

“To Juan Bernal,” Chuy said. “The man who saved my life.”

Esteban watched his uncle sip at the liquor. Chuy nodded at him.

“Go ahead. Drink.”

Esteban looked at the brown liquor in his glass before he raised it to his lips. When he lowered his glass there was pleasure and surprise on his young face. They both turned when a voice called out—

“Getting an early start?”

A small wizened old Spanish man watched them from under a large straw man. He was tending a grave a few rows over. Chuy smiled at the old man and shrugged.

“Why not?” Chuy said.

The old man grinned and nodded.

“Sí, seguro. ¿Por qué no?”

Yeah, sure. Why not?

Chuy raised his glass.

“How about you? Would you like a taste?”

The old man waved his hand and shook his head.

“No, gracias.”

He grinned and pointed at the ground.

“Or I will lay down right here and go to sleep.”

“That doesn’t sound like a bad idea.”

The old man laughed. He waved again before he went back to work. Chuy watched the old man for a moment longer, then turned to his nephew. He spoke quietly now, so only Esteban could hear.

“Señor Velarde. He says the same thing every year.”

Chuy and Esteban looked back at the old man.

“He’s been like that since his wife died,” Chuy said.

“Is that her grave?”

“Yeah. He spends a long time making it just right. He must ninety years old by now.”

Esteban looked at his uncle.

“So you come here every year?”

Chuy nodded slowly.

“Yes I do. For maybe thirty years now.”

Esteban stood up straighter. He looked down at the glass in his hand, then back up at his uncle.

“Wow. That’s a long time.”

“It sure as hell is.”

“Always the day before?”

Chuy nodded again.

“Yeah. Tomorrow when his family is here it’s too crowded. I can’t get a moment alone with him”

### 5

Chuy read the gravestone. He made a point of reading it every time. Esteban followed his uncle’s eyes and did the same. It was a squat monolith of black granite with the epitaph chiseled in square letters—

IN MEMORY OF JUAN XAVIER BERNAL
A SON AND BROTHER LOYAL AND TRUE
1943~1964

Chuy took a sip from his glass. Esteban saw this and took one himself. Then he held his glass out toward the tombstone.

“So how did he save your life?” Esteban said.

Chuy smiled at the stone, then turned and smiled at his nephew.

“He hit me in the neck with a fence post.”

Esteban winced.

“Ouch.”

“I was about your age. Still in high school. He broke my neck.”

“Why did he do that?”

“I called him a stupid bastard.”

Esteban grinned and shook his head. Chuy took another sip and so did his nephew.

“What happened to you?” Esteban said.

“I was paralyzed. Nine months before I got back up on my feet. Another month before I could walk even a few steps without help.”

Esteban’s mouth had come open. He closed it again and shook his head.

“Jesus,” Esteban said.

“Yeah. It was rough.”

“How come I didn’t know about this?”

“Your mother never told you?”

“Her? She never told me anything.”

Esteban frowned at his uncle.

“Not anything like that anyway. What she told me was always either what I couldn’t do or what I had to do. Things she wanted me to do for her. Like cook dinner. Go put gas in her car. She told me that crap all the time.”

He shook his head.

“She never told me anything about our family.”

The boy was quiet for a moment. Then he nodded at his uncle.

“How did that save your life? Him breaking your neck.”

“Kept me out of the war.”

Esteban frowned again. He nodded deeply.

“Oh,” he said.

And looked away. His eyes roamed around the cemetery, then settled on Señor Velarde. The old man sneezed loudly and Chuy turned his direction.

“Salud,” Chuy called out.

Señor Velarde waved a hand in the air and kept working. Chuy and Esteban looked at each other. Esteban gestured at the tombstone.

“You’re not mad at him? For what he did?”

Chuy shook his head.

“I think maybe I deserved it.”

Esteban laughed. When he saw his uncle wasn’t kidding he stared at Chuy.

“For real?”

“Yeah. He had just joined the Army. I told him that was a stupid thing to do. Asked him why he wanted to go fight the Anglos’ war.”

Chuy shook his head.

“I had no right to say that to him. He was doing what he thought was right. What people said was the right thing to do. He was proud of what he was doing. And I went and spit on it. Like a real asshole.”

### 6

Chuy looked over at Señor Velarde and watched the old man at his work for a moment before he looked down at Juan Bernal’s grave. He raised his glass and waved it over the earth that covered the dead man.

“Not all of him is in there. He lost part of his leg in the war.”

Chuy looked at Esteban and raised his glass into the air.

“Every year I come and drink to his memory. To thank a good man for keeping me alive.”

Chuy put his head back and emptied his glass. Esteban did the same and then grimaced. He frowned at his uncle as he lowered his glass.

“I thought it was supposed to be tequila.”

Chuy nodded.

“Yeah, that’s what people say. But it doesn’t seem fair. Just because you’re dead all you ever get is tequila? What if you don’t like tequila? Or maybe you get sick of it.”

Chuy stepped over to the tombstone and lifted the bottle.

“You like this stuff?”

Esteban nodded.

“Yeah, this is good. What is it?”

“Mexican brandy.”

Chuy held his glass out toward Esteban.

“Hold this,” Chuy said.

Esteban took his uncle’s glass. Chuy uncorked the bottle and poured them each a little more, then re-corked the bottle and returned it to its place atop the tombstone. He took his glass back from his nephew and raised it high. Esteban raised his glass too.

“For all the brave men and the price they pay,” Chuy said.

They tossed their brandy down and were quiet for a moment. They kept their eyes and thoughts to themselves. Then Esteban looked at his uncle.

“So that’s why your neck gives you trouble sometimes?”

Chuy nodded. Esteban frowned into his empty glass. Chuy watched his nephew and waited. When Esteban spoke he kept his eyes turned down.

“I remember one time she called you. To come fix something. I don’t remember what it was. But Terésa said your neck was out and you couldn’t do anything. She yelled at her. Cursed her out. Said you were faking it.”

Esteban raised his eyes and frowned at Chuy.

“I knew you weren’t,” Esteban said. “I knew you wouldn’t do that.”

Chuy’s smile came soft and tender on his rough face. He reached out a hand and gripped his nephew’s shoulder.

“Thank you for having faith in me.”

Esteban smiled and blinked and nodded a few times, then lowered his head. Chuy squeezed his nephew’s shoulder before he took his hand away.

“I never did that stuff for her,” Chuy said.

Esteban raised his head and stared at his uncle. Chuy gestured with his glass.

“I didn’t care if she was cold because the heat was broken. Or couldn’t shit because her toilet was clogged up. The hell with her. She never gave a damn about anyone.”

Esteban’s lips were parted now and his white teeth gleamed. Chuy nodded once at his nephew.

“I did those things for you,” Chuy said. “I did what I could to keep her place decent because *you* lived there. So it wouldn’t be any worse for you than it already was.”

Esteban blinked and shook his head.

“I didn’t know that.”

He blinked again and tears started down his seamless face. He didn’t speak or make a sound. Every few seconds he reached up and wiped his tears away.

“You okay?” Chuy said.

Esteban nodded. Chuy watched his nephew suffer and wished his sister had died right after this good boy was born. The guilt and regret that came with that thought made his chest tight and cold.

### 7

Señor Velarde was using a hand broom to sweep off his wife’s tombstone. Chuy knew this was the last step in the ancient Señor’s routine. Next he would gather his tools and start toward his old Ford pickup that waited nearby and roll out of the graveyard toward home. Then tomorrow Día de los Muertos would begin and Señor Velarde would return with four generations of his descendants. Chuy would see them all together over where the old man was working now when he returned here to the grave of Juan Bernal and visited with the Bernal family. How many more years would that happen? There were not many years left for old Señor Velarde. Maybe this year would be his last. How many more years were left for any of them?

Chuy stepped over to Juan Bernal’s tombstone and lifted the squat bottle of Mexican brandy. He turned toward Esteban and gestured with the brown bottle toward his truck.

“We should get going,” Chuy said.

He lowered the brandy and smiled at his nephew.

“Karina wants us to go trick-or-treating with her. You up for that?”

Esteban nodded and blinked and wiped his damp face.

“Sure,” he said. “Yeah.”

Chuy watched Esteban for a few seconds, then he nodded.

“Good,” Chuy said.

He started toward his truck and patted Esteban on the shoulder as he went past him. The boy looked over at Señor Velarde, then at the tombstone of Juan Bernal, then turned to follow his uncle out from among the graves. Chuy stopped beside his truck and Esteban stood watching him while Chuy called out—

“See you mañana, Señor Velarde!”

The old man turned to face them. He grinned and pulled off his large straw hat and waved it in the air.

### 8

Early the next morning Chuy and Esteban returned to the village cemetery. This time they went to where their own blood was buried and went to work cleaning the graves of their family. While he worked Chuy tried to think about his parents and his brothers and his grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins who were all buried here. But his thoughts kept returning to the one they scattered in the river. He didn’t want to think about Frescura but he couldn’t think about anyone else.

And thinking of his sister made him angry. His motions became violent. He stabbed his hands at the weeds and ripped them from the soil. Finally he stabbed one hand too hard and his index finger smashed into a half-buried rock. Blood oozed out from under his cracked nail.

“¡La estupidez de cosas!” Chuy spat out.

The stupidity of things!

Hearing those words come spitting out of his mouth finally made Chuy stop thinking about Frescura. Instead he remembered old Zenaida Sandoval, his tough father’s even tougher mother. Chuy hadn’t heard those words since his grandmother passed away almost thirty years ago. He believed the phrase originated with Zenaida herself. She had her own way of putting things. He was comforted that her words were still with him. Living on deep inside. He repeated her words, softer this time—

“La estupidez de cosas.”

As the syllables played across his tongue Chuy saw that some of Zenaida had lived and died with her granddaughter. Not any of the good things. Not the resourcefulness or the industriousness or the levelheadedness. Not even the good cooking. Just the hardness and the coldness. Zenaida could be cruel when she wanted to. Frescura chose to be cruel all the time. If she hadn’t been so lazy she would have been truly dangerous.

A moment later his anger had vanished. All that remained was the cracked fingernail under a clot of blood and dirt.

Chuy turned when Esteban spoke—

“You all right, Unc?”

Chuy nodded at his nephew. Then he smiled.

“Yeah.”

He held up his hand. Thick blood started down his finger.

“Just this,” Chuy said.

Esteban craned his neck for a better look. He nodded at the blood and dirt and the thick mud they were forming.

“You should clean that,” he said.

Chuy smiled again.

“You think?”

Esteban shrugged.

“I’m just sayin’. You might want to.”

He smiled again at his uncle before he went back to work. Chuy took another look at his wound before he staggered to his feet. His stiff knees complained and cracked as he rose. Across the dirt lane that wound among the graves stood a frost-free spigot with a red levered handle atop a length of iron pipe. Chuy lifted the handle and waited for the flow then stuck his finger in the warm water and washed away the blood and dirt. By the time he was done the water was almost cold. He dried his finger with his shirt and had just found a bandage in his glovebox when his nephew appeared beside him.

“How’s the finger?” Esteban said.

Chuy smiled while he unwrapped the bandage.

“Ain’t that sweet,” he said. “You came to check on me.”

“Nah. I need some water.”

“And here I thought you cared.”

“I do care. About my thirst. Your finger not so much.”

Chuy laughed while he wrapped the bandage around his wound. Esteban reached into the bed of the truck and ice rattled in the insulated jug of red and white plastic while he lifted it and drank. Chuy closed the glovebox and the truck door and took his turn with the jug. The freezing water went stinging and welcome down his throat.

When he lowered the jug Esteban was peering up at him.

“You think she loved him?” Esteban said. “My father.”

### 9

They stared at each other. Then Chuy turned away and looked out across the graves. People were scattered here and there. Sunlight angled down in golden beams. He turned back again and spoke softly when he answered—

“Do you think she loved anyone?”

Esteban flinched. A brief tremor that rocked his shoulders. He turned away and squinted at whatever he saw.

“No,” he said. “She didn’t have any love in her.”

He kept himself turned away. Then took a step backwards and leaned against the truck. His eyes went down to his feet and his hands jammed down into his pockets. Chuy stepped over beside his nephew and returned the water jug to the truck bed.

“He’s a saint compared to some of the others,” Esteban said.

He raised his head and looked at Chuy.

“Real hard-asses. Looked at me like they wanted to slit my throat.”

He blew out his breath and for a moment he trembled. Then the shaking passed and he looked cold and steady off across the graveyard.

“I didn’t think there was anything left she could do that would hurt me. I thought I was done with that.”

Chuy nodded slowly.

“I thought so too.”

“But she did it again. Like it was just casual or something. Just like, I’m done here. And she’s gone.”

Esteban frowned and shook his head.

“Like it never mattered.”

He frowned up at his uncle.

“Like *I* never mattered.”

A ball of ice formed in Chuy’s belly. His pulse throbbed and his chest ached. He put a hand on his nephew’s thin shoulder and turned the boy so they were facing each other.

“You matter to *me*, Esteban. You always have. From the moment you were born. And you matter to Terésa and Marbella and Wyatt and Karina. You matter very much to all of us. Karina talks about you all the time. We all love you very much. I know how rotten things have been for you. But it’s over now.”

Chuy shook his head.

“She doesn’t have any say in the whole rest of your life.”

### 10

Late in the morning a blue Toyota sedan parked behind Chuy’s truck. The doors swung open one-by-one to release Terésa and Marbella and Wyatt and little Karina. An hour later the graves were covered with sugar skulls and flowers and other little offerings. Then the food and drink were brought out and the family dined among their dead.

When their meal was over Wyatt and Esteban fell in with some young men and teenage boys who were gathered nearby. Their conversation was punctuated by bursts of yelling and laughter. Terésa and Marbella wandered off to visit with friends and took Karina with them.

Which left Chuy alone with the dead Sandovals. He did his best to ignore them and watched his neighbors instead. His eyes followed Tony Hidalgo as the old man stumbled around drunk like he did every year. Veering among the numerous graves of his family, nearly colliding with trees and his living relations, a green bottle of beer clutched in one hand. When he backed over a tombstone and fell flat on his ass Chuy burst out laughing. He stifled his laughter when Tony’s daughter Chichí turned to glare at him.

Old Tony Hidalgo was quiet after his fall. So was Chuy. He kept thinking about his sister and pushing her away again. He sent his eyes all over the graveyard trying to forget about Frescura.

Eventually his roaming eyes stopped on his father’s tombstone. He counted up the years since Tito Sandoval had died. And realized that his father had been dead for half as long as Chuy had been alive. Try as he might Chuy could not grow accustomed to being older than his father had been when death took him. He knew Tito had died fairly young. But having lived past the age at which his father died made Chuy feel like an old man. He knew that he was not. But lately he felt every one of his years.

Chuy thought he heard someone call his name. He turned to where he placed the voice and saw only Hidalgos. None of them looked in his direction. He stood up and scanned the graveyard and did not see any faces pointed his way. He looked to where Wyatt and Esteban were talking with the other young men. They both had their backs his direction. He looked around again searching for Terésa and Marbella and could not find them.

He turned back to the young men and watched them talk. His mind had been cleared by searching for the nonexistent someone who had called to him. The thread of his thoughts had been lost and his was glad of it. His thoughts were not his friends today. Now instead of thinking he became aware of the sounds made by the others scattered around him and the play of the light through the trees. He savored this moment of calm and tranquility knowing with the mood that plagued him today this feeling would not last.

And an instant later it vanished. His thoughts again went wheeling back to their inexorable center on this haunted day. Frescura was with him once more. She had claimed today as her due.

*Let her have it*, Chuy told himself. *Then maybe you can be done with her.*

And with that resolution made he asked himself once again the old question that refused to be answered—

Why had she wasted her life?

*You can’t fix it now*, he wanted to tell her.

Chuy remembered Frescura in the last moments they were together. Furious and smoking before her crummy little house, dirty and disheveled from her drunken escapade and the cramped hours spent in jail. He wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her till that stubborn head off hers came flying off. The words he wanted to yell at her crowded into his head—

It’s too late now. Too late to make it right. Just like I told you it would be. I told you a thousand times. You wouldn’t listen. You never listened.

Then Chuy finally admitted he had still hoped his sister would change. Even after all the long years of unending proof she never would. Right up to when he saw her dead in that hotel room. Only then did he admit she was beyond hope. That she had squandered any chance of redemption. And it stung deep to bring that little shredded scrap of belief in Frescura out into the daylight and admit it had been part of him. And to hate her for having killed it.

Chuy stepped before his mother’s grave and looked down at her tombstone. And told himself again how Verdad would have felt about her only daughter being cremated. And even worse her ashes scattered in the river. But there were no plots left here. No room to squeeze in anymore dead. And everyone knew what Frescura wanted done with her remains. She had told them far too many times and always when everyone least cared to hear about it. But now here before his mother where all the others had been buried Chuy let himself feel guilty for having done what his sister wanted.

“I’m sorry, Mamá,” Chuy said. “But I couldn’t please everyone.”

He stepped to the head of his mother’s grave, raised his hand to his mouth, kissed the tips of his index and middle fingers, then pressed his kissed flesh to her tombstone. While he held his fingertips against the cool granite his heart rolled over in his chest.

When Chuy took his hand away he decided it was time to visit the living. He needed a break from the dead. Maybe if he left the dead alone he could stop thinking about his sister.

### 11

As he did every year Chuy went first to see the Bernals. Along his way across the cemetery he paused here and there to say visit briefly with friends and acquaintances. He exchanged pleasantries and sometimes a joke or two and admired the decorations done by others to remember their dead. Then he was welcomed by the Bernals and as always Chuy received a warm embrace from the elderly Señor. Who as he did every year solemnly thanked Chuy for being a good friend to his son Juan.

Chuy spent close to an hour among the Bernals without a single break in the conversation. When that moment finally came Chuy stepped outside the dense cluster of the Bernal family and spent some time alone with his memories of the day they buried Juan. Then it was time to move on. The Bernals were all busy so he didn’t say goodbye.

As he walked away Chuy looked over to where the Velardes were gathered. And was surprised to see the old Señor looking back at him. Señor Velarde waved and Chuy did the same. Then Chuy was surprised again when the old man held a bottle in the air. With his other hand he gestured for Chuy to come join him.

This was a first. They had shared a few drinks at Rico’s over the years.

But never here. And never on this day.

Chuy lowered his head as he made his away among the graves toward the Velardes and read names and dates off the tombstones he went past. Over many years the many dead had come here to rest.

How many more years and how many more dead could one place take?

### 12

As Chuy drew near Señor Velarde called out a greeting. He shook Chuy’s hand and indicated they should sit together in two matching lawn chairs set before the grave of his late wife. The old Señor insisted that Chuy sit first, then took his seat beside his guest with a smile on his lips and savored the moment before he posed this provocative question—

“Have you heard that our Father is gone?” the old man said.

It took Chuy a moment to place the correct father in this question. To know that his host was referring to the village priest. But by “gone” did he mean normally gone? As in he had left? Or did he mean dead-gone? By the smile the old man was wearing Chuy thought he must just mean gone-gone. But today was the day that death was somehow different. And not so final.

So maybe he really was dead-gone?

Chuy frowned and shook his head.

Señor Velarde raised one gray eyebrow.

“El Padre has left us.”

He spoke with gravity and satisfaction.

“He up and quit. Poof! Just like that.”

The old man cocked his head.

“And not just *our* church. He quit the *whole* Church.”

Chuy opened his eyes wide.

Señor Velarde nodded.

“It’s true. He left the cloth.”

Chuy looked away and frowned. Then turned back and smiled.

“Just like that. Father Vincente quit.”

The old man nodded.

“Yes. Just like that.”

He held up his hand and snapped his fingers.

“Poof! Gone like a puff of smoke.”

Chuy shook his head.

“Well good for him. He was too good to be priest.”

Señor Velarde laughed down in his belly. His laugh turned into a cough. When his cough passed he brought out a handkerchief and wiped his mouth. When he had put his handkerchief away again he looked at Chuy.

“Doncia Ribera saw him in blue jeans and a tee shirt,” the old man said.

He pointed at his own left bicep.

“He has a tattoo.”

The old man raised his one eyebrow again.

“Of a hula girl.”

Señor Velarde cupped his hands before his chest.

“With big chichotas.”

Chuy grinned at the old man.

“Did she tell you that too? Doncia Ribera?”

Chuy imitated the gesture the old man had made.

“About the big chichotas?”

Señor Velarde raised his chin a little and angled his head to one side. Light danced in his eyes and a smile raised one corner of his mouth. He looked away across the graveyard and his smile spread over his face. Then he angled his eyes at Chuy and raised his chin a little higher.

“Maybe she did. Maybe she didn’t. But I know that it’s true.”

Chuy nodded at the old man.

“If you say so. Then it must be so.”

Señor Velarde kept his head lifted up and smiled at Chuy for a little while longer, then his laughter welled up inside of him again and broke out in waves. While the old man was enjoying himself Chuy wondered what drove Father Vincente to leave the Church and doubted he would ever see the now ex-priest again. He knew the man was from California and assumed he would return there. Chuy felt this loss more intensely than he would have expected. He told himself it was probably just the day and the state he was in. When Señor Velarde finished laughing Chuy asked him—

“Why did he quit?”

The old man nodded.

“The same question I asked. That everyone asks.”

“And no one knows?”

The old man shook his head. The he leaned toward his guest.

“I bet there’s a woman.”

Chuy smiled and glanced away. Then nodded once at the old man.

“And you think she looks like the hula girl. With big chichotas.”

The old Señor shrugged.

“Why not?”

Chuy smiled and shook his head and then he laughed.

“Yeah,” he said. “Why not.”

Chuy’s eyes settled on the Bernals. He watched them talk and laugh and mill about while he remembered Father Vincente standing before the altar giving the service for Frescura. And how grateful he had been for the calm goodwill and understanding the priest radiated on that challenging day. When Chuy spoke the sound of his own voice surprised him—

“I don’t blame him.”

He turned back to Señor Velarde.

“How can a man be a priest in a world like this?” Chuy said.

The old man shook his head slowly.

“Beats the hell out of me.”

### 13

Chuy wondered at a life that could put a hula girl on a man’s bicep, then turn him into a priest, then turn him back into a civilian. Apparently the man Chuy only knew as Father Vincente had lived a very different life before he became a priest. Then lived a second life as a priest. And now he was starting a third with the color off again. That was a lot of lives for one man. Who was still young enough to have more than a few years to cram some more lives into.

Old Señor Velarde watched his guest and waited.

Chuy let him wait. He was imagining other lives for the former priest.

Merchant marine. College professor. Circus clown.

Eventually Señor Velarde cleared his throat.

“So tell me,” the old man said.

Chuy turned to his host. Señor Velarde wore a broad smile on his weathered face. There was a spark in his pale clouded eyes.

“How are your dead this year?” the old Señor said.

The cemetery seemed very loud. Chuy heard about fifteen voices speaking all at once. A tractor was going somewhere. Crows yelled at each other. Chuy wondered if the old man somehow knew that this year his dead were with him much more strongly than ever before.

But how could he?

Chuy felt like he could reach out and touch his dead. His mother and father and his two brothers. Most unfortunately his sister. Long gone Juan Bernal. Every dead person he had ever known seemed to be up out of the earth (and the river) and restored from being ashes and dust and were busy walking about making his life a crowded mess. Even a kid he barely knew from way back in grade school who died of appendicitis in the second grade returned to Chuy recently. For the first time ever.

But there was no way Señor Velarde could know this. What Chuy was going through with his dead. Maybe it was a question he would have asked anyone. Just a little something he thought up and liked the sound of. Maybe he had already popped this same question a dozen or more times today.

Chuy blew out his breath and shook his head before he answered.

“Busy,” he said. “This year my dead are very busy.”

Chuy felt chills when Señor Velarde placed a gnarled hand on top of his. He looked down at the unexpected hand resting on his own. Then up into the old man’s face. Ancient eyes peered deep into Chuy’s. The old Señor smiled and nodded once. A slow deep bow of his stately gray head. He squeezed Chuy’s hand and his voice rasped from deep back in his throat—

“Yes. That’s exactly how it is. The dead are so busy.”

Señor Velarde nodded again, just as slow and deliberate as the first time. He marked his next words by taking his hand away from Chuy’s and raising a crooked finger into the air—

“This year more than others.”

Once more he peered deeply into Chuy’s eyes. Then his cough returned hard and shook through him. His handkerchief came out and he made a swipe across his mouth and stashed the cloth away. Chuy watched the old man and was glad to be here talking with him. Sharing this feeling about their dead had brought him a measure of peace. He was grateful to the old Señor for calling him over.

### 14

Señor Velarde turned away and bent down over the side of his chair. When he turned back he was holding two small glasses. He handed them to Chuy then turned and bent down again and brought up a tall clear bottle. Chuy caught a glimpse of the label and gladly confirmed it was tequila. He craved the hot bite of it in his throat and in his stomach. Señor Velarde poured a dose into each glass and returned the bottle to the ground. When the old man was seated upright again Chuy handed Señor Velarde one of the glasses. Their eyes met and they raised their tequila into the air.

Then they both said together—

“To the busy dead.”

They laughed together as they clinked their glasses. Then were quiet while the tequila burned. And for a few moments after. But it was not a day to be quiet for too long. Soon the old man and his guest seated in the folding lawn chairs among the graves under the tall trees of the old village cemetery were laughing together again.

They knew their dead would understand. That even the most begrudging of those many who now lay beneath the dirt and rocks and patchy grass of this well-used graveyard would not fault them for their amusement. What point is there in being alive if you cannot laugh? And what is more deserving of being abused with laughter than the ridiculous absurdity of death?

You might as well be dead yourself. If you do not laugh at it.

And of course the dead would laugh too. Not only at death but at anything and everything. The dead would give everything to laugh again.

If God would only let them.

## The Owl Must Hunt Again

### 1

Three cars were parked at Rico’s. Inside two tables were occupied. Chuy and Luis were behind the bar. They stood at the sinks discussing a few details for tonight’s event. When they finished Luis went down the bar and turned into the kitchen. Voices emerged as he pulled the door open. Chuy heard Terésa mention oregano. Then the door swung closed and the voices were silenced.

Chuy went down the bar to the stereo and turned it on. A pedal steel came gliding out of the speakers. Chuy looked at the glowing radio dial and hoped Rico would approve of how they were executing his plan. Of course his plan had called for him to be executing it. And had its roots all the way back when he first bought this place. Rico intended to put the kitchen back in service as soon as he saved enough money. But the years kept piling up and Rico’s bar became a thing of its own.

Chuy returned to the middle of the bar and stood with his back to the room. Before him, opposite the sinks and the taps, at the center of the mirror behind the bar, between the shelves of bottles, was the carved wooden sign with the sleeping sombrero-wearing fisherman. In front of the fisherman and his fishing rod was a brass cremation urn. Serving as a foundation, laid flat beneath the sign and the urn, was Rico’s boxed copy of *Tales from the Spanish* by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón.

Chuy did not open the book when he assembled this shrine. He did not know what remained pressed within its pages. If someone told him at this moment his eyes would tear and he would have to sit down. So it was good that no one did. Chuy needed his strength.

He looked at the carved wooden sign and remembered the last time he saw it out front on the black metal door. Which was also the last time Rico hung it there. He remembered coming down the lane in his truck and finding Chela Varga standing before the locked door staring at the slumbering Mexican. He remembered cutting his wheel to veer into the lot, rolling his window down, and telling her that whenever that sign was on his door you could find Rico Lupe up at Los Pilares.

He remembered pointing to the north and shouting at her—

“What are you waiting for? Go get him!”

He started to pull away. Then jammed on his brakes. He leaned back out of his window again and asked her if she knew Rico’s car. She did not. She had never seen it. He described the long red convertible and told her it was a 1965 Chevrolet Impala SS. Diligently maintained in impeccable condition. Then he pointed to the north again and commanded her again to go find Rico. To go look for his car up at Los Pilares.

Then he got his truck moving again and this time he kept going.

He had been full of hope for his friend as he rolled away.

After this remembrance, as had become his habit, Chuy made a fist and rapped three times on the wooden sign. Then wondered, not for the first time or the last, why he kept doing that.

### 2

Señor Velarde was holding forth at a table full of old men. Chuy arrived with their drinks and smiled when he heard the old Señor describe again his new favorite tattoo. Those chichotas seemed to grow bigger with every retelling. As Chuy lifted the last glass from the tray and placed it on the table Señor Velarde turned and looked up at him.

“Chuy. Did you know Father Vincente was Greek?”

One of other men cut in—

“He’s not a Father anymore.”

Señor Velarde turned to this man.

“I don’t know what else to call him.”

“Just Vincente.”

Señor Velarde pointed at Chuy.

“Then he won’t know who I’m talking about.”

The objecting man shrugged.

“Still. He’s not a Father anymore.”

Señor Velarde waved dismissively at his critic.

“Bah! You’re being a pain in the ass.”

The objecting man shrugged again. The others seated at the table laughed. Chuy joined them. Then the old men all looked up at him expectantly. Chuy tucked his empty tray under his arm.

“What?”

Señor Velarde raised a hand and gestured at him.

“Did you know that Father Vincente—”

He turned and pointed at the objector.

“Be quiet you.”

Even the objecting man laughed this time.

Señor Velarde turned back to Chuy.

“Did you know he was Greek?”

“No.”

Señor Velarde raised both hands in the air.

“Of course you didn’t! No one knew!”

Now the objecting man raised his hands.

“So what! So the man is Greek! Who cares? Why are you making such a big deal out of this?”

“He spoke such good Spanish.”

“A Greek priest can’t speak Spanish?”

“You know what I mean.”

Chuy interjected—

“Who said he was Greek?”

Father Vincente pointed at the objector.

“He does!”

The objecting man threw his hands up in the air again.

“I keep telling you! My sister! She told me!”

Chuy narrowed his eyes at the objecting man.

“How do we know you even have a sister.”

He didn’t expect the old men to find this so funny. While they were laughing themselves silly Chuy remembered he came over here intending to turn on the sign when he was done at this table. He decided he better get to it before he forgot again and left the old men laughing behind him.

He was approaching the door when it swung open—

And Chela Varga appeared right in front of him.

They froze. Then the singer smiled and nodded once and got moving again. Behind her followed the rest of Los Corchos Rojos. When they were done streaming in Chuy recovered himself and stepped past the door to the switchbox mounted beside it. He hesitated at the switch. Then flipped it over and decided he could use some air.

### 3

He hadn’t seen her since the night when he stood behind the bar and told her and her mother and the rest of the barroom that Rico was dead. Which he considered to be the single stupidest and most ill-considered thing he had ever done. He had known for several months now that she would be here today. And had spent those several months wondering how he would handle it. Now here she was and he was still wondering.

In a moment he would go back inside to whatever would happen. But before he did it was necessary to inspect Rico’s sign. He had disliked the man who came to repair it—hated him actually—so he needed to keep a sharp eye on that scoundrel’s handiwork. To make sure the unlikable repairman had done what he was paid for.

The sign seemed fine. Honestly it looked great. That was good. Tonight the sign should look especially wonderful. Even if that meant Chuy didn’t have an excuse to be angry at the hateful man who repaired it. He moved his eyes over the two-foot-high neon letters that spelled his dead best friend’s name in flowing red script.

“Ah Rico, you bastard. Why did you have to go and die on me.”

Chuy sighed and told himself he was being an asshole and went back inside.

Where the first person he saw was Chela Varga. Standing in a pool of light on the stage Rico requested in the last conversation he and Chuy ever had. Or more accurately the stage Rico suggested. Since he wasn’t definite and only said he might want one. But he got one anyway. Chuy had completed the stage two days ago. Tonight would be its inaugural performance.

Chela was speaking with one of her fellow musicians. Chuy saw what Luis meant. He said her beauty had turned subtly tragic. There wasn’t any one thing you could point to and say that’s the thing right there, that’s what makes her so. But it was undeniable.

Luis said her voice had changed too. That the timbre had become darker and more poignant. That now often people wept uncontrollably when she sang. Chuy hoped he wouldn’t be crying like a baby the moment she opened her mouth. Then felt again a stab of guilt and remorse when he recalled that she had not opened her mouth in a professional capacity for three months after the last time she came here. Because of what happened that night—what he had done, the shock he had given her—she left here unable to sing.

But at least her transformation, however painfully achieved, had been good for business. Luis said La Fuente Azul was packed for every performance by Los Corchos Rojos. And the crowds weren’t there to hear the guitarrón.

Although the guitarrón man did his part. They had added some unexpected material to their repertoire—vintage country songs. The highlight of which was a show-stopping rendition of “Walking After Midnight”. That opened as a haunting call-and-response between Chela and the guitarrón.

“It gives me chills every time,” Luis said.

Luis heard these songs were added at Chela’s insistence.

Señor Armesto only relented when Chela threatened to quit.

### 4

Chuy went behind the bar and past Terésa who was seated in his old habitual spot beside the cash register. He added the empty tray he was still carrying to the stack beside the sinks. The tray that had carried the drinks he delivered to Señor Velarde’s table what seemed like an hour ago.

Chela had finished speaking with her colleague. Now she was staring across the room. Chuy followed her gaze—

To Terésa. He looked again. Just to make sure.

He had not been mistaken. Chela Varga was staring at his wife.

Chuy felt hot all over.

He returned to where Terésa was seated. Checked one more time just to be absolutely certain. Then bent down so he didn’t have to raise his voice.

“She’s staring at you.”

“I saw that.”

“You think she knows?”

“I can’t think of any other reason for her to stare at me.”

“Me either. So she must know.”

“Would he tell her that?”

“Yes. He would tell her everything.”

Terésa closed her eyes.

“It was such a very long time ago.”

She opened her eyes again and peered up at Chuy.

“Why stare like that?”

Chuy didn’t want to answer.

But today wasn’t the day not to.

“Before her, you were the only one. So you cast a long shadow.”

“But nothing ever happened.”

“He loved you. That happened.”

“But so long ago. And he was in love with her now. And she loved him back. Which has to matter more than anything.”

“Yes. All that is true.”

“So why stare at me? What do I matter now?”

“Once you love someone they always matter. You know that. And anyone that mattered to him will matter to her. Forever.”

“Yes. I know that.”

Terésa shook her head.

“But I don’t want to. It’s just too sad.”

### 5

Esteban brought a plastic milk crate out of the storeroom and put it upside-down behind the sinks. Chuy thanked him and stepped up onto the crate and looked out over the room. He was going to ask for everyone’s attention but he didn’t have to. In a moment the full room was quiet and every face was turned toward him.

He put a hand to his mouth and cleared his throat.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming here today. It would have meant a lot to Rico. And it means a lot to me.”

He scanned the room. There were faces he had known for decades. Faces he had met more recently. Faces he had never met.

“I’ve tried to talk about him before. But I couldn’t do him justice. Today I want to try again. Now that I’ve had more time to think. I needed time, a good long amount of time, to understand everything he meant. To all of us who knew him. I know some of you here today never met Rico. Hopefully by the time you leave you’ll feel like somehow you knew him too. At least a little.”

Chuy spread his arms.

“So that’s what this is all about. To celebrate the man. So we can all know him a little better.”

He put a hand on his chest.

“And to keep him with us. Alive in our hearts.”

Someone coughed. Chuy cleared his throat again.

“He didn’t know how much he meant to us. I tried to tell him. More than a few times. He wouldn’t hear it. He changed the subject. Or told me to shut up.”

Quiet laughter. Chuy smiled.

“He told me to shut up about a lot of things.”

The laughter was louder this time.

“He felt he didn’t deserve it. All of us caring about him. Like he had done something wrong. And was trying to…”

Chuy frowned.

“What’s that word?”

He looked down at Terésa. She was with him behind the bar. Standing on his left side. She frowned and shook her head. Chuy smiled at her.

“Atone,” Chuy said.

He looked back out at the room.

“He seemed to feel that he needed to atone for something. Some sin he imagined he had committed. I could never get it out of him what he thought he had done. But it was like he thought he had one of those permanent black marks on his record. Those ones they scared us with when we were kids. A black mark on his soul he could never make go away.”

Chela lowered her head.

Chuy’s eyes dampened. He blinked them clear again.

“He was a damn fool for thinking that. Rico had a good soul. The best. A pure soul. He was as kind and generous and thoughtful as anyone you could ever hope to meet. Anyone who knew him will tell you that. We could all benefit from his example.”

Chuy took a deep breath.

“I never knew him to be selfish. How many people do you meet that you can say that about?”

Chuy shook his head.

“Not many.”

He raised a hand.

“Okay. That’s enough of me just rambling.”

He looked down as he drew a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. Raised his head again and held the piece of paper aloft.

“I wrote a little something. A toast. Does everyone have a drink?”

Chuy said to himself—

“Actually I don’t have a drink.”

Only a few people down front heard him. Most of them laughed. Others further backed craned their necks trying to learn what they had missed.

Meanwhile Luis had retrieved a frosted mug from the freezer. He raised it to the taps and pulled Chuy a beer. When the mug was full he passed it to Esteban. Chuy bent down to take the mug from his nephew.

“Thank you.”

Chuy raised the mug up over his head. He looked down at the piece of paper in his other hand. Even though he had memorized what was written there. Looking at the words steadied him.

His voice rang out loud and clear—

“To the many sinners who have called this place their second home. To the wayfarers who have wandered in seeking refuge. Rico Lupe was a holy man. A mystic of the mix. High priest of the frosted mug and the double shot. Grandly elegant and gracious dispenser of medicinal libations. When we had that certain illness, Rico was the one who cured us.”

Chuy raised his glass higher.

“So let us all drink to him.”

Every arm was lifted upwards.

Chuy called out a little louder—

“To our Saint Rico of the margaritas.”

For a second there was no reaction. His words hung in the air.

Then the crowd spoke as one and echoed him—

“To our Saint Rico of the margaritas.”

They drank.

Chuy nodded at the room.

“Thank you. All of you.”

He grew embarrassed. He turned away and went to step down off of the milk crate. He stopped when he heard someone clapping. He turned and saw Señor Velarde had risen from his seat and was applauding. Others joined the old man. The applause swelled and filled the room and the tempo grew faster. There were whoops and shouts. Someone emitted an ear-splitting whistle. People began pounding on the tables and stamping their feet.

Chuy knew some of this was for him. He hoped most of it was for Rico. And he knew a lot of it was just because. Just because they were alive.

He decided he didn’t care how much of it was for one reason or the other. What mattered was the joy they shared. That they stole away from death. That everyone felt there was something to be celebrated.

Here and now. At this moment.

In this life that was too quick to leave us.

### 6

Just as Chuy feared he wept copiously when Chela sang. There was nothing to be done about it. Tears streamed down his weathered face. Terésa clutched his hand and laughed at him. He laughed back at her and kept crying.

The song that destroyed him most was the song that destroyed everyone in the room: “Walking After Midnight”. Chills ran up and down his spine from the moment Chela and the guitarrón opened with their call-and-response all the way through to the closing line that Chela delivered a cappella.

Chuy was overwhelmed by knowing how Rico would react. If he could watch and listen from the other side. Here was the love of his life in his bar singing one of his all-time favorite songs as a dark and haunting lament of two lovers forever separated. Eternally searching for each other, but doomed to remain alone in perpetual post-midnight desolation.

How could anyone who knew the backstory not be destroyed?

### 7

At midnight Chuy switched off Rico’s sign. The empty parking lot fell into darkness. No human presence watched the neon dim and glow like embers before going dark. The only sentient witness to this transition was a great horned owl perched on a cottonwood limb above Rico’s casita.

The owl turned when Chuy stepped out the back door. He locked the door behind him then walked slowly to his truck. He climbed in, sat staring into the darkness for a moment, then started the engine and turned on his headlights. They illuminated the unoccupied casita.

Chuy sat with his hand on the shifter remembering being inside with Terésa going through Rico’s things. And felt threatened by an unquenchable grief. They would have to find a tenant soon. They couldn’t afford to leave the casita empty.

He put his truck in gear and started across the lot. Out in the lane a rabbit appeared in his headlights. He took his foot off the gas and was about to ease on the brakes when a huge pair of talons appeared just above the rabbit and an enormous bird filled the pool of light for only an instant then disappeared.

Chuy jammed on the brakes. The truck lurched to a stop.

“Holy Mother of Christ.”

He got his truck moving again.

He did not see the owl circle close behind him. He detected a flash of motion in his mirrors but by the time his eyes got there the mirrors were empty.

They moved in parallel. The owl off to his right, flying low over the yards and fields, the dead rabbit dangling in its talons. Chuy sensed something was out there and told himself he couldn’t know that. But he knew it anyway.

The owl pulled ahead of him. Crested a line of trees and landed atop the peaked tin roof of the mission church at the corner of Carril Espinoso and Entrada Oeste. The metal roof reflected dim silver from faint starlight. The rising moon had yet to crest the distant rim of the great valley. The owl listened to Chuy’s approach as his truck rolled along the lane.

Then the owl began devouring its kill. It ignored Chuy’s truck as it rolled past the church and across Entrada Oeste. It also ignored the other vehicle it was aware of, the black Audi sedan entering Carril Espinoso from the east.

The driver of that car made a sweeping turn off Los Huertos Road and into the dirt lane, then swung wide into Rico’s parking lot and rolled to an abrupt stop. The engine and headlights died, the driver’s window slid down, and a woman’s face came out into the deep night, a long Anglo face that turned up toward the stars. The woman’s sharp nose sniffed the still night air, which carried the scent of water through the bosque where the river coursed ever-onward, and of rich bottom earth turned in a garden nearby. Then she lowered her face and traced her eyes along the front wall of the bar.

As Chuy locked his truck and crossed his yard and mounted his front steps and moved quietly into his darkened home, back down the lanes the Anglo woman in the Audi restarted her engine. She had not left her car, had not set foot in the gravel and dust, and had not tried the black metal door.

The Audi continued along Carril Espinoso, where like Chuy before her the driver was unaware of the enormous owl perched on top of the old church. When the Audi turned south on Entrada Oeste, Chuy was sitting on his bed, pulling off his boots. Terésa was asleep beside him. The great horned owl on the tin roof of the old adobe mission church, becoming sated and pausing its gruesome meal, blinked at the Anglo woman’s departing car.

Then the owl finished eating. And sat heavy with it atop the church. It sat and blinked and digested till the Audi sedan was back in Las Haciendas and unoccupied, the windows up and the doors locked, the muffler ticking loudly in the cooling night air.

Inside her old adobe house Madilyn Kovac was sprawled on her back across a wide bed of yellow pine, staring up at the white stucco ceiling, her eyes fixed on a thin crack that forked like a snake’s tongue. The long Anglo woman sprawled across the bed pressed both hands over her face, sobbed silently for most of a minute, then rolled to her side and turned off the lamp that sat on the low side table made of the same yellow pine as the wide bed. In the dark she let out a strangled gasp. Then she and her house were quiet.

The great horned owl shook out its imposing wings. Then dove from the tin roof of the old adobe mission church and flew north and a little east across the old village. A horse turned its head when the owl cast a shadow across its paddock. Eventually the owl crossed Los Huertos Road. Beat its silent wings across a wide field. Then disappeared into the black-shadowed depths of the ancient bosque. And mounted to a roost high in a towering old cottonwood.

Tomorrow would come soon and the owl must hunt again.