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Desperate Times Call

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

DESPERATE TIMES CALL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Hector Duarte

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Hector Duarte, and entitled Desperate Times Call, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Lynne Barrett

Vernon Dickson

Debra Dean, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 7, 2017

The thesis of Hector Duarte is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Hector and Maria Duarte, for their patience and support. Los quiero mucho.

To my girlfriend, Samantha Salmon, I send infinite thanks for seeing me through this grueling thesis. I wasn't the easiest person to deal with when things got rough, but you offered the life preserver that kept my head above water every single time. I have so much love for you, Boo Boo.

To all my friends who encouraged me to keep going in moments I was ready to throw in the towel. Your support and words of kindness, (sometimes harsh words), will never be forgotten.

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Many thanks from the bottom of my heart.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

DESPERATE TIMES CALL

by

Hector Duarte

Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor Debra Dean, Major Professor

DESPERATE TIMES CALL is a collection of short stories and a novella about people whose lives intersect with violence. The young girl in *Of Course She Would* is forced to leave her home after finding her meth-addicted father dead of a heart attack. Tomas Mangual, the main character of *She Said Two*, sets off on a blind date to discover his counterpart has recently been the victim of a disturbing hate crime. The featured novella, *Diablo Corrido*, raises the question: How far would someone chase their ambition to see a life-long dream come true?

Using the intimate perspectives of first-person and close third-person points of view, *DESPERATE TIMES CALL* offers glimpses of characters chasing dreams of success, romance, wealth, even normalcy, but coming up empty-handed.

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Of Course She Would

Her father lay with a puddle of vomit next to his lifeless body. It pooled around his stubbly cheek.

His left arm was stretched full length. The index finger seemed to point accusingly in her direction. Natasha carefully pulled him away from the vomit, offering her father a last bit of dignity before the cops would see him.

It was her last year of high school. She was eighteen. In less than a month, high school would be behind her and it'd be time to cut out on her own. Destiny was speeding up those plans.

After calling the police, she unhooked his gold necklace and placed it around her neck. The dolphin and money bag charms were cold from the air conditioner's direct blast. Her father always ran hot.

She kissed the money bag and traced the one-hundred etched into it with her thumb. As a kid, she teased him it looked like a boxing glove. He would smile back and insist that one day it would work its magic. It never did.

Officer Rathburn pulled a phone from his shirt pocket and handed it to Natasha. "Make it quick."

Natasha flashed a fake smile of appreciation. "Hope she answers."

Rathburn let out a dismissive sigh.

Aunt Milagro had turned her life around six years ago and stopped offering yearly invites for Natasha and her father to spend summers in Blooming, a suburb close to Orlando. Natasha

was twelve the last time she called and her aunt had said, “When my junkie brother cleans his life up, then he can come and spend some time up here. Till then, he isn’t welcome.”

Now, Natasha was calling to invite herself because there was no other place left to go.

“Muerto?”

“Si, tia.”

“And there’s nowhere else for you to stay?”

“I wouldn’t call if there was. Believe me.”

Milagro sighed. “Leave it to Alberto to do something like this.”

“Tia, please.”

“When are you coming?”

“I have to take care of getting Dad’s body to the station and everything, so give me a couple days and I’ll take the bus up there.”

“Fine. Bring money so you can go to the grocery store when you get here. Can’t expect me to feed you too.” Milagros hung up.

Rathburn gently took his phone back. “You sure he hadn’t shown any signs of ill health or anything that might cause concern leading up to this?”

“His whole life was cause for concern.”

Rathburn thumbed notes into his phone. “Had he set up funeral arrangements?”

She shook her head.

“Don’t know or never did?”

“Look around.” Natasha pointed to the cracked floor tiles, paint-chipped walls, and specks of puke.

“We need to go to the station.” Rathburn looked around and leaned in. “Why don’t you look around nooks and crannies? See if maybe he left behind an envelope or brown paper bag somewhere. I’ll hang outside and give you a few minutes.”

Natasha also leaned in close and placed a gentle hand on his chubby shoulder. “Thanks so much.”

Rathburn took a step back. “Take your time. I’ll be waiting outside.”

A thick mixture of dirty socks and jasmine incense hit her when she stepped into her father’s room. She organized the three pairs of shoes he rotated since forever into a short row. His white tank tops were stained yellow under the armpits. Hidden underneath them was a glass pipe far past its prime, its chamber soot-black.

Natasha always argued with her father to make the bed first thing in the morning. That way, it was done and there was one less thing to worry about. Even on his last day, he hadn’t listened. So, she made it for him, pulling the linen tight across the bottom-right corner. She heard paper crinkling and lifted the mattress. There was a plastic freezer bag stuffed with balled-up rolls of money. Her unintentional inheritance was all one-dollar bills that added up to fifty dollars. She stuffed them in her pocket, turned off the lights, and closed the door. Before heading back outside, she put the money in the top drawer of her desk.

Rathburn flicked his cigarette hard into the street when he saw her approaching. “Took a while. Find anything?” His moustache jumped with the hard syllables.

“My dad didn’t leave any money behind. Is the cremation expensive?”

“You sure your father never mentioned a funeral? An envelope hidden somewhere in case he wasn’t around some day?”

Natasha shook her head.

Rathburn looked at her over the frame of his glasses. "Come with me," he whispered.

She followed him to an unmarked detective's car. When he leaned in to the center console, she saw some of the top of the detective's ass-crack.

Natasha turned and looked up to the sky.

"This is my card," Rathburn said.

Natasha took it and smiled.

The detective leaned in closer. "Look. I can rig this, cremate him for free. It'll just take me a few days. Can you wait that long?"

"I don't have many options."

Rathburn showed up three days later when the sunset had turned the sky purple. When she opened the door, he handed her a clear plastic clipboard holding carbon-copy forms several pages thick on it.

He helped her along, pointing out where to sign and what parts to skip.

After she was done completing the forms, he handed a cardboard box wrapped inside a clear plastic bag. It was her father.

"When you headed to your aunt's?" he asked.

"Tonight. I can't stay in here much longer. It's weird without dad. I think he's going to come out of his room any minute," she said.

"The bus station at night? I'll give you a lift."

She needed to save as much money as possible. Natasha didn't dwell on the fact she might never see the house again, so she went to her room, grabbed her bags and cash, and followed the detective out to the car. Her father was tucked between her left arm and her ribs.

“Buckle your seatbelt,” he said, before slamming the car door shut.

By the time he turned out of her development toward down town, it was night time.

His brakes screeched when he pulled up about a block from the station’s front entrance.

Only a few people were gathered around the bus with Orlando spelled out in digital yellow letters. She might be able to sleep across an empty row.

“Need money?” Rathburn asked.

“Yeah. He didn’t leave anything.”

“You already said that.” He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a hundred-dollar bill.

“That should get you started.”

With the extra money, she could get a cab in Orlando to her aunt’s house. Natasha tucked the bill into her pocket. “Thanks, Detective Rathburn. I owe you big.” She hugged him tight.

He held her longer than what was comfortable. It took a hard pull to get his arms from around her.