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# Greater Miami: Stories

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

GREATER MIAMI: STORIES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

J. David Gonzalez

2013

To: Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by J. David Gonzalez, and entitled Greater Miami: Stories, 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.

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Denise Duhamel

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Vernon Dickson

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John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 20, 2013

The thesis of J. David Gonzalez is approved.

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Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2013

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to all the voices needing to tell stories, no matter the language.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

GREATER MIAMI: STORIES

by

J. David Gonzalez

Florida International University, 2013

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

GREATER MIAMI is a collection of short stories about the disparity between the hoped-for expectations of life in America—as seen through the prism of South Florida—and the reality of a life lived on the margins. The characters, ranging in age from early adulthood to the elderly, attempt to navigate the perils of a new and unfamiliar existence—physical and/or psychological—while seeking to recoup the losses of home and country, love and language.

The collection uses Miami as its setting due to the wide demographic range of its inhabitants, and the stories address themes of memory, love, sex, opportunity and privilege, the mayhem born of disinformation, and the anxiety of displacement. Each story in the collection describes a pivotal moment when the characters encounter a truth that had previously eluded them and then must deal with the repercussions of that knowledge.

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## THE BALLAD OF BIG BILL ASHLEY

Big Bill Ashley folds his uniform in quarters, lays it in his locker and hobbles towards the shower. His leg hurts. His ankle hurts worse. Like it has rocks in it instead of bone. He runs his fingers through his hair and slicks it back against his head, lets the water pound his face. Steam collects around him. The smell of the river is inky here and hangs in the air like tendrils in a garden. Fungus corrals the tiles near the drain.

A rookie deputy wanders in, sees Ashley and hesitates. He's heard the stories, wonders if he should give the man his privacy. No, he thinks, we're all on the same team here.

Any luck? the rookie asks, and whips his towel over the neck of the nozzle.

Big Bill Ashley's wife, Margaret, feels guilty about the eleventh item in the express lane, even if it is the diapers and she needs them like pronto. Landen is sick. He's almost a year old and again he's started rejecting milk. Two weeks ago for the first time in almost two months. Again about ten minutes ago in the frozen food section. Maybe it was the blast of cold air as she reached for a stack of Salisbury steak dinners; maybe it was the fluorescent lighting, reminding him of the hospital. Either way, something set him off and now he's bawling. She swears the people know it's somehow her fault. It's in the way they look at him, then at her.

The baby came coughing out of her two months early and flat out rejected breast milk the moment he tasted it. Vomited all over her chest. They tried everything the doctor told them. Similac, milk in powder, even goat. None of it would stay put. So the baby had

to. A month, six weeks, eight weeks, three months older and longer than the rest of the babies, but weaker, more pale, and shriveled as if his skin were a size too big, and she, at home, without the heart to bring down the banner that spelled his name in letters shaped like clouds and painted watercolor blue.

Big Bill Ashley said, He looks kind of like a lizard, and it made Margaret cry.  
Landen Coles Ashley. Inside an incubation tent.

Big Bill Ashley's knuckles are like tree snails, waxy but hard and ancient looking. In one hand he holds a mac-11 machine gun with silencer. In the other, a small rounded egg rests on the pedestal of his three remaining fingers. He stands behind a small podium at the front of a room.

Big Bill Ashley scans the faces like a beacon.

Gentlemen, he says, these are loggerhead turtle eggs. Approximately forty millimeters in diameter and weigh about three grams each. A nest can contain anywhere from eighty to a hundred and fifty eggs a clutch. In 1978 Elvis was already dead a year and loggerhead turtles were declared threatened by the Endangered Species Act. And that means we care about their well-being. Tremendously.

The law explicitly states that no person no matter how cute or clever shall disturb, take, have in his or her possession, sell, purchase or otherwise interfere with sea turtles, sea turtle eggs and/or sea turtle nests. Their very existence depends on it.



Now it would appear that a particular group of individuals have been telling it along that these eggs carry some sort of power. More particularly, the power to fuck like an old Indian warrior. Hanson, I see you laughing, so that tells me you'd like some.

Listen. We're going to have to focus here. These are not hippies or hillbilly poachers. We're looking at drug-runners. Bahamians. There's money to be made in the voodoo racket so suddenly they're going environmental and raiding nests.

Big Bill Ashley smacks at a board with drawings on it.

Four houses, he says. Lop-sided layout. We know at least five viewpoints from which they post lookouts. And yes, heavy artillery. It may not look like much when we show up but they have three things that we know of. Drugs. Guns. And these goddamn eggs.

Big Bill Ashley's wife finally puts their baby inside the car. He's giggling and relieved, a little sweaty but smelling of lavender powder, something else she purchased in the supermarket. Doused him in it she did. She doesn't know if he likes it but she tells herself he does, that he can recognize how happy it makes her to keep him clean smelling, that he recognizes how much it means to her and he'll learn to see it in her face, learn to spot the difference between pleasure and displeasure and make this face, the one she wears now, the one with the bouncing eyes, the face he'll learn to love, make him never want to see any face other than this one.

Ain't that right boogey-bear? she asks the baby, tickles him. And he, naturally, giggles and squirms.

Big Bill Ashley hacks into a napkin, shoves it into his pocket. He's never been in a botanica before, but here he is. The backroom is draped in smoke and the Priestess wears purple. Big Bill Ashley crosses his arms, tree trunks that they are.

For sex?

The Priestess grows smug on him, smiles a languid curl.

No, Mr. Ashley, she says, and looks over her shoulder. A lithe and shirtless Negro boy stretches and unfurls along the floor. His eyes are sealed.

Not simply sex, she says. Sex is a word so, unimaginative.

You prefer fucking?

Please, Mr. Ashley. She raises her hand, a jangle of jewelry. No need for that language here.

Then I don't understand what you're saying.

These, *turtle eggs*, Mr. Ashley, carry inside them a very special potion. Like all things in nature do. Even you, Mr. Ashley.

Her hand crawls across the table one finger at a time, dusty like a mausoleum spider.

No, says Big Bill Ashley, and snatches her wrist, they do not. He tosses her hand away.

Tsk tsk, says the Priestess, rubs her wrist. Someone such as yourself, such an ardent protector of these turtles, and you don't even know what you are protecting.

Big Bill Ashley's father Theodore is at home, snoring on the couch. The old man has got his favorite groove on. Windows open, the ballgame, raspberry schnapps. He

loves the sweat, the warm crush of humidity, the air so thick and bloated you can drown just drinking it in. He hasn't swum in ages. But this comes close.

Big Bill Ashley arrives at their home and the old man wakes, laughs.

What's so funny?

I just dreamt the best tree. It's got Dobermans in it. And they're lapping at coconuts.

Ashley looks at the old man, soaks him in.

You smell like piss, Dad.

The old man laughs again.

Big Bill Ashley's father was once the nastiest of the nasty. Poached every pelt, plume and hide the Everglades had to offer. And then some. Even once took the leg of a warden that got snake bit wandering around his property. The deterioration of the tissue began almost immediately. Theodore clubbed the man with a lead blackjack, laid him face down on a shortened picnic bench, tied him up with leather bands and hacked away, first with a cleaver to get through the meat, then a saw for the bone.

The courts tried slaying him with everything they could. Aggravated assault, kidnapping, torture, attempted murder. Until the Doc showed up, and testified to Theodore's actions saving the man's life. He explained how venom from a cottonmouth dissolves the flesh from the outside in, digesting the prey before it enters the snake's maw. He told how the warden's eyes now carried a hint of gold because the venom managed a ride to the top and the echo must've left its imprint.

You're not in one piece, that's for sure, said the doctor. But you're alive to tell it.

Theodore, a black bolo tie hanging from his throat, hair greased, toothy grin jagged and misaligned, raised his stumpy souvenir over his head in triumph. Here! Here! said the old man.

Big Bill Ashley wanted to know how his father snuck the leg into the courtroom.

Boy, said his father, you ain't ever going to know that. Even if I telled it to you.

Big Bill Ashley answers the telephone. The air conditioning is broken and his office is a swelter. Two fans sit atop file cabinets and whir back and forth like sprinkler heads.

Hello there, stranger, says the voice, husky. You sound sexy and lonely.

Quit it, Margaret.

Margaret. Who's that? Is that your wife's name? Your girlfriend? My name's Joanne and I'm a redhead with big bouncy tits, a real Victorian hussy. I'll make you forget all about her.

Quit it, Margaret.

Margaret huffs. You're no fun, she says. Then, after a pause, Landen's sick again.

Big Bill Ashley pulls out from behind his desk, lifts the rotary phone with the five fingers he does have. Paces.

Have you tried the powdered milk?

I've tried every milk but rotten. Are you coming home tonight?

Do you want me home?

I wouldn't be asking you. At least for dinner. I want to make something decent tonight. Have someone to share it with for a change.

Pause.

So?

I may not be done for a while.

You're right. The food will probably be cold.

Big Bill Ashley remembers a time when he knew the shape of their love. It was round and had a hole in it that they kept filling with weighted spheres like the game of skee-ball they played on their first date. A look of surprise, joy even, flooded her eyes as he rolled ball after ball into the pockets. Cardboard tickets continued to wag out of the machine like a tongue. He had never played this game before, but that night he was on fire. Every joke, every compliment, landed perfectly. She cheered him and hugged him and they walked hand in hand on fresh sod under a night sky shot up with stars and Big Bill Ashley angled her toward the tent full of balloons, t-shirts and goldfish and traded the tickets for a stuffed bear, some rubber erasers, and a lucky troll and still had three tickets left over.

Here, he said. He tore the stub in half, and they split the earnings. Now we've got to come back next year. Margaret eyed him curiously.

Is your job dangerous? she asked him.

It can be.

Then why do you do it?

Big Bill Ashley thought about telling her about his mother, about her dying young. When she grew sick everyone around her said it was the swamp. The doctor said it was the cancer, and that it started in her ovaries. Some of it had already been detected in her legs and some was headed north, to her lungs, and her heart.

What are ovaries? he had asked, too young to know.

That's where babies come from, his father told him. That's where you came from. He had wondered if him being born had put it there, or maybe he brought some out with him and carried it around like a reminder, like something that binds him to his mother.

Big Bill Ashley's eyes returned to Margaret, I'm good out in the Glades, he said.

Is that the only thing you're good at? asked Margaret, her eyes full of channels that lead to a place he imagined sharing with her.

I might have some surprises for you yet, he said, still thinking about the things that swim inside him.

Big Bill Ashley likes to tackle the bull by the horns, the neck, the tail, the goddamn hooves if he has to. Not two months minted from the academy did he find himself in his first pursuit by airboat. An anonymous tip had come through. Spoke only three words. Big bull gators.

Dead of night. The sounds of the swamp kept him vivid. Let his ears see what his eyes could not. Cicadas and crickets. The ructus of frogs. The soft clop of svelte hooves in the marsh. And then, the click of a light. A yellow rod stretching from here to there. The crack of a rifle. And it was done. He waited for them to collect their prize, to gun their engine, and he gunned his.

The older wardens had warned him. Hit a curve too hard and you'll go into a slide. And there's no controlling that.

The front of the boat must have clipped a mangrove root, something, and sent man and machine fast into the air. He tumbled through branch and rock and water and earth, heels over head over heels.

Ashley felt the breaks in his leg, his hip and his hand. His ribs more pop than crack. Face first he landed. Broken nose and toothless mouth stuffed with muck. No breath in his lungs. He tried to lean up but his hand failed him. Two fingers were gone and a third was on its way. He opened his eyes and his left one didn't work. He thought he lost his eye the way he did his fingers. Lost to the glades for food or fertilizer.

His mangled hand prodded his face until he learned what happened. He had taken a wicked gash on his front and a flap came down covering his eye like a patch. When he was touching what he thought was his missing eye was the raw pulp of his forehead and the wound left an opening as close to his skull as he ever wanted to be.

Now, inside his office, Big Bill Ashley says goodbye to his wife, returns the phone to its cradle, and massages the space above his eye as though he could put things back the way they were.

Big Bill Ashley danced with Margaret that night at the carnival, much to the disliking of a sugar farmer whose wife had left him around the same time his eyes began to pearl over with glaucoma. The man tried cutting in.

Sorry partner, said Margaret, but I may be busy here for a while. A while, it seems, was the time it took for the man to leave the ramshackle barn, pop open the glove

compartment of his rotted truck, and return with a chrome-plated .38. When the hammer clicked behind Big Bill Ashley, Big Bill Ashley swung around and deflected the bullet into his right buttock where it continued down and wedged itself in the meat of his thigh. Big Bill Ashley snatched the wrinkled farmer by the throat and squeezed until the man's face began turning lavender. He probably would've killed the man had Big Bill Ashley not collapsed. Everyone who saw agreed. He lost a lot of blood.

Big Bill Ashley's wife wasn't always his wife. She was someone else's first, and that man managed an arts and crafts store. She taught painting there, Tuesdays, Thursdays and weekends. And he smoked cigars inside the store and wandered the aisles relentlessly, hoping for thieves, while she congratulated mostly children on their versions of sailboats and windsurfers, a pelican, a snake in the brush, six witches.

Big Bill Ashley can't sleep. He turns on his side, crooks his arm under his head, turns to the other side, covers his eyes, gets out of bed and removes two thick sheets from the closet, folds them in half, lays them on the side that belongs to him, pads it thick like soil and slides under them. Maybe this will keep him still.

Beside him, Theodore snores like a lawnmower.

Big Bill Ashley's father refused to move into the city.

You were born here, he said. And your mother died here. A man's got to know when things are meant for him, Billy.



Big Bill Ashley tried selling his father on the idea of an ocean-side apartment, something with a balcony, where he can pot plants and care for a canary. Go swimming any day he wants. But the old man stood firm.

You can go if you want, Theodore said. I know how to take care of myself. He said he wanted nothing to do with traffic lights, newspapermen or fast food restaurants. He said he hated the city.

It's a strange world out there, Billy, the rich are too goddamn crooked and the poor too goddamn mean.

Big Bill Ashley takes his father to the beach for his birthday and the old man panics in the water, panics worse when his son supports him in a cradle. His arms hoist the geezer from his knees and behind his back. This is humiliating to Theodore. Once slicker than a moccasin, the old man now feels humiliated. Less buoyant than even flotsam.

Let's go, says Theodore. This is for the birds.

It's for the fish actually, says Big Bill Ashley. Theodore glares at him.

The old man sits bundled and shivering in the passenger side of his son's pickup truck.

Big Bill Ashley shuts the door, tries turning the engine over. The motor stalls.

You want to know how I got the leg into court that day? The old man looks straight ahead at the ocean, at the question his body can no longer answer. It was the goddamn leg I walked in on, he says. Strapped it to my own knee. Slid it into my own boot.

Big Bill Ashley looks over at this father, waits for him to look back.

That's always been your problem, Billy. It's always in front of your face and you never see it.

Big Bill Ashley tries to start his car. Again, and again.

Big Bill Ashley had given chase to drug runners and fugitives, game poachers, plant poachers, outlaws, drunks, men with tattooed faces, women with tattooed hearts, runaways, arsonists, illegal immigrants, gun runners, cultists, meth addicts, hippies, renegade cops from Ft Lauderdale, nudists, attempted suicides, and acid-headed teens screaming about the trees and the faces in them. But he's never chased eggs before. Especially eggs that purportedly figured lust and magic inside their shells.

The job came down quickly and with little red tape. Loggerhead turtle eggs were being poached from Macarthur Beach. The main suspect was a Bahamian crack dealer that ran a small time church from his home in north Broward. The man's name was Nehemia Fergusson. Or Maxwell Charity. Or James Russell Charity. Depending on where he'd been arrested, and for what.

Big Bill Ashley sees an airboat loaded with whitenecks pull up to the dock box. Greenie isn't supposed to be piloting. Tanned hide the color of burnt caramel, his skin crosshatched into patterns, looks like a snake when he shoves vinyl baggies into his pockets. When he looks up and sees Big Bill Ashley, you can almost hear the rattle.

The tourists unload and file away.

Goddamn it, Greenie. What'd I tell you about feeding those damn crocs?

Aw hell, Bill. You know how much these tourists pay for an all right time. Nobody's eaten here in years. Not bought a goddamn thing from the shop in months. I can't make it on these rides alone, Billy. That tip money counts for something.

Big Bill Ashley wants to throttle this man, abhors what he's implying. The encroaching world is the stuff of nightmares for Big Bill Ashley.

Before he answers the captain, Big Bill Ashley spots a young man and his mother, redheads the both of them, she dressed in heels and a skirt, and he imagines them to be French. It's her dress that puts that in his head. She dabs her son at the mouth with a towelette. The little boy turns and looks at Big Bill Ashley. Joy joy joy on the little boy's face. He holds his hand out. It's fleshy but empty. Or at least Big Bill Ashley thinks so. Because then the little boy shuts his hand, opens it, and suddenly holds a marshmallow. The boy plops it into his mouth, laughs again, and claps with his fat fingers.

Big Bill Ashley rounds the corner to the home of his wife and sees an officer arresting three teens. All three are handcuffed. One looks Latino; patches of facial hair, fucked-up mullet, listens to the officer with eyes wide open. The one closest to the street is on his side vomiting. And he doesn't stop. His eyes are closed. No one home. And a girl sits in the middle, dirty tank-top, red shorts, crying, the strands of her hair like tawdry ropes. She sees Big Bill Ashley as he drives by. Her eyes meet his, and his insides go cold.

Big Bill Ashley thinks South Florida should stop lying to itself. Someone needs to saw it off from the mainland, set it adrift and rename it something in an Indian tongue, something that means Little Prince of Nothing or, Back to Where Things Ought to Be. That someone might be him.

Big Bill Ashley's son bears little resemblance to the father. At Margaret's, Big Bill Ashley holds his son with his arms outstretched. The son laughs, kicks his legs, amused at all the space out here.

Big Bill Ashley nods his head, points with two fingers. This has been a long time coming. Nineteen months, give or take. Long enough for Landen to have been planted, cultivated, birthed, gotten sick, got healthy, then sick again. Big Bill Ashley sat out here for days in rain that felt like someone was hurling bags of coins to get what he needed.

The house is rudimentary. Seems more a temple. A half moon carved into a door made from cypress plank, the windows pieced together from bits of stained glass.

They've called in reinforcements and they rush the main building. Smaller units flank the posts. They were told to keep eyes for the neighbors, keep their guns light.

They use their numbers to impress and overwhelm, to stun the perpetrators into non-action. The men shout and curse, shatter windows, knock over tables and vases painted with storks.

The smell inside the compound is of burnt rubber and vanity oils. Someone shuts a door and begins flushing a toilet. Big Bill Ashley leads with his gun. His heart beats inside his skull. It's difficult to see through the smoke. All he makes out are limbs.

Finally he arrives at what he imagines to be the master bedroom. He shoulders his way in and aims his weapon at a thin black man. He's shirtless, wearing short purple shorts. A cigarette dangles from his lip. He stands still like a tree, cradles a young child in one of his branches. The room drowns in smoke and sunlight.

Hands in the air, shouts Big Bill Ashley.

If I raise my hands, asks the man, who will catch my son?

Big Bill Ashley hears the crack of thunder, as if it came from the man's voice.

Big Bill Ashley's mother doesn't have much left.

Tell me something you learned at school today honey, his mother asked him.

Butterflies taste with their feet.

That's nice honey, she said, and pulled the covers up towards her chin.

Big Bill Ashley's father says, Here, listen to this. He pulls the record from its sleeve and it makes a serpents hiss. Theodore puts the needle out on the edge. The player crackles and spits. The words *Doc*, *Merle*, and *Watson* are stacked atop *Cuckoo* and *Bird*. Big Bill Ashley sees them as they come around but doesn't know what they mean.

Theodore's eyes pool and open.

*Oh, the cuckoo she's a pretty bird.*

*Lord, she warbles as she flies.*

*She'll cause never more trouble*

*And she'll tell you no lies.*

The wind whistles behind the musicians. The recording is live.

Can you believe it? asks Theodore Simon Ashley.

Big Bill Ashley is pictured in a book titled *Keepers of the Marsh: True Tales of the Everglades Lawmen*. Beneath him are the dates when he was born and the one when he expired. His face is pocked as if the sun just blasted its way in there. Like, pump and kaboom. His eyes are rain-cloud gray and just as heavy.

Big Bill Ashley had a moustache ten feet long.

## UNA OFRENDA

*Like the waves of the ocean,  
wash away the trials that I bear, ...”*  
-Yoruba prayer

Dulce Ibanez shuts the door to the bedroom behind her and shuffles her way towards the kitchen. She is humpbacked and shriveled. She wears pale tan slippers dirtied to grey and a housecoat with deep pockets on each side. The front yoke is stretched and oversized and the top two buttons have fallen open. She's toothless and skeletal. Her hair, diaphanous as a dust ball, is flattened from her pillows.

The inside of her house is dark. Porch lights filter through the blinds and the glow outlines the dining table, rectangular and dressed in a long white runner. On top of the table are seven glasses full of water and an offering bowl layered in mint leaves, dandelion flowers and yam roots. Beside the bowl is a headless duck, lying on a palm frond, feathers intact. Dulce removes a box of matches from her pocket. She lights a series of blue candles and places them on the table. On the wall, a pendulum clock says it's a quarter to four in the morning.

She makes her way into the kitchen and turns on the light above her stove. She ignites two of the burners. On one she places a large pot of water and soap. The other, a saucepan of milk. Behind her there is a window that looks out onto the street. She squints through the blinds. A garbage bin. A pair of street lamps. Something she guesses is a dog. She cuts off the air conditioning, and cuts off the ceiling fans, and strains her ears to listen. She takes the saucepan with the milk and walks out the back door into her yard.

It's a small yard, no bigger than any of the others in Little Havana. Recessed in the corner is the toolshed her son Dagoberto built. All the equipment she'd need to keep her yard—the orange tree, the guava tree, the landscaping Dago paid for—was stuffed inside. He even came over and used them a few times. When things were good.

Dulce follows the stone path around a rotary clothesline. The air is thick with bugs. She comes to the chain link fence that separates her yard from her neighbor's. A siren mourns across Flagler Street. She sits in a patio chair beneath a bougainvillea tree and smells cigarette smoke.

“Already you're smoking?” asks Dulce. “At this hour?”

“I grew lonely waiting for you,” says Milagro, her voice so full of gravel you could scrape your knees on it. She's short and fat with a body like a stack of flapjacks. She wears a striped shirt with a wide neck and her arms pour from her sleeves. She sits with one leg on a backup generator, a 12000-watt beast capable of running a small hotel. She wears rollers in her hair, eyeglasses at the end of her nose, and last night's makeup on her face.

“Hand me the mugs,” says Dulce.

Milagro heaves herself off the generator and walks towards the fence with two tin mugs. She extends the mugs through a hole in the fence, keeps the cigarette in her mouth. Dulce divides the milk, and steam curls in the space between them like question marks. Milagro returns to the generator. She lifts a tiny metal pitcher and shows it to Dulce. Dulce nods, and Milagro pours a shot into each of the tins. She walks back to the fence and hands one to Dulce.



“To what do we toast to?” asks Milagro. She drops the cigarette butt and grinds it into the dirt with the fat of her foot.

“To not poisoning each other,” says Dulce.

“To forty fucking years of not poisoning each other,” says Milagro. She lifts her coffee and drinks.

Dulce drinks, and scalds herself on the coffee.

“Vieja,” says Milagro, “you used to respect our meetings. Now you’re showing up without even your teeth?”

“Mi’jita, it’s my gums. They’re just shot to shit. I went to the curandero for a healing and still nothing. The pain is just unbearable. It’s gotten so bad I’m thinking of seeing a dentist.”

“Come to think of it,” says Milagro, “you look kind of sweet this way. More grandmotherly. Somebody might even be inclined to feel sorry for you.”

Dulce blew a breath across the top of her coffee and sipped from it.

“I have only one question and then we can both go back to bed,” says Milagro. “Do you know where your son is?”

“Dago? I haven’t the slightest idea where he is.”

“You’re lying to me,” says Milagro. “I’m trying to help you and you’re lying to me.”

“You’re my oldest and dearest friend,” says Dulce.

“Friend?” asks Milagro.

“You’re my oldest and dearest something. Associate. Why would I lie to you?”

“Because Dagoberto is in real trouble this time, Dulce.”

Dulce sets her coffee down. She tugs at her housecoat. “This heat is unbearable,” she says. “Why don’t we ever talk inside? It smells like cat piss out here. And it’s full of bugs. It’s disgusting,” she says.

“You don’t trust me enough to come into my house, and I sure as fuck don’t trust you enough to walk in to yours.”

“This is true,” says Dulce.

“Let me ask you again. Do you know where your son is?”

“I can’t say that I do.”

“Then can you tell me when the last time you saw him was?”

“I don’t know. Eight, maybe nine months ago. My mind isn’t what it used to be.”

“You’re ninety fucking years old and you’ve never forgotten a debt, who paid it or who collected it, since the day we met. And now you’re telling me you can’t remember the last time you saw your son?”

“He’s a son of a bitch,” says Dulce. “Why should I keep tabs on him? He should be the one keeping tabs on me. His own mother. Alone in this house. At ninety. The least he could do is bring me groceries. That isn’t asking much, is it?”

“No, I suppose it isn’t,” says Milagro. She leans back on the generator, turns her mug upside down to show that it’s empty.

Dulce finishes the café con leche and turns her cup over as well.

Milagro removes another cigarette and lights it. “Victor is not happy,” she says.

“And?”

“And he asked me to talk to you.”

“We wouldn’t be out here if he hadn’t.”

“That’s right. You see, you do have some sense in you,” says Milagro.

“Doesn’t change the fact that I don’t know where Dago is.”

Milagro pulls at her face in frustration. “When was the last time you spoke to Victor,” she asks.

“Last Tuesday,” says Dulce.

Milagro laughs. “Last Tuesday?” she says. “You left your money sitting there for over a week. That’s not like you, Dulce.”

“I’ve been busy,” says Dulce. “I haven’t had the time.”

“You’ve been busy?” asks Milagro.

“I’m thinking of moving,” says Dulce.

“Really? A little late for freelancing, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t be freelancing,” says Dulce. “Just been thinking about a place by the beach. High up. My feet off the ground. Where I don’t have to see or talk to anyone. Imagine that.”

“Sounds nice. Why the sudden urge?” asks Milagro.

“Sudden to you, maybe.”

“Does Victor know you’re planning on moving?”

“You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“I feel honored.”

“Likely the last person too.”

“Has Victor tried calling you?”

“Yes,” says Dulce. She looks at the ground beneath her feet, at the trees in her yard, at her house, the back porch light humming. “But I didn’t answer.”

“Now why would you do a stupid thing like that, Dulce?”

“Because he knows I hate him more than I hate you.”

“Be that as it may, when Victor calls your telephone, you answer it,” says Milagro. “They’re looking for Dago,” she says. “Victor says Dago shot and killed El Manco at the Gato Tuerto last night. That block is Victor’s. That backroom is Victor’s. And he asked me to come and talk to you. He knows you and I have an agreement, an agreement that goes back to when we were little shits in Havana thinking we could run these numbers ourselves. And it’s worked,” says Milagro. “It worked there and it’s worked here. Because of Victor. He makes sure to keep trouble out of our hair, and we do our part to keep trouble out of his. Everything we have in this country we have because of Victor. We have protection, from rivals and from cops. And we’ve made a fortune, both of us. But Dago broke the covenant, Dulce. And you know what that means.” Milagro stubbed out her cigarette and immediately lit another one.

“Those things are going to kill you one day,” says Dulce.

“If not these, then something else,” says Milagro. “Now please, tell me, where’s Dago?”

Dulce folds her hands in her lap. “I do not know where Dago is,” she says. “But I know what they’re saying about him. About the shooting. And that’s not how it happened.”

“Don’t be difficult,” says Milagro.

“Dago was down big. That much I believe. He was always a terrible gambler. He got obstinate. Refused to lose. He doubled up and placed his father’s bracelet into the pot.”

“It’s always a stupid bet that sets off the powder keg,” says Milagro.

“It was his father’s bracelet,” says Dulce. “And El Manco won the hand. Now you tell me, what does a man with one arm want with a bracelet?”

“To show off the one good arm he does have,” says Milagro. “The fuck does it matter what he wants with that bracelet. He won the hand. If Dago wasn’t willing to lose the bracelet, he shouldn’t have wagered it. Cards are cruel, Dulce. It’s in their nature.”

“El Manco cheated,” says Dulce.

“And you know this because?”

“Because there were three shots fired last night. Two bullets are in El Manco. Where is the third?”

“Where does it matter where the third is?”

“Because El Manco was cheating and Dago called him on it.”

“Takes some skill to cheat with only arm one,” says Milagro.

“How do you think he lost his first arm to begin with?”

“And if El Manco did cheat?” says Milagro. “What of it? Dago could’ve gone to Victor and had him straighten this out. That’s the deal. That’s always been the deal.”

“You expect Dago to trust Victor? For that matter, you expect Dago to just let El Manco walk out with his bracelet, and trust that he’ll get it back? No. El Manco knew he’d been caught cheating and he shot Dago first. That’s where the missing bullet is. In my son. Dago killed El Manco in self-defense. It’s not his fault El Manco has terrible aim.”

“So you have spoken to Dago,” says Milagro.

“I have as many eyes inside el Gato Tuerto as you do, mi’jita.” Dulce stands and

stretches and looks something like a scarecrow in her coat. “Now if we’re done here, I’d like to go back to sleep. These meetings of ours take so much out of me.”

“Where is he?” asks Milagro.

“That’s the thing with Dago. He has so many connections. Between girlfriends and socios from back in Cuba, he could be anywhere. Have you tried the twin’s chapisteria, the body shop? There’s also that veterinarian in La Souwesera, by the bowling alley, you might want to look there. I think he does bullet jobs. I hear there may even be a new guy. In the Gables. His son studies dentistry. The old man doesn’t do the work. The kid does. And I’ve been told he keeps interesting hours.”

Milagro stood and squashed the last of her cigarette. “I want to believe you,” says Milagro. “I want to believe that what you’re saying is the truth.”

“I haven’t spoken to Dago,” says Dulce.

“This is going to be bad,” says Milagro. “Bad for the both of us.”

“Like I said,” says Dulce, “I’ve been thinking of moving.”

Dulce enters the kitchen and deposits the saucepan into the sink. She dabs her finger in the pot of soap water still on the stove. It’s not hot enough yet, and she turns the temperature up. She hears the door to her bedroom open and she shuffles into the hall. Dago is standing there, leaning on a wooden crutch, his pant leg soaked in blood. His head is big and bald and covered in sweat. In his right hand, he holds a glass of water with a set of teeth in it.

“Did she buy it?” asks Dago.

Dulce looks at her son. He's fat-lipped, and wears a gold tooth. A face like a collapsed tenement. He wears a green tracksuit and a pair of sneakers. She slides her way towards her son. She runs her tongue over her gums, and smacks her lips together. She takes the dentures from the glass and positions them in her mouth. Her jaw is fixed and box-like now. The teeth are enormous.

"Sit," she says.

Dago hobbles towards the dining table. He grimaces with every step. He's losing blood, and color. He sits on a chair with his leg stretched out, the bullet wedged high in his thigh. Dago looks at the offering on the table. "What's this all about?" he says.

"You know," says Dulce. She pulls a chair out from the dining table and sits up tall with her back straight. She watches her son squirm from the pain. "You look so much like your father," she says. "Doomed from the beginning."

"Tell me there's something to drink in this house," says Dago. "Beer. Something. Anything," he says.

"Wait here," says Dulce. She leaves her seat and returns with an unlabeled bottle of rum. She pours two shots and hands one to Dago. Before he drinks she places her hand over the glass. "Una bendición," she says. "A blessing." She closes her eyes, incants a prayer.

Dago tries to read her lips but has trouble focusing.

Dulce removes her hand and Dago swallows the drink. She hands him the second one and he chases the first with it.

"When are you going to take the bullet out," he says. "When is someone going to show up and take this goddamn bullet out?" His breathing is labored.

“Do you realize what you’ve done,” says Dulce.

“I know what I did,” says Dago. “I shot El Manco. Twice in the fucking chest. Put an end to his cheating ass.”

“El Manco wasn’t cheating. You can lie to yourself but don’t lie to your mother.”

“The fuck would he want with Papa’s bracelet?” says Dago. “It belongs to me. So what if he wasn’t cheating. What right does he have to steal from me, to take what’s mine?”

“Victor—”

“Fuck Victor!” shouts Dago. “I only wish he would’ve been there so I could’ve shot him too.” Dago laughs. “It’s clear to me now. That’s what we should’ve done a long time ago. We should’ve killed him, and taken the numbers for ourselves.” Dago coughs. He spits on the floor. “If I’m going to die,” says Dago, “I’ll curse his name all the way to the fucking grave.”

Dulce clucks her teeth at her son. Tears escape from her eyes and disappear in the folds of her face. “You have no soul,” she says.

“Fucking Christ, vieja,” he says. “Can’t you see that I’m dying? Spare me the heaven and hell.”

“You’ve always been a shit,” she says. Dulce stands and walks over to her son. She grabs him by the face. “I’m not talking about salvation. I’m talking about you, your body, and your time on earth. The soul isn’t some version of you that lives on after you die. Your soul isn’t inside of you. Your soul is like an angel, a guardian angel. A protector. It is outside of you, and protects against any harm that comes your way. You get injured, your soul is what heals you. Someone attacks you, spiritually, con un trabajo, your soul



protects you. But when you do something terrible, when you break covenant with the laws of nature, when you break the rules set by those who provide for you, you lose your soul. And when you lose your soul there is nothing left to protect you from evil. No one who goes it alone survives. This is something you've never understood."

"And what of your soul?" asks Dago. "After I die, what will happen to your soul?"

Dulce points to the table. "This is my ofrenda," she says.

"It's not going to be enough," says Dago. "It's never going to be enough." Dago coughs and grimaces in pain. "If you're wrong," he says, "and there is a hell, I'll save you a seat beside me." Dago closes his eyes, and his head slumps into his chest.

Dulce walks over to her son and feels his neck for a pulse. It's useless. She knows the bullet pierced something critical. His leg is sticky with so much blood it looks like molasses in the dark. The sun is starting to rise. She needs to hurry.

She takes the duck from the offering table and dunks it in the pot of soap water. She holds the duck by the feet and dunks it over and over until the feathers have lost the sheen from their natural oils. She dries the bird and begins plucking its wings. She stuffs the feathers into a small bag, then plucks the tail. She runs her hand against the grain and rubs the rest of the feathers loose, plucks them away in clumps, and shoves them into the bag as well.

Dulce then places the duck on a large cutting board. She drags a knife just below the drumstick and removes the feet. She locates the oil gland near the top of the tail and removes it in one go. She cuts a two-inch slit near the ass, reaches in and feels for the stomach, smooth and round like a river rock. She pulls the gizzard out and it drags the intestines along with it. She separates the liver and the gall bladder, removes the lungs

and the heart. She reaches deep in the bird and removes the kidneys with her fingers. She flips the bird and makes an incision below the neck and removes the grain sack, the voice box and the windpipe. She takes the hollowed out bird and dumps it in the trash. The heart, the liver, the gizzards, the windpipe and the feet, she drops in cooking oil and begins to fry.

Dulce takes the herbs from the offering bowl and binds them together with twine. She lights the bundle on fire and blows out the flame. She brushes Dago's body with the smoke, his head and neck, his shoulders, his chest and arms, his groin, his legs, from his toes to his head, back to his toes, back to his head. Dulce mumbles a prayer, asks for help purifying her son. She leaves the kitchen, heads into the toolshed and returns with a large plastic bucket. She fills it with the feathers from the duck and tosses in the remains of the purification herbs. She positions the bucket beside Dago. Dulce takes her knife and plunges it into the side of Dago's neck. It pains her to stick him this way, but this is no longer her son. She positions his head and watches the beads collect inside the bucket drop by drop. Dulce prays for appeasement. She kisses Dago on the forehead. "I only did what I had to do," she says.

The sun is shining and her son's body has stiffened in the chair. Dulce cleans the kitchen of any remaining gore from the duck and tosses it in the trash. She dumps the cooking oil in a plastic container, seals it and throws it in the trash as well. She performs the ofrenda with the cooked duck parts. When she finishes, she discards the offering on the table as well as the food. She takes out the trash and places it on the curb. None of this can stay in her house. The bucket, with the feathers and the mint and her son's blood,

she keeps. She burns a combination of sage, tobacco and spearmint and purifies the kitchen, the dining room, and the bedroom. Finally, she sits beside her son's body. All she can do now is wait.

The doorbell rings and Dulce stands to look through the peephole. She opens the door and allows Victor and two men she's never seen before to come inside her home. Of the two men, one is Americano, with wiry red hair. The other is a mulatto, his face covered in burn scars. And Victor.

Victor is stone-faced and sour and built like a bookshelf. His face is nondescript. Brown eyes. Moustache. Hair on his head thinning. To draw a police sketch would be to round up any number of Hispanic men, forty-five to sixty. He looks like no one and like everyone. Such is his advantage.

"It's a surprise to see you, Victor," says Dulce.

"You haven't been answering my phone calls."

"These ears of mine. I guess they're finally done for."

"No one said growing old would be easy."

"You always were so thoughtful," says Dulce. "And who are your new friends? Care to introduce them?"

"Show me Dago," says Victor.

"Of course," says Dulce. "This way." She leads the men into the dining room, and the men look at the corpse, and then at her.

"He wasn't a good man," says Dulce. "but he didn't pretend to be one either. That's commendable, isn't it? He was, in his own way, sincere."

“You know your son,” says Victor. Victor reaches into his coat and removes a blank envelope. “This is for you,” he says. “These are your earnings from last week.”

Dulce opens the envelope and counts fifteen hundred dollar bills. “This is kind of you, Victor. Thank you.”

“You’re a terrific earner,” says Victor. “You always have been. Now I believe you have something for me.”

Dulce leaves the dining room and returns with the bucket of feathers and blood. “My son’s sins were unforgivable. Allow this as compensation.”

“Dulce,” says Victor, “we have known each other a long time. You’ve always believed in our rules, abided by them. There are few who understand the old ways like you. But what Dago did, murdering a man in one of my homes, because, make no mistake, El Gato Tuerto is like a home to me,” says Victor, looking at the bucket, “is unacceptable.”

“He paid for it with his life. There’s no greater cost.”

“I’m sorry, Dulce, but it isn’t enough,” says Victor.

“What?” says Dulce.

The gringo with the wiry hair removes a pistol from his pocket and hands it to Victor.

“No,” she says, “Please. I have so much life to live. I want to own a lizard. I want to live by the ocean.” She falls to the floor and begs. “Please,” she says. “I did everything you asked.”

“This is true, vieja. You did do everything I asked. But you forget one thing,” says Victor. “I’m not your god.” Victor raises the pistol. And shoots Dulce straight through her teeth.

Victor hands the gun back to the gringo and the man wipes the pistol free of prints. The gringo places the gun in Dulce’s hand, and crushes her fingers around the trigger. He picks up the envelope of money from the floor and returns it to Victor.

The mulatto with the burnt face picks up the bucket of blood.

“Are we done here?” asks Victor.

The men leave the house and Victor locks the door behind them.

## WHAT MY FATHER CALLS WORK

It's five in the morning and I'm walking across the patio deck of my father's café. It's mostly dark out, but there's the soft glow of a coming sunrise just beyond the edge of the ocean. Never in my life have I been here this early.

I juice the oranges, the pineapples, and the sugar cane. I set four sheets of bacon to cook inside the oven, arrange the ceviche—fish and shrimp—in the display freezer alongside a pair of hogfish long past their prime. I remove the lobsters from the cellophane and place them too in the freezer. I take a bag of Cuban bread, cut the long loaves into quarters, butter them and stack them in a plastic bin. I chop onions, green peppers and parsley. Crush a mountain of garlic. I set the soups out to thaw, seafood bisque with no actual seafood in it and clam chowder, Manhattan-style. I replace the oil in the friers, one, two, three, and prepare a pyramid of silverware, a fork and knife mummified in a napkin. I brew two pots of Maxwell House, knowing few will drink it, then froth some milk, pour a double shot of espresso down the middle of a styrofoam cup and take it with me to the deck.

The horizon is brighter now, the sky turning the color of slate. The air is wet and cool and full of brine. Sea oats separate the restaurant from the sand dunes, and the sand dunes separate the oats from the shore. The beach is empty. A single lifeguard stand, a stack of beach umbrellas, and the lighthouse, tall and alone. I hear the hush of small waves and I can almost imagine this place before me and my father came to work here, before the Australian pine and the coconut tree imported from Malaysia, before pigeon

plums and the boiling of the gumbo limbo. I try and hold it all in, but I can't. There are too many natives, too many fountains of youth.

My father exits the office, a small storage space he shares with giant tins of tomatoes, and joins me on the deck.

*"Dime*, he says, "tell me what happened."

Jelly called me. Frangelica Stuart. I hadn't seen her or heard from her since the blow up at Sid's party.

"Everything good?" she asked. She was calling from her job, a bar and restaurant inside a Brickell high-rise. Her voice bounced off expensive tile from inside the bathroom. It was eleven pm. She'd been at work for five hours and had another three to go. Don't blame me for knowing her schedule.

"The usual," I said. "What's up with you?"

"It's Sid."

It was always Sid. Two weeks ago, he threw a party at his house where he had sex with Melanie Arguelles, so him and Jelly broke up. For real this time. Three weeks before that Sid got pulled over doing a hundred and ten in Jelly's car. She'd gotten drunk and passed out in the passenger seat and he'd been bumping coke all night so he was the clear choice to drive. The cops arrested Sid and drove Jelly home in the back of the squad car. They sentenced Sid to a year's probation, a suspended license and a shit ton of community hours. Hence the house arrest house party.

"He left a voicemail," she said. There's wetness in her voice. Was she crying?

“What’d he say?”

“That he needed to talk to me. That he was sorry. About Melanie. About the car. He wants to change. Said he can’t do it without me.”

“Did you call him back?”

“No. I called you.”

Music to my ears.

“You think he means it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, maybe. But can he? You saw how he was at the party. More weed, more pills.”

“And his parents?”

“In Ecuador. You think they want to deal with him? Wouldn’t surprise me if the only reason he called was because he’s all alone in that house. Only so much coke and Xbox, you know?”

This was Jelly coming to terms with it. Sid’s friends were jumping ship. Her and Sid were through. Someone in a skinny tie was clamoring for a cocktail. She needed to get back to work. Nothing could be done about either.

“Can I ask you something?” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Pick me up tonight.” Jelly’s never asked me to pick her up from work before. Sid always took care of that. Took. Past tense.

“What time?” I asked.

“Around two. I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.”



“You think we can do something?” she asked.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Let’s go to the beach. Let’s get fucked up. Something.”

“I’ll figure it out,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said, “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

This is what you have to understand. My parents came over in '92, during the Special Period. My father said it was when the island finally ran out of everything, food, electricity, hope. He says this like it’s the smartest thing anyone’s ever said about Cuba. And so my dad and my mom—my mom pregnant with me—came to Miami because enough was enough. My mom’s uncle ran a small chain of discount stores and he helped with a loan and my dad took the money and bought a corner café in Medley, a warehouse district full of body shops and mosaic wholesalers. The café had eight bar stools along the counter and a short row of benches along the wall. He named it *El Pez Trabajador*, the Worker Fish. That was in '95. I practically grew up there. After school I’d go to the restaurant and do my homework along the counter by the espresso machine. You know how much people tip a ten year old making a cafecito that blows their socks off? Enough for him to earn his own lunch money, that’s how much.

We were at *El Pez* for fifteen years. People liked us there. We lived fine. But one day my father and mother tell me they’re selling the restaurant and we’re moving to another restaurant, on Forty-first Street in Hialeah. Cell-phone stores, car dealerships, the Westland Mall. The restaurant had a great location and the space came dirt cheap, most

of the equipment included in the cost. My dad named it *Ya Tu Sabes!* This was us coming up. This was going to be the restaurant that got us out of the muck. Turned out the previous owner had stiffed the I.R.S. a ton of taxes and they came after my dad. He didn't understand what the previous owner had to do with him but lawyers kept calling the restaurant anyway. That was around the time my mom died. Sometimes, when I can't sleep, it's my father's face I see in the dark, trying to read the letters from the lawyers, trying to get through all that English without my mom. *Ya tu sabes*, indeed.

How he came to buy the third restaurant, the one we're running now, is another case of Cuban connect-the-dots. Suffice it to say somebody knew somebody who used to get their hair cut by somebody's aunt, they heard about what happened to my mom, and the next thing you know, we're being awarded the lease to the café and concessions inside of Bill Baggs, a state park at the tail end of Key Biscayne, one of Miami's most exclusive pieces of real estate.

My father was bursting. I hadn't seen him this optimistic since forever. He said the cafe was on a beach we used to visit back when I was baby, before the restaurants. He asked if I remembered it. There were squirrels everywhere, he said. Us eating guava paste straight from the jar. How much I loved playing in the sand, my mom helping me build castles. I said I did and it wasn't entirely a lie. I remembered the beach and I remembered my mom lathering sunscreen on my face but mostly I remembered the pine trees, the floor completely blanketed by these tiny cones that hurt to walk on. And the lighthouse. I remembered being scared of the lighthouse. That was then.

When we drove across the causeway to go see the new restaurant, the vista was enormous and glistening. The sky and the ocean were a matching blue. Hundreds of boats

lining the wet slips at the Rickenbacker Marina. Gulls flying in arrow shapes. We drove past Hobie Beach, past the Rusty Pelican and Marine Stadium. We drove past Crandon Park and my father said there used to be a zoo there. When we arrived at the park, gone were the Australian Pines, the squirrels and everything else I remembered. The park manager, a Fred Flintstone-looking type—big head, no neck, arms down to the ground—explained how the latest hurricane had flattened the entire park. The only thing left standing, miraculously enough, was the lighthouse, tall and straight like a candle. That was two years ago and now the park was preparing for its grand re-opening. We, my father and me and the restaurant we were going to open, were to be part of the park's re-branding. This was where we were going to sell sugar cane juice and fried cod fritters.

We have high hopes for you, said the park manager. And our hopes will make yours even higher, said my father, smiling the only way he knew how. We opened Billy Bagg's Lighthouse Restaurant—Tallahassee insisting on the name—in the fall of last year. And that's how I met Frangelica Stuart.

It was a Sunday. I was bussing tables and she walked in to the café. She was dripping wet, wearing a bathing suit with mismatched top and bottom, and tracking sandy footprints across the restaurant. She walked into the gift shop—a converted closet space selling beach towels and plastic dive masks—and started thumbing through everything. I followed her in and asked if she needed help. She said not really. I told her I could give her a discount if she saw something she liked. She asked me if I worked here. I told her I owned the place, well, my father did, but one day I would. She asked me if she could get

a discount on ice cream. Of course, I said, and we walked over to the freezer. I stood close enough to her to watch the blast of cold air draw goose bumps across her arms. She shivered and laughed and took a bite from a frozen mango pop and everything I ever wanted in this life came pouring right out of me. That's when Sid showed up.

And not just Sid either, but the whole crew—Dominick, Wilbur, Chasity. Sid wrapped his arm around Jelly and grabbed the skin on her hips like it was a roll of coins. She told Sid I offered her a discount and next thing I know I'm selling a dozen fruit bars at a thirty percent. Come back and see me any time, I said. I'm always here. And they did. Practically every Sunday after that. Always asking for the discount. But what choice did I have? I'd never seen anyone that looked like Jelly. Big, blue ocean eyes, blonde hair like some kind of American dream. She was, I came to learn, a key rat, meaning she was born here, her mother was born here, and her mother before her was born here. If you're ever in her house, ask her to let you see these portraits she has of her family. Her great-great-grandfather dressing a deer in the Florida wilds. Her great-grandmother with, like, ten sisters, standing in front of a cabin built of county pine. They're beautiful, these pictures. They're yellow and brittle and hanging in these ornate pewter frames. You really should see them sometime. They're something else.

I clicked off my cellphone. It was just past eleven on a Saturday night, and I'd been streaming a Japanese vampire movie on my computer because I had nothing better to do. And now, I had a date with Jelly. I knew it wasn't a *date* date, but it could have been.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I don't have a shot in the world at Jelly. But you're wrong. You've never seen the way Jelly looks at me when we're alone. When she tells me things about her family, about the parts of her heart that she doesn't share with anyone else. Especially not Sid. She tells me we're two of a kind. The only real people on the key. That we have to work for what we have and nobody understands that but us. Once, at one of Sid's parties, Jelly saw me making out with Melanie Arguelles and got mad at me for it. Said I could do better. That I deserved to do better. Who was she talking about if not herself? Sid had his chances, plenty of them, and tonight was my chance. Come hell or high water.

I took a shower, combed my hair, dressed in a pair of sand-colored corduroys, white sneakers and a black t-shirt, sprayed cologne onto my hands and rubbed it along my neck. I looked at myself in the mirror one last time, left my room, and found my father in the kitchen, sitting at the dining table, the lights in the house dimmed but for the ceiling fan above him. He was wearing his glasses and a white tank top that showed how much weight he'd lost the last few years. He had a small tumbler of wine and the supply list for next week in front of him.

*"Pa' donde vas?"* he asked.

"Out."

"Out where? With who?"

"Going out with Jelly."

"At this hour?"

"I'm picking her up from work. She needs a ride."

"I thought she had a boyfriend."

“She wants me to pick her up.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s complicated.”

My father removed his glasses and looked at me. His eyes seemed small and bird-like. Red, too. Whenever his eyes grew bloodshot like that he’d give you the same reason why. He was tired. Always tired. “Be careful,” he said. “And don’t be home too late. There’s work tomorrow. Sunday is our busy day.”

“I know.”

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

“And think of a special for next week. Some big shots from Tallahassee are paying a visit. We should impress them.”

“Okay,” I said, and locked the door behind me.

Something you might not know about state park concessionaries. Since you’re regarded as an employee of the park, and in effect, the state, you can live on the grounds. All you’ve got to do is buy yourself a double-wide trailer, and you’ve got yourself a home. Given my mom’s funeral arrangements and the legal clusterfuck with the previous restaurant, my dad poured every last nickel into our trailer. We were living off the edge of the city, inside the jungle end of a barrier island, where lighting of any sort was disallowed for fear of disorienting the wild life. But, there were also advantages.

It's beautiful, this park. The scarlet daggers of wild poinsettias, the white puffs of lantana. Every imaginable palm. And since the only other residents are rangers who spend the entirety of their day on their feet patrolling these grounds, at night, they lock their doors, shut their blinds and this place becomes the biggest backyard I've ever known.

I walked towards my car, an '86 Toyota Tacoma. A thin shimmer of salt covered the hood. Night-blooming jasmine in the air. I drove towards the restaurant, loaded my car with everything I needed and headed towards Jelly.

I pulled up to the Epic Hotel and confused the holy hell out of the valet guys. I explained I was here to pick up my friend, an employee, and they made me park across the street, where I wouldn't block the view of the Lamborghinis. Jelly came bounding out of the lobby doors wearing her uniform—black slacks, tight and tapered, and a black blouse. Her hair was knotted at the top of her head like a bun and she wore glasses. She looked around for me. I tapped the horn twice. She spotted the car, waved and scurried across Brickell, dodging long honks. She slid into the car, threw her arms around my neck and kissed my face. She leaned back, but kept her arms where they were.

“I missed you,” she said.

“I missed you too,” I replied. She smiled and her nose became a button I wanted to press all day.

“So, where we headed?” she asked. She leaned back in her seat and undid whatever was holding her hair together.

“To Bill Baggs,” I said.

“What?”

“To Bill Baggs.”

“I thought we were going out.”

“You said you wanted to go the beach.”

“I meant South Beach.”

“How am I supposed to know that?” I laughed.

“Are you kidding me?”

“I’m not kidding you. That’s where we’re going.”

“Is there a bonfire rave you’re not telling me about?”

“No.”

“Cocktail party at the top of the lighthouse?”

“I wish.”

“So, what’re we doing?”

“We’re going to eat.”

“What?”

“We’re going to eat. On the beach. You’re going to love it.”

“So, table for two then?”

“That’s right. Most exclusive joint in the city.”

She rolled her eyes, but she was going for it. She was happy. Or making the effort.

“Let me go by my house first though,” she said. “I want to change clothes.”



I agreed and headed towards Key Biscayne. She lowered her window and I did the same and her hair whipped around like some kind of animal.

I pulled onto a patch of grass outside her house, a one-story beach house that sat short and wide. There's a fence around the property, combination wood and concrete that felt Mediterranean. A massive oak rose from the middle of the yard and bracketed to its trunk were a number of showy orchids. I followed Jelly across a concrete path and when we came to the front door, there waited her mother, sitting in a rocker, smoking a cigarette in the porch light.

Jelly skipped ahead of me, kissed her mother. "You two can entertain each other for the next ten minutes. I'll be right out."

Her mother looked at me. "Fancy seeing you here," she said.

"Jelly needed a ride home and wanted to go out."

"I see," she said. Jelly's mother was named Dorothy Agnes—call me Dot—Stuart, but when I met her, she shook my hand, and said her name was Ms. Stuart, divorced once, never making that mistake again. She was strong, box-shouldered, and somewhere in her fifties. She might have been beautiful once but it was hard to see that now. By day, she managed a chain of lumber stores. Nights, she cooked, cleaned, and looked after her own mother. On days off, she redid the bathroom, built an add-on to the kitchen.

"Let me ask you something," she said, "what do you think of Jelly?"

"What?"

“Jelly. What do you think about her?”

“She’s great.”

“How about a real answer?”

“I’m not entirely sure what else to say?”

“Say she has terrible taste in men.”

I stayed quiet.

“She’s been dating Sid how long now?” she asked.

“Eight months.”

“Eight months, is it? Okay, eight months, and he’s never once been inside my house. Is that on him? Or is that on Jelly?”

Jelly once told me she’d asked Sid to dinner twice at her mom’s house and twice he side-stepped it. She never asked again, and that was that.

“It’s on Sid,” I said, unsure of the right answer.

“That’s right. It’s on him. He’s man enough to screw my daughter but not good enough to sit across the table from me. Being a hell raiser is one thing,” she said, “but being too chickenshit to meet the person you’re sleeping with’s parents? That’s something altogether different.” She pulled on her cigarette, exhaled, and said nothing else.

“So why’d you ask me what I thought about Jelly?”

“Because she’s the one that allows it. What’s that say about her?”

“He isn’t right for her,” I said, emboldened.

“Of course he isn’t right for Jelly,” she said. “That part’s obvious. The question is, who is?” She looked at me and laughed and offered a cigarette.

“I don’t really smoke, Ms. Stuart.”

“All you kids smoke,” she said.

I pulled a cigarette from the box. Not my favorite brand, but what’d be the point in saying it?

“So, where you guys going?” she asked.

“We’re going down to the park. Thought we’d take in the night. Have something to eat.”

She arched an eyebrow like it was a Halloween cat. “I like you,” she said. “I like you and your dad, and I’m only telling you this because I like you. You’re giving her too much of what she doesn’t want. She may like you. She may even care about you. But, Sid? He’s got her head turned all around. She won’t listen to reason.”

“She isn’t the only one,” I said.

“I get it. It’s the natural order of things. You’ve got to bump your head a few times before you see clearly.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Jelly is a lot like me when I was younger. She isn’t ill-intentioned, but she won’t regret things either. She’ll just accept her mistakes as part of getting older. She’s twenty-three now. Thinks she’s got the world by the balls. Precious few people have the world by the balls, honey.”

Jelly came outside and looked at her mother and at me and I imagined she’d heard every word. She looked at the cigarette. “Since when do you smoke?”

“Since your mom asked me,” I said.

“Can I have one?” she asked.

“You know the answer to that,” said her mother.

Jelly looked at me. “Parents,” she said, “making all the sense in the world since 1990.”

“It’s a quarter to three,” her mother said. “Be back before Romeo here needs to make you breakfast.”

Jelly turned and headed towards the car. “Only if he’s lucky,” she said.

I drove to the park and punched in the key code. The gate groaned open. It was dark beyond dark inside Bill Baggs. I flipped on the high-beams for fear of hitting a darting animal.

“Did I tell you about the one time I came home late and thought there was a dead body in the middle of the road?” I said. “My headlights were right on the body and for a moment it didn’t move. I thought, Oh Jesus, please don’t let that be what I think it is. When it finally moved, it was actually two bodies. It was this guy and this girl and they were boning in the middle of the street. They got up, butt-ass naked, picked up their clothes, and rollerbladed away. Seriously. Just rollerbladed away. Completely naked, but for rollerblades.”

“That story’s not true,” she said.

“Of course it is.”

“Why would anybody get naked but keep their rollerblades on? For that matter, how would you take off your clothes, without taking off the blades?”

“Maybe they were in shorts. I don’t know. All I know is that I thought I saw a dead body and I shit my pants and it was two people in rollerblades fucking. I’ve never been happier to see two naked people on rollerblades.”

“So what you’re saying is, you confused two people having sex for a dead body.”

“It was late. I was fucked up. It was my first thought. Who’d think to have sex in the middle of the road? There’s got to be better places, right?”

“Like where?”

“I don’t know. Like, the beach.”

“Like the one we’re driving to now?”

“It’s not far at all,” I said. “You’ll see.”

My heart was racing. Jelly was smiling.

“You ever had sex on the beach?” she asked.

“Can’t say that I have. No.”

“And you’ve lived here how many years now?” she asked.

“Almost two.”

“And you’ve never had sex on the beach?”

“I tried. Once.”

“Tried? Explain.”

“It was too windy for her liking.

“It was cold?” she asked

“No. Sand whips when it’s windy.”

“That’s not sexy.”

“Not even a little.”

“And the weather report tonight?” she asked.

“Why?”

“Because I’d hate to get sand in our food,” she said, and laughed her head off.

We drove towards the lighthouse and onto a concrete path that lead to the beach. Park rangers used this entrance to come onto the beach with their four-wheelers all the time. I drove the car on to the shore, ten, maybe fifteen feet from the water, and cut the engine. There wasn’t a single insect in the air. The city was faint and the stars were dizzying. From the back of the car I removed a Coleman cooler that I packed with grapes, tapenade, and rosemary crackers. I had a bottle of wine and a small crate of raspberries. In a smaller cooler, I brought a pair of wahoo steaks, a pound each, two whole mangos and a flask of bourbon. I lit a portable grill and shut the lid.

“Anything I can do?” asked Jelly.

“In the back of the truck there’s a tablecloth. Set it down.”

We opened the wine and smoked a joint. She ate the grapes and the crackers and stretched her toes in the sand. I brushed the fish with a lemon and sage marinade and placed it on the grill. The mangoes I peeled and cut into perfect fillets, sprinkled salt on them, and set them on the grill as well.

“Why’d you do this?” asked Jelly. She licked her fingers from the wahoo, straight eating it with her hands.

“I wanted to do something nice for you.”

“Okay. Why’d you think I needed something nice done for me?”

“The last few weeks haven’t been shitty?”

“Oh, they’ve been shitty. And this is going to turn it around? You can do that?”

She folded her legs into her lap and sat up straight. She was wearing denim shorts and a loose blouse. The blouse had wide holes for sleeves and instead of a bra, she wore a bikini top. She stared straight into me.

“Let me kiss you,” I said.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Shouldn’t you give me a reason why?”

“I’m crazy about you.”

“What does you being crazy about me, have to do with me?”

“I’m better for you than Sid.”

“You’d be better off not bringing Sid into this,” she said. She wagged her finger she was searching for a reading.

“Do you love him?”

“Did you ever hear me say I loved Sid?”

“But—”

“You brought me out here. It’s three in the morning. And you’re talking about Sid. What about you?”

“I’d love you better.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I’d treat you better.”

“That’s the easiest thing in the world to say.”

“Give me a chance.”

She folded her arms. “Would you even know what to do with it if you got it?” she asked.

“Damn right I would,” I said, my knees telling a different story.

“Okay,” she said. She stood up and pulled her shirt over her head. She looked at me. “You better know what you’re doing,” she said. She undid her top with one hand and exposed her breasts. She turned around and ran straight into the ocean.

I stood up, threw off my shirt and my pants and followed her in my skivvies. She fell backwards into the water and laughed and splashed to keep me away. I grabbed her with both arms and kissed her deep. She reached down and grabbed my crotch. I grabbed her ass and her shorts and bikini bottom slid off like she was wearing a second skin. I tossed them both towards the shore and they landed with a splat. She wrapped her legs around me and I entered her. She bucked and I held on. She leaned back and dunked her head in the water. I sucked on her breasts and let the water rush into my mouth. We moaned and grunted and the water splashed around us. When I was ready to come she squeezed tighter. I’m on the pill, she said, and I came inside her. She kissed me on the mouth and floated away.

“So?” she asked.

“Everything I’d ever dreamed of,” I said.



I had a towel in the back of the truck so we took turns drying off. She covered herself with it like a cape and I stretched out along the tablecloth, nude and glowing. We passed the bourbon between us.

“So what now?” I asked.

“Now you take me home.”

“I mean after that.”

“I can’t really say. I guess I’ll have to deal with Sid.”

“I thought you were through with Sid.”

“At some point I’ll have to talk to him.”

“And you’re going to tell him?”

“About what?”

“About this. About what just happened.”

“What would you want me to tell him?”

“Tell him that we talked, and that we’re together,” I said.

“Would you want me to tell him we had sex?”

The air grew cold and I wanted to get dressed.

She shook her head for a moment. “Look,” she said, “don’t take it the wrong way.”

“How else am I supposed to take it?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Did you just enjoy that?” she asked.

“What?”

“Us. In the ocean,” she said. “Just now.”

“I guess so,” I said.

“Then let it be that. Let it be something you enjoyed.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“I loved it,” she said, and I believed her. “It was hot. But I’m going to have to deal with Sidney. And if you really want a shot at us doing it again, then you’re going to have to deal with Sid too.”

“He needs to know this is real between us.”

“You cooked me fish on a blanket and we had sex in the ocean. How real exactly are we?”

“When you put it that way,” I said. The look was all over my face.

“I like you,” she said. “I wouldn’t have called you if I didn’t. Don’t make this something it doesn’t need to be.”

“So, what is it then?”

“There are things I’ve got to sort out is all. And now you’re one of them.”

As soon as Jelly spoke those words I knew I’d crossed over. We weren’t friends anymore. What we were though, I wasn’t entirely sure. Like it didn’t have a name. She’d been playing it close to the vest and I’d taken the entire deck and said, Look, each of these cards is you.

I looked around, at the tablecloth and at food, and felt pitiful. The grapes were half-eaten. The tapenade was full of chipped cracker. The wine bottle, empty and jammed into the sand. Even the beach, which earlier felt private and exotic, now just felt abandoned.

“I should take you home,” I said.

“That sounds about right.”

I got dressed and she got dressed and we're in the car and I'm moments from turning the ignition when I realized what was about to happen. I put the car in reverse and the tires spun out.

"We're stuck," I said.

"We can't be stuck," she said. "Those four-wheelers go up and down the beach all the time."

"Any idea how much heavier this car is?"

"We can't be stuck," she said.

"Don't freak out," I tell her. "I need to think."

"Try driving forward," she said.

"It'll spin the wheels in a different direction. We'll be more stuck."

"Try reverse again."

"The same thing is going to happen."

"Do *something*," she said.

"Whatever I do is going to get us more stuck. Do you understand?"

"What's the difference between stuck and more stuck?" she said. "What do we have to lose?"

"Really? Stuck is stuck? Okay. Let's try your plan." I put the car in drive and floored the engine. "That didn't quite work, did it? Let me try again." I put the car in reverse and sent sand everywhere. "Again?" I asked her, and spun out for a third time.

She yelled at me to stop and it occurred to me what I just did. I stepped out of the car and the back tires dug a hole through two layers of sand straight down to the black of it. We were stuck, worse than stuck, and I scarred the beach something serious.

Jelly stood beside me. She saw that I was in deep shit and wasn't angry anymore. "I guess there is a difference between stuck and more stuck," she said.

I felt like screaming. How could I have been so stupid? If I'd only looked, I mean really looked, deep past the layers of me, right down to the black of it, I would've known Jelly wasn't the answer. Instead, I chased her like she chased Sid, both of us rabid for what we thought we wanted. This was my play at Jelly. Those were the tires of my car. That was my father's restaurant looming over my shoulder behind me. It was going to be my ass.

"I have to call my father," I said.

"No, don't call your father."

"Why?"

"I don't want him to see me here."

My father arrived in the F-250 he used to load kitchen equipment. He was wearing a green v-neck, a pair of grey shorts and flip-flops. He carried a flashlight and walked determinedly towards us.

"Frangelica is in the car," I said.

"Tell her to get out." My father wanted to destroy me. He ran his flashlight over the two gashes in the sand. "Que hicistes?" he asked. Jelly then came out of the car and hugged my father. She kissed him and said she was happy to see him. He hugged her back, called her mi amor.

“We’re going to need your help,” he said to her. “Please, get in the driver’s seat.”

His charm was palpable. I envied him for being able to switch it on like that.

Jelly smiled and got behind the wheel.

My father raised his finger at me. “I don’t know what you were doing out here,” he said, “but always respect women. Always.” He leaned closer. “Respect even more their perception of you. This,” he said, and shook his head.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Bring beach umbrellas.”

“How many?”

“Three,” he said.

“You think we’re going to need all three?”

“It’s how many we’re going to break before we get you out.”

From his car my father removed a steel chain with a massive hook and fastened it from the back of his pickup to the back of mine.

“Try one first,” he said. He took an umbrella and jammed the wood end of it underneath the tire. “You’re going to hold it like this,” he said, “with both arms. The tire needs to catch. Be sure it catches. And don’t let go.”

Jelly watched me through the rear view. She mouthed the words, This is never going to work.

My father put his car in drive. Jelly put mine in reverse. He tapped the gas, and so did she. The umbrella bent. The tire wasn’t grabbing and was instead trying to spit the wood out. I held, tried shoving it back towards the tire. My feet slid in the sand. The wood cracked, then splintered, and the umbrella end, the end I was holding, snapped

clean. I fell to the floor and saw the rear tire catch on the shattered husk beneath it. I yelled to my father to stop pulling but he didn't hear me or ignored me and pulled until both tires came up and then dragged the car all the way to the pavement.

"What are we going to do with this?" I asked my father. I held the both pieces of the umbrella in my hands.

He looked at me, heartbroken. "How would we ever explain this?" he said.

"I was hoping we wouldn't have to."

"Keep it," he said. "You'll figure it out."

"I guess I'll take Jelly home now," I said.

"Not yet. You've got some cleaning up to do." He pointed at the sand. "After you drop her off, come to the restaurant."

Jelly and me spent the next forty-five minutes brushing away tire marks and shoveling sand onto the ruts. When we were finished, we were sweaty and angry and tired and covered in sand. As we left the park, I noticed the moon vines in bloom, small and puffy like mouths. I thought to point them out to her but really, what good would it do?

The drive to Jelly's house was quiet and short. I pulled up to her house and left the car idling. Didn't even put it in park.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm not even sure what you're referring to."

She shook her head. "I'm not really sure either," she said.

“Can I kiss you?” I asked.

“Why not?” she said and leaned in and kissed me. “I’ll see you,” she said.

“I just want you to be happy,” I said, trying to sound sincere.

“Okay,” she said. She opened the door and headed to her house. And I drove away.

Our head cook, a three hundred pound Dominican who goes by two different names, entered the kitchen through the back entrance and sees the prep has already been taken care of. My dad whistles and the cook sees us on the deck.

“The hell are you guys doing here his early?” he asks

“Have him tell you the story,” my father says, points to me.

“Since my work is done, you guys want something to eat?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” I answer, and wave him off.

“Two omelettes,” says my father. “One for him, one for me. Shrimp and onions. Bring hot sauce on the side. And two café con leches.”

I turn and look at my father.

“You should eat,” he says. “You’re going to need your strength. Sunday is our busy day.”

## BEST WIGS

You imagine the boy's name to be Lucas, and he leans across the countertop at the photo lab where he works and says to you, "Mrs. Calderon, I know what it takes a be a man." He is sixteen, maybe. His voice does not rise above a whisper. He removes a photograph from his shirt pocket. It is of you, Mrs. Calderon, and it is provocative. "I've been printing doubles," says Lucas. His eyes are shallow blue and bright like aquariums.

He lays down one, two, three photographs. And there you are. Unfurled, and blonde as sand dunes. A chin-length number arson red. The longest of tresses, dark and infinite. Lucas hisses through his teeth.

He gathers the photographs and follows you here, to the Best Wigs Store in Allapattah, and hands you a brunette bob and a two-tone European flip. There is no shame in young Lucas.

You want to tell him about the craving inside you, of the hunger for heat and muscle. Instead you say, "I have so much love to give."

Lucas, all a sizzle, answers, "And I will drain it all."

But there is no young Lucas in this story, Mrs. Calderon. There is only you, here, at Best Wigs, among the mannequin heads, beneath the hum of lights like Unity Medical, in a crowd of Haitian women, Dominican and Puerto Rican women, women from St. Lucia, from Trinidad and Tobago, from Brazil, from everywhere, and you, Mrs. Calderon, cannot take your eyes off of the boy you imagine to be named Lucas, or the girl soaking away every drop of his attention.

They kiss, and marvel at their hearts and their bodies and the astonishing things they can do with both. The girl tosses a set of bombshell curls over her head and says to



the boy you imagine to be named Lucas, “Who do you want me to be?” And you, Mrs. Calderon, knowing what fans inside you, you hold a European flip in one hand, a brunette bob with thin weftings in the other, and ask yourself the same thing—Who do *you* want to be?—when the boy you imagine to be named Lucas turns in your direction, gives you those big aquarium eyes and asks, “Do I know you?”

And you, Mrs. Calderon, you answer, “No. I’m sorry. You do not.”

## THE GIFT

Salazar was asleep on the couch, afternoon napping and dreaming of Penny when he heard a quick pound on the front door. He rubbed the heels of his giant hands into his eyes and peeled himself off the couch.

He opened the door and a postal worker—large and impatient, her uniform blue and too small—shoved a packet of bills and magazine subscriptions towards him, then handed him an oversized white envelope.

“Sign here, sir.” She handed him a digital delivery pad, yanked out the plastic pen and passed it to him.

“Never had to sign before.” He scrawled his signature across the screen.

“We just deliver the stuff.” She took the machine and made to look at it. “Mr. . . .” she said.

Over her shoulder Salazar watched his neighbor Ugo, a thick-browed man with a stack of muscles and a moldy sense of humor, drive onto the sidewalk in front of the house, slam shut the door of his crap colored Isuzu Hombre, and give Salazar the finger before walking off towards his home.

Salazar looked at the parcel in his hands. Bright white cushion mailer, blue masking tape, certified address label—

“Oh no,” he said. “I can’t take this.” But the woman was already making her way towards the street. He bounded down the concrete squares that lead from his house to the sidewalk and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned and looked at him like he was crazy for touching her.

“You have to take this back.”

She spoke without looking at him. “We don’t send back, sir.”

“Please, take it back.”

“Can’t do that.” She walked through the gate and shut the latch on the chain link fence before Salazar could follow her to the sidewalk.

“It’s easy,” he said, and held the parcel towards her. “Tell your boss I okay’d it.”

“No,” she said, rifling through more mail, walking down the street.

Salazar walked side by side with her, following her along the fence, running out of lawn.

“Whatever’s in this, I already have,” he said. “I have two of them. Who needs two of the same things?”

“It’s yours,” she said, her voice trailing off, a thousand more packages to deliver.

“You signed for it.”

Salazar took the mailer towards the back of the house to the cranny he had converted into a quarter-moon booth with bay windows. At the table he cleared away a stack of renderings he hadn’t touched in three weeks, an open container of Mu-Shu pork and two empty bottles of a wine he’d bought trying to impress the blonde behind the register.

The mailer was an oversized envelope, an unconventional size with a self-sealing flap glued over the top. And there was her name, addressed to Salazar, mailed from her mother’s home in Chicago, peeled and affixed to the corner.

Sweet Penny, he thought, of course you went home.

The night before she left Penny had crept into bed with him, took off her shirt and asked him to look at her. She asked him if he still thought she was beautiful.

“Of course,” he said, leafing through a magazine on home renovations.

“Do you promise to find me beautiful in ten years?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And in twenty?”

“Yes” he said, wishing she’d stop.

She reached out and turned his face towards her. Her eyes like puddles.

“Tell me,” she said.

“I promise,” he said, closing the magazine. He kissed her softly on the mouth, smiled and reached behind her. He pulled the chain on the table lamp and the room went dark. “Let’s go to sleep,” he said.

She flipped the light back on.

“You don’t love me like before, do you?” she said.

“Why do you say that?” His voice was harsher than he intended. He exhaled, softened. “I know we’ve been here four years already and we’ve been engaged every one of them. I know I said I’d find a job with a firm as soon as I finished on the house but sweetheart, none of the places I’ve interviewed with felt right, you know that. Besides, the house—”

“This isn’t about the house,” she said. “This is about you. I need to know if this is going to work.”

“It’s your mother,” he said. “She’s pushing for a date isn’t she?”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe I’m not talking about marriage?” she said.

Salazar stayed quiet.

“Then I’d have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said, and meant it.

Penny looked at Salazar. “What happened?” she asked. “You used to know what you wanted.”

Salazar came home late the following night having worked a double he asked the security administrator to throw his way. He removed a hanger from the living room broom closet and hung his security uniform—shirt and pants—on the inside knob of the door. Penny would take it to the cleaners in the morning. He shuffled towards the kitchen in a pair of briefs and black socks, opened the fridge, noticed Penny hadn’t saved leftovers. He grabbed a beer instead, thinking it was better he not eat so late, shut the door and saw the note. He tugged it off, not sure what it meant at first, and read it again. I’m not sure I know what I want either, the note read.

He went upstairs to their bedroom and half of the closet was empty. That was three months ago.

Salazar shook the package and something slid around. He imagined loose tarot cards, a flighty gimmick to get him to think about his life. Or maybe Penny sent him photographs. The good old days, torn in two.

He wondered how much of the break-up was his fault. But she left, he thought. Just like that. How was he to know there was something wrong? She never said so. And he never thought to ask.

But now, holding the package, there's no sorrow in Salazar. There's only anger. If that's how easy she can leave, he thought, that's how easy this goes in the trash. He turned towards the door that led to his yard.

“Son of a bitch,” he said.

The back door was open, closed just enough so it wouldn't shut. And on the counter beside the microwave Salazar saw that someone had eaten his last mango and left the seed sitting atop the other fruits in the bowl. Ugo had been in his house again.

Salazar hated the guy, was certain the feeling was mutual. The day he and Penny first moved in, Ugo had been drinking Presidentes out of a bucket of melting ice. He jumped and offered to help but no sooner was he inside the house than he began taking cigarette breaks, leaning on boxes and eyeing Penny who, Salazar explained, was his fiancée, engaged four months now.

Recently, Salazar decided to remove the wrought iron bars that covered the house and replace the wood of the casement windows. Immediately Ugo began warning Salazar of burglars in the neighborhood, of people, he said, that were keeping track of everyone's comings and goings. Salazar accused Ugo of trying to scare the gringo with tales of shadowy Nicaraguans. Ugo insisted he was trying to help, that Salazar's house was susceptible to break in.

Salazar cursed Ugo, cursed himself for letting Ugo get under his skin, and headed to toss the package into the garbage bin when Ugo called his name.

“Hey Sally, what you got there?” asked Ugo.

“Nothing.” Salazar closed the trash lid and tucked the package back under his arm, knowing Ugo would snatch it for himself the moment he was out of sight. “And stop calling me Sally.”

“But that’s what Americanos like, no? Like, Larry, Charlie. Your name is Sal. Sally. It’s a neck name.”

“Nickname.”

“I said neck name.”

“And stop coming inside my house. That’s the second time you’ve taken my food.”

“Taken your food?”

“You took one of my mangos.”

“But why would I take your mango,” he said, “when I already have my own?” He raised a fresh piece of fruit and peeled it with the other hand. He deposited the sliver into his wet mouth and smiled.

“That’s from my tree,” said Salazar.

“Your tree hangs in my yard,” said Ugo.

“Never mind.”

“Hey, amigo, where’s your old lady? Haven’t seen her around.”

“That’s because she isn’t around.”

“And what’s that?” Ugo pointed at the package. “That from her? Penny sending presents to her little Sally? You know, in Spanish, Penny is how we say dick. Like that. That’s how we say dick in Spanish. *Pen-nee.*”

“That’s great, Ugo,” said Salazar, and headed back towards his house.

“Just trying to chair you up,” shouted Ugo.

“Cheer.”

“I said chair.”

Salazar slammed the package on the kitchen table—for a moment wondered if what was inside was fragile—and dialed the number to Penny’s mother’s house.

“Hello, Salazar.”

“Is Penny around?”

“She can’t talk to you.”

“Were those her instructions to you?”

“Those are my instructions to you.”

“Well, she sent me something.”

“And?”

“I want to know what it is.”

“Then open it.”

“I don’t want to open it.”

“This is your problem, Salazar. You want. You don’t want. You’re never going to get your ass in gear. You think you can provide for her, provide for a family, working the jobs you do?”

“Tell her I called.”

“It’s over, Salazar. This is what I’m trying to tell you.”

Salazar slammed the phone onto the hook, gave it a few whacks for good measure. Fresh anger steeled him inside. She was the one that left. Her decision. Her



fault. She's to blame. He turned towards the package and noticed a trail of ants tracking across the dining table. He imagined Penny, and he felt tired. His anger slid away. "How did this happen?" he asked.

Salazar drove a gold Acura Legend with over two hundred thousand miles on it. When he picked Penny up outside of the Shoreland dorms for their first date, she slid in and said, New car smell. She made him glow from the start.

In Chicago, Penny had never owned a car and Salazar, having lived his entire life in Florida, never knew life without one. Together, they never felt more free. They blew on each other's hands during winters sharp as crystal. They fled south, to Miami, to swim and soak in the sun. And when Salazar's mother grew sick sooner than expected, they drove to the bay to spread her ashes, and to the lawyers that handed Salazar the keys to the only thing she left him, the two-story Belvedere bungalow he now lived in.

When he asked Penny to marry him he saw their future spreading out before them like a blanket, a subtropical life together in a paradise cottage. Now, locking the door behind him, all he saw was an empty house, framed by telephone wires, the floorboards warped by wear.

He imagined what would have happened had they stayed together, gotten married, had kids, given her everything she wanted. The whole nine. Would she have left eventually?

Salazar set the envelope in the passenger seat, walked around to the driver's side, pumped the gas twice and turned the ignition. The car stank of stale heat and cigarettes.

He lowered the windows, then flipped open the ashtray and fumbled through the butts for the joint he didn't finish yesterday.

He looked at the gift in the seat beside him and imagined it something precious, like a child. "Looks like it's just you and me," he said. Salazar then dreamt it was summer and the kid was on vacation and spending the next three months with his dad. He and Penny had long since divorced. She had remarried. He hadn't. Salazar was going to make this Michael's, no, Tommy's, no, Lincoln's, he was going to make this Lincoln's best summer ever. "What say we drive with the window's down?" asked Salazar, stoned and amused.

He drove towards the Forty-First Street Diner and decided to take the long way, show the boy—it could have been a girl—how beautiful it was down here. Nothing like Chicago. Look at the trees. Look at the people. Can you hear that music? I can take you to go see dolphins if you'd like. The ocean is all around us. It's amazing. You'll see.

The traffic lights all turned green. The road seemed somehow more spacious. And every song on the radio played just for him. Not the sad songs, but the right songs. Al Green, Todd Rundgren, Wham! The wind rushed in through the windows and ran its fingers through Salazar's hair, patted his spirit.

He pulled into a parking space and brought the gift with him into the restaurant. The sheen inside the diner was a warm orange.

"Just one?" The woman behind the counter looked like she had been born there. Her hair was made of straw and she kept a cordless phone slung over her shoulder like she'd been on hold forever.

"Two please," he said, and raised up the envelope.

She crumpled her face at him. She'd seen stranger.

"Just a joke," he said.

The woman nodded, half-smiled. "Bonnie," she shouted.

Bonnie shuffled over and she had Penny's eyes. Heavy-lidded. Beautiful. Sad straight through to the bottom.

"Follow me," said Bonnie, and guided him to a seat. "Is this okay?"

"It's fine." He set the package on the table and slid it to the side.

"What you got there?" she asked.

"It's nothing. I just didn't want to leave it in the car."

"Can't be nothing if you didn't want to leave it in the car."

"Right," he said.

"Anything to drink?"

"Coffee," he said. "And a mango juice."

"Any particular order?"

"Juice with the food. The coffee after."

"I'll be right back."

He ordered a steak and eggs, well done and over medium. He ordered French toast and a side of bacon, ate a strawberry crepe for dessert, and thought about the gift. Bonnie was right. It couldn't be nothing if he didn't want to leave it in the car. What it was, he realized, was Penny's hold on him.

If she had sent him something spiteful, it would only stir his resentment, one last kick on the shin on her way out the door. What if she sent letters upon letters blaming him? Or what if, sliding around in there, was the lingerie set he had bought her? The

clothes would smell a certain way, feel a certain way. He'd think of her and find himself aroused, his loneliness growing right along with it.

But what if she sent him something tender, something sweet and thoughtful, full of longing and regret? Would he be at a loss for nerves? What if, instead of panties, she sent something of his, maybe one of his shirts she loved, with a note saying, "I'll miss you more?" Then what? He was barely hanging on as it was.

Salazar thought about opening the package but no, he couldn't. Whatever was inside, Salazar reasoned, was going to hurt, and he wanted no part of it.

Through the window he looked out across the street and saw people of all shapes and stripes walking towards their cars or to their homes, some out for a stroll. It was one of the things he liked best about the Forty-First. The view. The other thing he loved, was its convenience. Because on days like today, when Salazar felt he'd like to see as little of the world as possible, the Forty-First was his only choice.

There was a grocery store in the adjacent lot, a video store, a laundromat and a small liquor store. And across the street was the post office, where he could send anything he wanted, anywhere in the world.

Salazar paid his bill, snatched some peppermints from a fishbowl by the counter and walked outside, the gift tucked tightly under his arm.

The entrance to the post office was one long window and the floor inside was polished terrazzo. The building had smooth rounded edges and, sitting where it was on the corner lot, invited second looks.

“You got us just before we closed.” The old man wore spectacles and a silver cross hung from his ear. He was covered in sunspots. “I don’t know if I can get this out today though.”

“No big deal,” said Salazar. “I just need to get it out. I’d like to return to sender.”

“Was it sent to you mistakenly?” The man—his patch said Roy—made for the package. Salazar said a private goodbye and handed the gift to Roy.

“No. Right address. Wrong sender.”

“Excuse me?”

“The ex. The fiancée. I don’t know. She sent me something and I don’t want it.”

“People send all kinds of curious things,” said Roy.

“Truthfully, I don’t know what it is. And I don’t care.”

“Oh,” said Roy, his eyes growing dull. “Well I don’t know if I can rightfully accept this then.”

“What?”

“I can’t send this back if you don’t know what you’re sending.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No sir. It could be hazardous.”

“She already sent it once. It’s been through the mail. It’s safe.”

“I can’t accept this. Not in good conscience. By law, we’re not allowed to accept and/or deliver packages with unknown contents. It’s a recent addendum but I assure you, in this day and age, you should be grateful that it’s there.”

“But I could have lied to you and said anything.”

“And I would have believed you. But since you said you didn’t know”—Roy leaned in and Salazar noticed the ring of nicotine stained into his moustache—“there’s cameras,” Roy whispered. “I just can’t.”

“I can tell you what’s not inside there.” Salazar pointed to a poster. “No guns. No drugs. No animals.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“I can promise there’s no dynamite.”

“Passed that stage in the relationship, are we?”

“Look. There’s nothing in there. It’s empty. It’s bullshit. There’s no paint thinner, no rotting fruit. Nothing.”

“Sir,” Roy reached out and laid his hand on Salazar, “just go home. It’s late in the day. We’re almost closed. See what she sent you and come back tomorrow.” Roy smiled. “I should get to closing. If dinner gets cold, Harry’ll kill me.”

“It shouldn’t be this difficult. You know that, right?” said Salazar, snatching the package off the counter.

“Tomorrow’s another day, sir. But I assure you, today isn’t all that bad.”

Salazar walked back towards his car. The package felt somehow heavier and damp. He imagined something growing inside there, some piece of him. The more insecurity and spite he poured into it the bigger it grew. He shook his head, shook the thought away.

Salazar was sitting on the couch—drinking Canadian beer, the gift by his side, watching *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*—when the idea came to him.

He opened a utility drawer and shuffled away a ring of paint swatches, a contact lens kit, a letter opener, a woodchuck with a stuffed heart that read “Love is a Many Splintered Thing,” found a flashlight and headed towards the attic. There had to be something up there he could send her.

The shape of the ceiling felt unfamiliar so he walked slowly, securing his footing as he went. The room was vaulted and deeper than he remembered. It was stifling, musty and grim.

The flashlight drifted around the room and spotted nothing but boxes, stacks and stacks. How much did they bring with them when they moved?

He found a portable gas grill and a box of nature-themed door pulls, a stack of photo albums with rare Florida stamps that belonged to his mother, a box of kitchen miscellany—tins and jars, spoons, ladles, a grinder, a strainer—and a duffel bag that had electrical tape, wire cutters, batteries and bungee hooks. He found an unused stack of flowerpots, and a jewelry box full of beads and necklaces. He was sweating, so he took off his shirt and tied it around his head like a wanderer.

He continued to shuffle the boxes around until he came across one marked HOME. He removed butterfly anchors and a leveler. Old jazz records. A mask and a snorkel from their trip to the Lower Keys. A small antique clock, a gift from her grandmother. A Halloween costume. The floor plans for the house. The memories in the boxes didn’t feel like things that happened in the past. To Salazar, they felt as though they were breathing and living and at the same time dying, slowly losing the kind of gravity he was looking for.

His throat was parched. Humidity squeezed him like a grip. He was about ready to call it quits when the beam from his flashlight lit on a set of words printed on the side of a small yellow box. Sturdy, long-lasting, washable.

Salazar picked up the box, turned it and looked at a drawing of a cuddly rodent wearing exercise gear and smiling, sweat drops launching from his head. It was a hamster wheel and suddenly Salazar was a child, six, maybe seven years old. No one told him the female was pregnant, much less that cedar chips were toxic to the hamsters, that it damaged their eyes, their tiny respiratory systems, their judgment. He discovered them on his own. The blood seemed fake. He tried to pick one up and something white slid out of its belly. He had yet to stop crying when his mother shoved the entire aquarium into a large black bag, tied the knot and set it outside with the rest of the garbage. If that's the way they're going to behave she said to him, we're better off without them.

Up from beneath him, Salazar heard the telephone ringing.

"Why do you sound out of breath?" asked Penny.

"I was just up in the attic. Moving stuff around."

"My mom said you called. Does that mean you received the package?" Something bounced in her voice, something hopeful.

"Sure did," he said. He looked towards the tabletop and saw the gift for what it was, her fears, her insecurities, her Plan B. "Why'd you send me that?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No, I don't think it is."

"Oh." Her joy floated away from her. "Maybe that's the problem then." He'd heard this voice before, a muzzle over her hurt.



“Is that what you called for?” Salazar looked back over at the gift and saw Ugo standing there, package in hand, holding it to his ear, concentration stapled on his mug. Salazar’s eyes went wide like saucers. He slapped his hand over the mouthpiece and motioned Ugo to get out, to leave the way he came.

Ugo turned his hands up, unsure of what his neighbor was trying to tell him. Salazar drew his hand across his neck, then waved at him as though he were shooing a fly. Salazar could hear Penny.

“Once upon a time, . . . I understand that now, . . . hoped you’d realize.”

“Uh huh. I know,” said Salazar, and heard the sound of something tearing. He looked at Ugo and saw the man shaking the contents onto the table. Salazar was right. They were photographs. And they came fluttering out. Ugo looked inside the package as though something was stuck. Salazar covered the mouthpiece again.

“What are you doing?” he shouted.

“Hey amigo, I thought you said there were cookies in here.”

“Who the hell said anything about cookies?”

“You did. You said Penny sent you cookies.” Ugo shook the large envelope, hoping to jar something loose. “Are there no cookies in here?” Ugo looked disgusted, annoyed. “Why would you say there are cookies and then there are no cookies?”

Penny continued. “Never been more important, . . . we have to try, . . . not just our lives anymore.”

“Penny, sweetheart,” said Salazar, “I understand what you’re saying but I just don’t think now’s the time to talk about this.”

“Then when Salazar? I can’t wait much longer.”

“Hey amigo,” said Ugo, “I think you need to look at this.” Ugo walked over to Salazar and handed him a photograph. In it Salazar saw Penny, lying on her back, her shirt pulled up to her breasts, her arms circled around a bump on her belly that hadn’t been there the last time he saw her.

“Oh my God,” said Salazar, and dropped the phone. He walked over to the pile of photographs and shuffled through them. She had photographed herself in front of a mirror, portrait and profile. There was a picture of her at the doctor, waiting in the lobby. A photograph where she looked as though she was crying. A photograph of her eating ice cream, by herself. Beneath them, Salazar slid out a sonogram.

Clear as the day, Salazar saw two heads. He picked up another picture and saw Penny, bliss and consternation swirled across her face, holding a plastic stick with a blue cross on it. He noticed the tile behind her. She was in their bathroom.

“Salazar? Salazar?” She called out from the phone.

“Penny,” he said, and fell silent. He searched for the right words but said the only ones that came. “I didn’t know.”

“Hello Penny,” shouted Ugo.

“Was that Ugo?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he see the pictures?”

“Yeah.”

She sounded somehow exposed. “What did he say?”

“He said you look beautiful. And that I should fly to you right away.”

“You look beautiful baby,” shouted Ugo, “but you should’ve sent some cookies.”

“Penny,” said Salazar. “Tell your mother that you’re coming back to live with me. Tell her I took you for granted,” he said. “I see that now. But, this, . . . I just—”

“You don’t have to,” she said. “Not if you’re not sure. I sent you the pictures because I wanted you to know.”

“You could’ve called.”

“I wanted you to see,” she said.

“Penny,” he said to her. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“You almost did.”

Salazar said he understood why she left, that he wasn’t ready for her, not the way she needed him. But seeing those pictures, she really did look beautiful.

“It’s not just me anymore,” she said.

“I know,” said Salazar. “It’s you and me, and them.”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s us.”

Salazar told her he loved her, now more than ever, said goodbye and hung up the phone.

“When you woke up today last thing you thought was that you’d be a daddy, eh amigo?” said Ugo. “Your life is over, man. Take it from me. Seven kids. Three wives. Your life is over.”

“I don’t think so,” said Salazar.

“I’m telling you amigo. It ain’t easy having a little bungle of joy around.”

“Bundle.”

“That’s what I said,” said Ugo. “Bungle.”

THE GRATEFUL DEAD, LIVE AT MIAMI JAI-ALAI, JUNE 23, 1974

First shot I ever had at catching the Dead was in Kentucky in 1968. They played Bellarmine, over in Louisville, about three hours from my hometown. Might as well have been Tangiers for as much a chance I had of being there. I was sixteen then. A skinny kid, freckles, hair like dry straw. Then, in the summer of 1970, by the grace of some power greater than mine, my family up and moved to Fort Lauderdale.

People will tell you that South Florida back then was sleepy and old. And it was. Parts of it, anyway. But at the age of eighteen, as young as young could be when you think about it, I saw my life open up before me for the first time ever.

If I could make my way to those beaches again I'm sure I'd see some ghost of a younger me fishing on a two-seater kayak, pulling up snapper after snapper. I'd see myself water-skiing, clueless and smiling, waving to the today-me, not a thought in my head. That's the kind of kid I was. Reckless and joyful. No real sense of the world.

I drove a Dodge Colt back then, a toad-green number that I bought from a librarian for a couple of hundred bucks. And I drove that thing everywhere. Up and down a million times to the Keys. To Cocoa and Daytona and Jupiter. And, that night, in June of '74, me, Lester and Elena, drove to the Jai Alai Fronton in Miami to finally, finally catch the Grateful Dead.

En route we drank rum because it was exotic. Lester had rolled enough reefer to fill a soft pack of Winstons and we smoked furiously on the trip down. Elena—she was Colombian. Can you believe it? Me, with a Colombian girlfriend?—she brought beer, LSD, and sliced pineapple. We turned the radio as loud as it could go and drove with the

windows down. Lester rattled his fingers like drums on the back of my seat. Elena looked at me with eyes full of something like love and I wore my suntan like a suit and felt twice as proud.

You can look up that show if you want. June 23. The second of two dates at the Fronton. Deadheads the world over will tell you this is concert was top ten best performance ever, easy. Maybe even top five. You see, it wasn't just any show we walked into that night. It was one of their Wall of Sound shows. Just this tremendous crag of a sound system. Absolutely mammoth. Unlike anything anyone had ever seen before. And there we were. Me, Elena and Les, and eight thousand of our closest friends, anxious and restless, waiting for something beautiful to happen.

When the first plucks of "Ramble On Rose" washed over me, the sound somehow felt like the skin of a balloon. Something in my chest inflated. The PA became a giant honeycomb, this massive, organic thing. And it made sense that way. Of course this is where the music would come from, from these amplifiers, humming, vibrating, producing honey.

The band played on and Jerry asked, "Aren't we pretty close to the Bermuda Triangle around here?" and I answered, "Very close." It was hard to breathe. It was easy to breathe. I wondered if we had drank too much beer in the parking lot. There was so much smoke in the air. The band played on and I sang along with them. Yes, I'll be waiting at the station lord, when that train pulls on by.

Lester got lost and never came back. I saw a black dude with an afro and a chipped tooth kiss Elena and so I kissed his girlfriend because that was what I thought I

should do. He smiled at me and we bumped fists and he said, “We cool, man. We cool.” And so I leaned in and kissed him because we were cool. We would always be cool.

He reached back and punched me square in the mouth. It knocked me right down and I just sat there. I didn’t feel pain but something had to come out of me, so I cried. I cried and cried. This forest of knees and me just bawling. Three and a half hours after the first note, the band put away their bag of tricks and the lights came on.

My head was still warped and folded and I tried making sense of what had happened. “I am in Miami, Florida,” I said to myself. “The Grateful Dead were the makers of the music. This is the sport of ancient Spain.” We found Lester by the car, pale and sweating, covered in sick and smoking a cigarette. Elena asked him, “Did you have fun, *mi amor*? Did you enjoy it as much as we did?”

We drove home in silence, mostly. I took Lester home first and as he made to get out of the car he turned to us and said, “That was a hell of a night, but at least we had the music.”

Still, to this day, one of the truest things I’ve ever heard.

## THE TROUBLE WITH SWIMMING POOLS

I was twelve years old, a year older than my cousin. We called him Papo. His hands, his head, his feet, his whole body was bigger than mine. He even had muscles, his shoulders looking like meatballs.

The sun was fat and orange and sinking behind the fence. We were the only two in the pool and the water glistened like it was on fire.

“Do you know what a girl’s period is?” he asked.

His mother was out buying groceries for the party and left his sister Sophie to watch us. She was lying on a wicker chaise and I could see where her suit was still wet. She was talking on the phone and laughing like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Of course, I do,” I said.

“You’re lying.”

Shadows stretched across the yard. The mango tree, the tool shed, even Sophie was casting silhouettes.

“Abigail Hijanos got her period during P.E. and ran to the bathroom crying,” I said. I dunked my head under water, then came up and spit like it was nothing.

“I bet you don’t even have hair on your balls.”

“I do too.”

“You make yourself come yet?”

“That’s gross.”

“I bet you don’t even know how to get a girl pregnant.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Bullshit,” he said, and splashed water at me.

“The guy sticks it in the girl,” I said. “He sticks it in her butt.”

“What?” Papo howled. “You have no idea,” he said. He splashed me again, and swam over towards the ladder.

“I was only checking if you knew.” I pulled myself up and sat along the lip of the pool. And there was my reflection in the water, swaying in his wake, my ears enormous.



## LA QUINCEAÑERA

Maria Estrella Urbanez burst through the door of her Little Havana home. She's wearing dark blue pleated pants and a white polo with her high school crest, St. Matthew Catholic, emblazoned on her chest. She slammed the door and tossed her bag of books onto the couch, narrowly missing Cosita, a tiny little mutt thing, already barking at the teenager. Maria Estrella is fourteen and full of trouble.

The blinds on the windows were thrown open and the house was awash in sunlight. The television was tuned to a Spanish talk show, the volume cranked to a million, no one watching it. Maria Estrella smelled chicharo, a kind of split pea porridge, her mother's specialty. She rounded the corner into the kitchen and found her mother, Marilynne, already dressed for work, and her aunt, Tia Matilde, eating wedges of avocado, sliced cantimpalo sausage and, in a bowl lined with paper towels, fried plantain chips.

Maria Estrella gathered her breath. "I have found my Prince Charming," she said, her English so thick you could ladle it.

"Mi'jita, please!" Marilynne waved off her daughter's words like they were flies. "What am I paying that school to teach you? If you can't talk decent English, then speak Spanish. Lord above, you sound like some kind of trapped animal."

"My English is sparkling," said Maria Estrella, insisting on the S. She leaned in and kissed her mother.

“And don’t I get a kiss?” said Tia Matilde. “I’ve only been defending you here for the last hour.” Tia Matilde leaned towards her niece and kissed her, leaving a gaudy stamp of lipstick on her cheek.

“From this one?” Maria Estrella hooked her thumb at her mother. “Let me guess. About my fiesta de quinces?”

Cosita ran into the kitchen and slalomed around Maria Estrella’s legs.

“Look,” said Tia Matilde, “I agree with you. A girl should have nice things if she wants them.” Tia Matilde was older than her sister, Marilynne, by fifteen years. They shared the same mother but a different father. This man, Tia Matilde’s father, was a jazz musician in a state-sponsored tourist hotel in Havana. When Tia Matilde turned twenty, he brought her to the clubs with him as a dancer. There she met a Brazilian businessman, got married, and fled Cuba. She spoke perfect Spanish, perfect Portuguese and good-enough English.

“I like nice things,” said Tia Matilde. “Does that make me materialistic? No. It means I like nice things.” In the light of the kitchen, Tia Matilde’s hair, dyed and permed, glowed orange. She raised her hands like she was directing traffic. Her fingernails were painted red and her wrists were a tower of gold bangles. “But your mother is working very hard for you,” she said. “And I hope you understand that.”

“If it were merely expensive,” said Marilynne, “that’d be one thing. But let me tell you what she wants.” Marilynne gave birth to Maria Estrella when she was twenty. Ten years later, Marilynne and her husband, and their daughter sat themselves inside of garbage cans latched to inner tubes stolen from a semi truck and hoped for Florida. The rings around Marilynne’s eyes told the story of her life in Miami.

Marilynne fanned out her fingers, grabbed her pinky and wiggled it. “One, she wants a limousine for her and her entire court. Two, she wants a waltz, so I have to hire a coordinator.”

“Mami,” said Maria Estrella, “what’s a fiesta de quinces without the waltz? It’s an egg without salt.” Maria Estrella choked as though the thought of a quinces without a waltz suddenly appeared in her mouth.

“Three,” continued Marilynne, “she doesn’t just want a DJ. She needs a special DJ. Al, no se que, DJ Al something. Somebody from the radio.”

“DJ Al Rescate,” said Maria Estrella, incredulous. “How do you not know anything?”

Cosita the dog stopped running, sat in between the women, panting, and began barking.

Tia Matilde sighed. “I was going to keep this a secret,” she said, “but anything to calm your mother down.” She turned to Maria Estrella. “Your uncle Paolo knows someone at the radio station. And that person says they’re very close friends with DJ Al Rescate’s personal accountant. It’s practically a done deal. That’ll be our present to you.”

“You see?” said Maria Estrella to her mother. “You’re always so negative.”

Marilynne huffed. Since the divorce, she’d been working two jobs, as a file clerk at a law firm in Miami Beach specializing in immigration law and, four nights a week, as part of the night crew at Another New Horizon, a rehab center for addicts of all kinds. Her days were filled with so much sorrow she hardly had time for her own.

“Four,” she said. “The banquet hall has to have a dressing room because she doesn’t want anyone to see her until the waltz. And, after the cake, she wants to be able to change.”

“Two dresses?” asked Tia Matilde.

“She wanted three,” answered Marilynne.

“You think I want to ruin my quinces dress by dancing in it?” said Maria Estrella. “You’re crazy. I want one dress for the waltz, and I change into another dress for the rest of the party. This is what civilized people do, mother.” Maria Estrella opened the fridge and saw nothing she liked and instead popped open a tin of soda crackers and poured condensed milk over them.

“Lastly,” said Marilynne, wrapping her entire hand around her thumb, “she wants a party, after the party, just for the court. No adults. Can you believe this?”

Tia Matilde turned her eyes to Maria Estrella.

“What?” Maria Estrella swallowed. “Okay, no after party, but I’m not budging on the dressing room.” She shook the crumbs from her hands, and crumbled her napkin.

“Now, let me tell you what I did today.”

“You decided to call the whole thing off and instead want to go on a vacation with your mother?” Marilynne clapped her hands.

“Even better,” said Maria Estrella. “I’ve decided who I want for my chambelan de honor.”

“The king of your court? That is big news. I can’t bear the suspense,” said Marilynne.

“His name is Rudy Sharpstone,” said Maria Estrella, in the best English she could muster.

“Que que?” asked her mother. “What kind of name is Rudy Sharpstone?”

“It’s a normal name,” said Maria Estrella. “Listen to the sound of it. Rudy Sharpstone.”

Marilynne narrowed her eyes at Maria Estrella. “That name *means* something in English.”

“Sharpstone? Yes. It means he’s rich. Just imagine. Maria Estrella Sharpstone. Wow.”

“Not Sharpstone,” said Marilynne. “Rudy. I’ve heard people say that before. It’s a way of describing. People look at me and say, You’re Rudy!”

“I’m not surprised,” said Maria Estrella.

Tia Matilde laughed and covered her mouth. She shook her head. “No, Marilynne, You’re thinking of the word, rude,” she said, “R-U-D-E. Rude.”

“It’s not the same thing? Rude? Rudy?”

“No,” said Tia Matilde, “rude is like, I don’t know, it’s when someone is a comemierda, someone who is a shit eater.”

“Your new boyfriend’s name means comemierda in English?” said Marilynne.

“You can’t just be happy for me, can you?” said Maria Estrella.

Her mother laughed and Tia Matilde laughed and Cosita the dog jumped like she was spring-loaded.

“Your mother is just giving you a hard time,” said Tia Matilde. “It’s like you have a new lover boy every other week.” She scooped Cosita up with one hand and rubbed her golf ball of a head.

“Not even fifteen yet and already she’s had like twenty love-sick enamorados,” said her Marilynne.

“At least,” said Maria Estrella, and gleamed.

“You see what I’m dealing with here,” said her mother. “What am I supposed to do with this? She thinks she’s a señorita already.”

“Weren’t you my age when you married Papi? Weren’t you fifteen?” asked Maria Estrella.

“No. Yes. It was different. We weren’t married but we were going to be.”

“And you had me a few years later, right?”

“We waited until we were church-married to have you. You get that straight.”

Maria Estrella hunched her eyebrow into suspicion.

“We waited,” said Marilynne.

“Mami, I only want what you and Papi had. I want to fall in love. I want to be swept off my feet. And I want to live happily ever after.”

“Mi’ija,” said Marilynne. “Your father is an alcoholic. We’ve been divorced three years. I work two jobs to keep us fed and to keep you in a school where you might learn something. Look at this house. Is this what you’d call happily ever after?”

“Oh no,” said Maria Estrella. “I won’t make the same mistakes you and Papi made. When I get married, when I *finally* get married, I’m going to love my husband and he’s going to love me and we’re going to live in an enormous mansion right on the water.

A piano in the front of the house, and a jet ski out back. Two jet skis! One for me and one for Cosita!” said Maria Estrella. She took the dog from her aunt, held the animal above her face and blew air into her tiny teeth. Cosita bit at the invisible thing in front of her.

“We came on a raft so she can jump on a jet ski,” said Marilynne. “God give me patience.”

Maria Estrella set the dog down and Cosita barked for someone to pick her up again. “What my mother doesn’t understand,” said Maria Estrella “is that the gringitos at St. Matthew have never seen a Cubanita like me.” Already, at fourteen, Maria Estrella had developed. She was trigueña, a word suggesting the swirl of Spanish, African and indigenous blood. Her skin was olive. Her hair was lustrous. When she ran her fingers through it, it wasn’t out of habit. It was to underscore a point.

“Pero, mi amor,” said her mother, “what gringito in his right mind would go out with a macharandanga like you?”

“What’d you just say?” said Maria Estrella.

“Macharandanga,” said Tia Matilde. “It means someone low-class. A street person.”

“Your own daughter?” asked Maria Estrella.

“I love you with all my heart,” said Marilynne, and kissed her daughter on the head.

Maria Estrella rolled her eyes. “These private school boys don’t know what to do with themselves when they see me,” she said. “But this one? Rudy?” she said. She closed her eyes and fanned herself.

“What makes him so different?” asked her mother.

“For starters, he’s a pelotero. But not like these Cubanitos or the negritos from Dominicana that look like they’ve never seen a field with lights before. Rudy’s father owns a sporting goods store, that’s how they’re rich, and when Rudy is in that uniform he looks like a real pro out there. A real Derek Jeter. And, you know what else? On top of that, he surfs. Can you believe it?” Maria Estrella held her hand against her forehead as if trying to keep the image of him from leaving her mind.

“Surf? Que carajo es surf?” asked Marilynne.

“Surf,” said Tia Matilde. “With the board. It’s when they ride the waves, like people in California. Doesn’t anyone here speak English?”

“And people here surf?” asked Marilynne. “There are no waves in Miami.”

“Mami,” said Maria Estrella, “this one, he makes his own waves.”

“Well, watch you don’t drown in those waves,” said Marilynne.

“We’ll see soon enough,” said Maria Estrella. She found a bowl of green grapes and plucked the last remaining few off the bunch. “It’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” she said. “I asked him out.”

“You what?” asked Marilynne.

“No one will ever accuse you of not knowing what you want,” said Tia Matilde.

“I asked him out,” said Maria Estrella.

“And he said yes?” asked Marilynne.

“Of course he said yes. He couldn’t wait to say yes. We’re going out on Friday.”

“Which Friday?” asked Marilynne.

“Tomorrow,” replied Maria Estrella.



“See what I told you?” said Marilynne to her sister. “She cares about absolutely nothing unless it directly involves her.”

“What did I do now?” asked Maria Estrella.

“You didn’t forget, did you?” asked Tia Matilde.

“I have no idea what either one of you are talking about.”

“Your cousin,” said Tia Matilde, “the one I told you about. He just came from Cuba. He’s close to your age. I asked you to take him out, to let him see Miami a little bit. Go get some ice cream, show him the mall. Something. This poor kid has been trapped at the house for almost a month and has seen nothing of the city. You said you would take him out this Friday.”

“You were serious about that?” asked Maria Estrella.

“Of course she was serious!” Marilynne slapped the table with her hand and Cosita who’d left the room and fallen asleep on the couch, came running into the kitchen, barking again. “You want and you want and you want, but you never give. You never give of yourself to others.” Marilynne spoke slow and stern.

“That’s not true,” said Maria Estrella. “Don’t be mean.”

“It’s okay. Just forget it,” said Tia Matilde. “I’ll talk to Urnavy. We’ll reschedule. It’ll be fine.”

“His name is Urnavy?” asked Maria Estrella.

“Yes,” said Marilynne. “And he’s your cousin. Coming to this country like you did five years ago. Or did you forget that too?” asked her mother.

“Mami, please. It was an honest mistake. You heard Tia Matilde. She’ll talk to Urnavy and we’ll reschedule and everything will be fine. Don’t be mad.” Maria Estrella threw her arms around her mother and kissed her face.

Marilynne tossed her daughter arms off of her, and shook her head. “One of these days, you’re not going to be able to talk your way out of trouble so easily.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” said Maria Estrella, looking every bit her age.

Soon after, Marilynne left for work and Tia Matilde called her husband Paolo to remind him that she was watching Maria Estrella tonight. Night fell and Maria Estrella and Tia Matilde ate dinner in front of the television and watched a made-for-TV movie about a South American drug dealer. Maria Estrella checked her Facebook, and Tia Matilde checked on her husband. By the time Maria Estrella was done with her shower, Tia Matilde had fallen asleep on the couch, Cosita in her lap, the eleven o’clock news signing off. Maria Estrella turned off the television and the lights in the house and placed a blanket over her aunt. She picked up Cosita, stretching and yawning in her palm, and took her to the bedroom with her. Maria Estrella went to sleep already knowing what she’d wear for her date with Rudy Sharpstone.

When Rudy Sharpstone arrived the following night to pick up Maria Estrella, he drove up to the house in a brand new SUV with a surfboard strapped to the roof. He honked twice, then looked at his cellphone. Maria Estrella had been sitting by the window but now waited patiently. She watched sixteen minutes tick away on the clock

beside her. She stood up and took one last look at herself in the mirror. She wore two-tone ankle strap shoes with a medium wedge, a pair of denim shorts that were too long for her liking, too short for her mother's, and an open-back blouse.

"Here," said her mother, and handed her a sweater.

"I don't think so," said Maria Estrella, not taking her eyes off her reflection.

"I'm not asking," said Marilynne.

"It doesn't match the outfit."

"Then change your outfit," said Marilynne.

Maria Estrella turned to her mother. "Why are you being so difficult?" she said.

"You're fourteen years old. He's seventeen. You put this sweater on or I go outside and tell him you're not going anywhere."

"Wait," said Maria Estrella. She left to her bedroom and came back wearing a striped cardigan. "Better?" she asked, and tilted towards her mother.

"Better," said Marilynne, begrudgingly. "Wear your seatbelt."

"Quit your worrying," said Maria Estrella. "Don't you see the size of his car?"

"That's what worries me."

Maria Estrella opened the door and Marilynne followed her daughter outside.

Marilynne kissed her daughter and Maria Estrella kissed her back and walked towards the car. Marilynne stood beneath the gloaming of the porch light, a pair of dragonflies jousting in odd patterns above her. Rudy Sharpstone noticed Maria Estrella walking towards him and put his phone down. Maria Estrella stepped inside the car and shut the door. Neon tubing lit up the bottom of the car and they drove away, windows down, the noise of something terrible wobbling out of the speakers.

Rudy drove Maria Estrella to a shopping mall in Kendall and paid for two tickets to see a movie called Piranha Lake in 3-D. He bought popcorn, two Seven-Ups and a box of Sno-Caps. Inside the movie, they took off their glasses and wrestled their mouths together until their tongues grew tired. Maria Estrella opened her eyes and saw the shadow of the movie flickering against Rudy's lap. She lifted the seat's arm and sat closer to him, kissed him even harder. He played with her hair, traced her neck with his finger. He grabbed both her shoulders and squeezed her arms together, ballooning her chest into something he could see in the dark. He wrapped his arm around her, pulled her towards him and covered her breast with one hand. She wriggled away.

"No, mi amor," she said, "not yet."

After the movie they left the theater and walked past the yogurt stand, the tanning salon, the arcade, the sports memorabilia store, the fried chicken restaurant, the cellphone store, the cigar store and came to a T.G.I. Fridays. The restaurant was slammed. The Miami Heat game was in its final minutes and the bar was raucous. The DJ was playing something that thumped. He bit his lip and pumped his fist and encouraged diners to do the same.

"We want to sit close to the DJ," said Rudy to the hostess.

Maria Estrella wagged her finger, then pointed to the back of the restaurant. She leaned in to Rudy's ear. "So we can talk," she said, and kissed the side of his face.

Rudy agreed and the hostess sat them near the server's station and the ladies restroom. She handed them menus and their silverware and said their server would be along shortly.

"So," said Maria Estrella, "tell me about your life."

Rudy laughed. “There’s nothing to say, really.” He flipped his hair, wheat blonde and shaggy, away from his face. He wore a diamond earring and a lettermans jacket over a striped polo. “My dad made, like, a million bucks when he was young. Him and his bros were some of the first to build a fantasy baseball site. You know what fantasy baseball is, right? Like, on the internet?”

Maria Estrella nodded and smiled and bit into a cheese stick.

“He was living in San Francisco at the time and he met my mom at some kind of concert, I forget what, but they got married and like, my grandparents on my mom’s side were already rich so they helped my parents built this house in Miami, the house we live in now. It was only supposed to be a winter home, but you know how that goes. My dad retired, and we moved down here. The sporting goods store is just for fun, to keep him busy. And my mom, well, she’s the perfect woman. She gets her hair done every two weeks. She’s got a group of friends that love going shopping together and doing yoga. My mom is super spiritual. And she loves going to dinner so we eat out a lot. But only to the best places. You ever been to Ruth’s Steakhouse? I should take you there some time. I thought about taking you there tonight but it’s really busy on Fridays, and I thought maybe you’d like this place better. Was I right?”

“Oh yes,” said Maria Estrella. “This is very nice.”

“And you? What about your family?” asked Rudy.

“Well, we came from Cuba when I was ten. I love Cuba very much. Very different from here. But as children, we don’t know about the problems of Cuba. All we know is how to run and play and there is lots of where to run and play. When I was

hungry, my father and mother give me food. Everyone in Cuba have trouble with food but not me. I have food.”

“That’s very beautiful,” said Rudy. “I admire your strength. Your accent is very cute. Tell me about your father and your mother.”

“They are not like your parents. My father is a good father. I love him. But he and my mother no get along. He likes to drink and to play. In Cuba it was okay but no here. My mother and him were divorce which is a big no for Cubans. Everyone said to her, don’t divorce, don’t divorce. But did she listen? She no listen.”

Rudy leaned forward, his head in his hands. His cellphone buzzed and he looked at the caller. He answered the phone. “Nah, bro. Can’t right now. What’re you looking for? The usual? All right, holler tomorrow.” He hung up the phone. “Where was I?” he said. He reached across the table and placed his hand on top of hers. “You are so different from the other girls at St. Matthew. You are special,” he said.

Special. Maria Estrella repeated the word to herself. Finally, she thought, someone who saw her for what she truly was.

“You talk nice,” said Maria Estrella. She reached out with her foot and touched his.

“We should celebrate, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I think,” she said.

“I can get us a beer. Or do you want wine instead? A glass of wine?”

“Yes?” said Maria Estrella.

“We look twenty-one, right?”

“Yes we do,” said Maria Estrella, sitting up in her chair.

“I have a friend who works as a waiter here. Let me see if he’s around.” Rudy flagged their server over. Her nametag said Krispy. Her hair was blue and she wore Chuck Taylors.

“Excuse me,” he said, “do you know if Tyler is working tonight?”

“I don’t know anyone named Tyler.”

“Are you new here?”

“I’ve worked here eight months.”

“That’s kind of new. You must not work on his shifts. So, no Tyler then?”

The waitress ignored Rudy and went on her way, her tray loaded with things.

“Maybe next time,” said Rudy. He looked at Maria Estrella. “I can’t get enough of you,” he said.

“I cannot get enough of you,” repeated Maria Estrella, loving the sound of it.

“I want to kiss you,” said Rudy.

“My birthday is coming,” she said.

“Your birthday? Maybe we can do something special,” said Rudy. “You and me?”

He placed his hand on top of hers and tap-danced with his fingers.

“I’m having a party for my birthday and I want you to come.”

“You’re having a party?”

“Yes. A special party. You have to practice for my party.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have to practice for my party.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Every fifteen birthday is a special party. There is a dance to start the party. You have to practice and I want you to be my partner.”

“Oh,” said Rudy.

“You do it for me?” asked Maria Estrella. “It’s a very special day for a girl and I will be very happy. Happy enough to kiss you,” she said. “And maybe, who knows? Maybe something else.” She leaned forward. “It’s a very special day for a girl,” she said.

“Wow,” said Rudy.

Maria Estrella laughed and fell back into her chair.

“And there’s a dance at this party?”

“A waltz. It’s tradition.”

“I don’t know how to dance,” said Rudy.

“It’s okay. They teach you.”

“Who’s they?”

“How do you say, dance planner?”

“A dance planner?”

“Yes,” said Maria Estrella. “And you will be the king of my court. My chambelan de honor.”

“What do I have to do?” said Rudy.

“Just say yes.”

“Okay.”

“Good. I’m happy,” said Maria Estrella, believing, in the heart of her heart, that this was the beginning of the rest of her life.



The following week, Tia Matilde offered up her house for the fiesta de quinces dance rehearsal. Her house, deep in the recesses of Kendall, was something of a palace to Maria Estrella. Visitors punched a series of numbers into a key code and a motorized gate opened to reveal a hardwood hammock of broad-leafed tropical palms, soft hills of shrubbery and mammoth Florida pines. It was just after eight pm. The path to the house was dark but illumined by fountains of cherubic babies spitting water from their mouths and from trumpets. Signs posted along the way read, Careful! Peacock Crossing.

“We should just have the fiesta de quinces here,” said Maria Estrella, her eyes wide open.

“Don’t get any more ideas,” said Marilynne. She drove towards the front of the house and parked behind six other cars along the driveway. Marilynne looked at her daughter.

“It’s called fashionably late,” said Maria Estrella. “Cuban time.”

“To your own rehearsal?” asked Marilynne.

“I read online that it makes everyone super happy when you finally show up. It’s a real thing,” said Maria Estrella. She stepped out of the car and straightened her dress. She wore a blue one-piece, cinched at the waist with a leather belt, and yellow flats. She painted her lips red and tied her hair into a luxurious braid.

Marilynne locked the car and dropped her keys into her purse. “I have to work tonight,” she said. “And believe it or not my boss has never heard of Cuban time.”

They walked towards the house and found the front door unlocked. Inside the foyer was a double staircase that lead to the second floor. Greeting them as they entered

was Celia, a blue-eyed Cockatoo, dancing back and forth along her perch. “Fiesta de quinces,” she shrieked. “Fiesta de quinces.”

Tia Matilde came from around the staircase.

“My god, where have you been?” said Tia Matilde. “Everyone is here. We’re waiting. The choreographer is here. Time is money, mi’jita. What took you so long? Let’s go.”

Tia Matilde led them through an arched hallway past the home theater and past Paolo’s den into the living room. Inside, the walls were painted the color of clay and trimmed in Moroccan tile. A large flat screen television hung on the front wall and a sectional sofa, a pair of recliners and a small bamboo bar, took up the rest of the room. Wicker fans pushed the air around slowly.

Uncle Paolo was standing near the bar drinking with two other men. One was older and shared a physical resemblance to Uncle Palo, a horseshoe of silver hair, round in the middle, bowl-legged, with strong-looking arms. The third man, had his hair parted to the side and wore stone-washed jeans and a t-shirt with a dragon on it. Uncle Paolo greeted and hugged Maria Estrella and Marilynne, and introduced them to a business associate of his.

“And here’s someone else I’ve been wanting you to meet,” said Tia Matilde.

“Maria Estrella. I’d like you to meet your cousin, Urnavy.”

The man with the dragon t-shirt turned to Maria Estrella. He was tall and thin and his eyes were uncommonly blue. “It’s nice to meet you,” he said. He leaned in and kissed Maria Estrella and she noticed a small outcropping of warts on his neck. “But I’m not really your cousin.”

“Then what are you?” asked Maria Estrella.

“Of course he’s your cousin,” said Tia Matilde. “His mother was your grandmother’s niece. We’re all family here.”

“I hear you’re excited about your quinces,” said Urnavy. He smiled and his teeth stuck out at odd angles.

“Urnavy should be a senior in high school,” said Tia Matilde, “but they’re holding him back a year. He wants to study architecture at the University of Miami. Isn’t that terrific?”

“Yes, it is,” said Maria Estrella, “but we should probably start the rehearsal already. Mami has to go to work tonight and I’d like for her to stay through most of it. It’s nice to meet you,” she said to Urnavy, then smiled without parting her lips.

Tia Matilde led them into the kitchen. She had bought trays of empanadas and pastelitos and croquettas and, through the sliding glass doors, Maria Estrella saw that most of the guests were gathered around the food. Maria Estrella counted six girls—a cousin, two daughters of family friends and three of her friends from school—and seven boys—four sons of her mother’s friends, two male friends from school, and Rudy Sharpstone himself. He wore a pair of gold colored pants, a purple sweater vest and a white button down with the collar popped. Instead of wearing his hair shaggy, he spiked it in a way that made Maria Estrella want to hang his picture on her wall. She slid open the door and the entire party greeted her at once.

“Mi amor,” said Marilynne, “this is Francisco. He’s going to be the choreographer.”

“This is Maria Estrella? But you’re even more beautiful than your mother said.” Francisco let his jaw drop open and placed his hands against the sides of his face. He was bald and wore round eyeglasses and a guayabera and a drawn-on moustache. “But you’re late. And I don’t tolerate lateness, okay? We have a lot of work to do. And time is critical,” he said. “Now, is the chambelan de honor here?”

Maria Estrella pointed him out. “That one,” she said.

Rudy turned his back and poured soda into a plastic cup.

“You have exceptional tastes, mi’jita,” said Francisco. “You should be very proud of yourself, but let’s go. We haven’t a moment to lose.”

Francisco stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled a loud and piercing whistle that cut through the conversations. He clapped once, and commanded everyone’s attention.

Maria Estrella walked through the crowd and made her way to Rudy.

“I am happy to see you,” she said to Rudy.

“Yeah, babe,” he said. “You want a sip of my drink?”

“What is it?”

“Some Scotch I snuck from the fat guy. Just mixed it with the Coke. Have some. It’s cool.”

“Don’t let anyone see you,” said Maria Estrella. “You’re here to learn the dances.”

“Babe,” he said, “No worries. This will loosen me up. Get me all loosey-goosey,” he said.

“Yes,” said Maria Estrella. “Loosey-Goosey.”

“Don’t let us bother you, Maria Estrella!” said Francisco. “It’s only your fiesta de quinces we’re here for.”

“I thought I was waiting on you,” said Maria Estrella. “We can start now.”

Francisco took the girls and the boys and lined three on each side of Maria Estrella. Rudy Sharpstone he pushed to the side “You, wait here,” he said.

“This is how you will spend most of the waltz,” said Francisco. “Learn your places. Try and remember the couple on your right. If they’re not on your right, you are in the wrong place. I have put you in a special order because of your sizes. Tall, short, tall. If you’re not in your places, the court will look sloppy and disorganized and everyone will blame you. But this is not where you’ll begin the waltz. We’ll be introducing you one by one, first the boys, then the girls, and you will meet on the dance floor in your places. Is this clear? Okay, let me explain how you will enter.”

The weather was pleasant and the air devoid of insects. Marilynne and Tia Matilde sat in recliners on the opposite side of the pool and drank café con leches. The moon was full and the light bulb inside the pool was like a second moon.

“Have you told her yet?” asked Tia Matilde.

“What do I say to her?” said Marilynne.

“You say you’ve forgiven her father, that he wants to come to the quinces, but you are not ready to love him again and you don’t think he deserves to come.”

“If I tell her, she’ll demand him there.”

“Has she asked about him?”

“No. If there’s one thing to thank Rudy Sharpstone for, it’s for taking her mind off her father.”

“Enough!” Francisco shouted.

Marilynne and Tia Matilde looked and saw the couples in Maria Estrella’s court doubled over in laughter. Francisco stormed over towards the women.

“I cannot work like this,” he said, and pointed at Rudy Sharpstone.

Rudy and Maria Estrella were arm-in-arm dancing. He wore an empty cup on his head and exaggerated his movements like a concussed merengero. Maria Estrella, laughed and laughed and tears came out of her eyes.

For the next two hours, Marilynne and Tia Matilde helped Francisco organize the dancers. They imagined the outdoor grill the stand-in for the stage from which Maria Estrella will emerge, and the boys and girls of her court practiced sliding their steps one, two, three, two, two, three, three, two, three, four, two, three. The boys complained about holding their arms just so. The girls complained about their feet and being stepped on.

“Live with it!” said Francisco. “This is very important night for Maria Estrella. I will not have you ruin it for her.”

The rehearsal came to a close and Francisco announced that there will be two more practices before the fiesta de quinces. The parents of the rest of the court began arriving and Maria Estrella grabbed Rudy by the hand.

“I want to show you something,” she said.

She led Rudy down a hallway that was decorated with pictures of Tia Matilde and Uncle Paolo riding a camel, at the top of a waterfall, sky-diving, eating oysters. She pushed open a door and walked into a game room with two pinball machines, a billiards table, a dartboard and a home bar made to look like a western saloon.

“This room is money,” said Rudy. “How’d you know about this place?”

“Tia Matilde had a baby but her baby die before it was born. They say Tia Matilde was too old for a baby and that’s why it die. Her and uncle Paolo make this room instead. It’s a happy room now,” said Maria Estrella.

“That’s awesome,” said Rudy. He removed a pool cue from the rack and rolled it back and forth on the table. “You want to play a quick game or what?”

“Yes,” said Maria Estrella, “A very quick game.” She pushed Rudy against the billiards table and kissed him on the mouth. She kissed his face, his neck. Rudy couldn’t keep up. He took his arms off of her and she ran her hands up his shirt and scratched his chest. Rudy yelped.

“I get excited,” said Maria Estrella.

“I can tell,” said Rudy.

“You get excited?” asked Maria Estrella. She ran her hand over the front of his jeans. “You do get excited,” she said.

Rudy placed his hands on the table.

“Do you mind?” said Maria Estrella.

“What?”

She grabbed his belt at the buckle and undid it.

“Are you sure about this?” said Rudy.

“I just want to see,” said Maria Estrella. She unhooked the buttons and peeled back his jeans and with both hands reached into his briefs.

The door behind Maria Estrella opened.

Maria Estrella turned and covered Rudy. Rudy grabbed his pants and held them together as though he had been standing that way.

“Perdone,” said Urnavy, “I was looking for the bathroom.”

“Okay,” said Maria Estrella.

“Your mother is looking for you,” said Urnavy. “She’s ready to leave.”

“Okay,” said Maria Estrella.

Urnavy stood there.

“Go,” she said.

Urnavy closed the door and Maria Estrella shook her head.

“Who was that?” asked Rudy.

“I don’t know,” said Maria Estrella. “Just another dumb cousin.”

Finally, the day of the fiesta de quinces had arrived and the Mi Destino Banquet Hall in Doral was stuffed to capacity. The parquet dance floor was buffed to a fine turtle shell and twenty tables, ten to each side of the room, were decorated with an elaborate bouquet of pink hydrangeas, candles and crystal pitchers of water, already sweating onto the tablecloth. The stage was dressed with a runner and a faux proscenium wrapped around the front, providing a staging area in the back. The guests, cotton-candy haired seniors, parents of school friends, parents of kids in Maria Estrella’s school, Marilynne’s co-workers—thin-lipped lawyers from her office and the Haitian nightshift workers from Another New Dawn—and distant aunts, uncles, cousins, and other accumulated relatives from their life back in Cuba, hugged and kissed and said things like, If it wasn’t for weddings and funerals, we’d never get together like this.

The wait staff was courteous and directed the guests towards their seats. They floated about the room handing out skewers of sweet plantains and shredded flank steak



on top of tostones, fried circles of green plantains. Two bartenders at opposite sides of the room poured Johnnie Walker and sparkling cider. For the kids, they served soda made from yerba mate served in a flute. Soon, a buffet would be made available. After the waltz, there'll be cake.

DJ Al Rescate was working the ones and twos, keeping the party bouncy. He wore a University of Miami Hurricanes baseball cap and an orange bowtie, undone at the neck, and played party staples like Juan Luis Guerra and Willie Colon. Tia Matilde requested Julio Iglesias' *De Niña A Mujer*. DJ Al Rescate wore sunglasses indoors.

Maria Estrella's court arrived via Hummer limo just as the sun was setting orange behind them. The driver pulled the car to the entrance and all the members of the court exited. Marilynne stood at the front door and greeted them one by one. She wore a one-shouldered, gold lamé dress and matching flats with bows on the ends. She kissed the teenagers on the cheek and thanked them for sharing this day with Maria Estrella. When she came to Rudy Sharpstone—white suit, white shirt, thin black tie and a straw hat—the benefits of being the chambelan de honor—she smelled something like guava paste, only hot, and somehow steamy.

Back stage Maria Estrella was sweating. It was pouring out of her like never before. Her forehead was damp, her upper lip moist. Her armpits, carefully shaved and treated with talcum powder, were beading up with dots of water. Her hands, cold wet and soft like they belonged to somebody else.

“Mi'jita,” said Marilynne. “What are you nervous about?”

“I am not nervous,” said Maria Estrella. She looked at herself in the mirror. She wore a red taffeta dress with a halter bodice and a lace up back. The skirt was bunched up

and cloud-like. She wore a tiara on her head and a shawl across her shoulders and fanned herself with a paper abanico. "I am not nervous," she said.

"There's something I have to tell you. It may help. It may make matters worse. What do you think?" asked Marilynne.

"Just tell me I look beautiful," said Maria Estrella.

"Your Papi and I have been seeing each other."

Maria Estrella looked at her mother. "And this is supposed to make me feel how?" She fidgeted, and tugged at her bodice.

"I don't know," said Marilynne. "It's why I didn't tell you sooner."

"So, why are you telling me now? You think this is news I want to hear?" asked Maria Estrella.

"He wanted to come today."

"Oh," said Maria Estrella. "And?"

"I didn't think it was a good idea."

Maria Estrella thought about this. "How long have you been seeing him?"

"Two months. Your father has been a patient of ours at Another New Dawn. He joined against my wishes. But this is good now. I see him, and we talk and I see that he's doing better."

"So, you can see him, but I can't?"

"It's not like that. He wants to see you, but we are not together. Your father has a lot to work through," said Marilynne.

The door opened slowly and in walked Urnavy.

"Get out," she said. Her chin quivered and she fought to keep from crying.

“Tia Matilde insisted,” he said. “I brought you something.” Urnavy stepped inside the room and shut the door behind him. He wore a houndstooth blazer and a pair of black slacks and didn’t look half bad. His hair was combed and styled and his face was clean shaven. He walked forward and handed her a clear case with a corsage inside it.

“I don’t want this,” said Maria Estrella.

“I brought it for you.”

“Why?”

“I thought you would like it.”

Maria Estrella looked at the corsage. Two pink roses were tied together by their stems. In between them, a satin bow. The corsage rested on a dark green leaf and was accentuated by tiny berries.

“Tia Matilde found me a job,” said Urnavy. “At a flower shop. It’s not so bad.”

Maria Estrella looked at her mother and her mother shrugged her shoulders.

“You know why we give flowers on special days?” asked Urnavy. “Because in ancient times, people used to give flowers as messages. Each flower meant something. Like, wisdom or gratitude. Some people even used flowers to plan escapes and get married against their family wishes.”

“So, what do these flowers mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Urnavy. “I just started working there. May I?”

Maria Estrella didn’t say no.

Urnavy reached for her hand and slipped the corsage over her wrist. “It matches and everything,” he said.

Maria Estrella modeled her arm in the mirror. “Thank you,” she said.

“Urnavy,” said Marilynne. “please tell Tia Matilde that we’re almost ready.”

“I will,” said Urnavy. He turned to Maria Estrella. “You look beautiful,” he said.

DJ Al Rescate cued the music and the audience hushed and the wait staff dimmed the lights. A spotlight opened on the proscenium and the curtains were pulled open to reveal a Havana cityscape. The night was dotted with light bulbs and the moon was a fingernail in the sky. The backdrop was a street scene, a trolley car, a street lamp, a two-story building with clothes hanging from a line, a young couple holding hands and pointing towards the sea. The opening brass of “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” filled the hall. Underneath the horns, a slow mambo was beginning to pick up steam as the members of Maria Estrella’s court sashayed their way to their positions. The door on the stage opened and Maria Estrella stepped on the scene.

She was met with thunderous applause and she smiled but the lights were bright. Too bright. She shielded her eyes briefly, then brought her hand down and tried to keep from wincing at the glare. Rudy had been standing at the edge of the dance floor. Spurred by Tia Matilde, Rudy came to as if he remembered where he was. He danced across the parquet as though his shoulders and hips shared a bone and kneeled in front of the steps leading to the stage. He offered his hand to Maria Estrella. The theme song to *Quinceañera*, a Mexican telenovela, swelled. Why does my body change from day to day? Little by little, the girl in me dies. Now begins the adventure of life.

Maria Estrella’s eyes adjusted to the dark. She saw Rudy Sharpstone, pale and clumsy, reaching out for her. She looked out towards the audience and spotted her mother, her hands clasped together as if in prayer. Tia Matilde nodded with her head.

Maria Estrella saw faces in the crowd she didn't recognize. She saw Urnavy, And she saw her father. She wasn't sure it was him. He'd lost weight in his face and his moustache fell farther down his mouth than she remembered. He wore a tie. Then he blew her a kiss and she recognized the softness in his eyes. Maria Estrella looked at Rudy. She blinked, and felt confused. Her vision collapsed at the corners and she fainted. Maria Estrella fell forward and Rudy, unprepared and panicked, stepped aside. Maria Estrella fell off the stage and on to her face.

Blood erupted as thought from a packet of condiments. The audience gasped. Someone screamed and cried. Marilynne and her husband ran to Maria Estrella. Tia Matilde shoved Rudy Sharpstone out of the way. They rolled Maria Estrella over. Her eyes were closed. Her nose was bent to the right and pouring blood freely. Her mouth was full of blood and so was the side of her face. Her two front teeth were split and missing. Her father slapped the sides of her face softly and Maria Estrella sat up. The lights in the room came on. She opened her eyes slowly and cried. She covered her face and tried to stand. Her mother and her father held her by her arms and carried her back stage. A smattering of applauses broke through the silence.

“Coño cojones,” shouted Tia Matilde. “Give them ten fucking minutes, will you?”

Marilynne and Maria Estrella's father, Diosdado (“Diosdado, pero Diablo criado;” God-given, but Devil-raised) sat their daughter backstage and pressed a towel against her face. It immediately bloomed with blood.

“I'll call 911,” said Marilynne.

“No,” said Maria Estrella. She held her hand up “Not until the waltz.”

“Pero, mi amor, you have to go to the hospital,” said her mother. “Look at your face.”

“It’s okay. I’m okay,” said Maria Estrella, her voice blubbing.

“Are you sure?” asked Diosdado.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said. “Give me another towel please. Maria Estrella looked at her father. “Hi,” she said.

“You feeling okay?” he asked.

“No. Not even a little,” she said.

Marilynne laughed.

“Is this funny to you, mother?”

“No,” said Marilynne. “But look at us. What are we doing here?” she said.

“Trying to stop the bleeding,” said Maria Estrella.

“Mi amor,” said Diosdado, “we should get you to a hospital.”

“I thought Mami said you couldn’t come.”

“I changed my mind,” she said. “He wanted to come, and I said no. But still he kept asking. He said there was plenty he was ashamed of. But you were not one of those things. I just didn’t know how you’d react to seeing him”

“Now we know,” said Maria Estrella, holding up the blood-red towel.

Her father took a fresh towel, tossed some flowers out of a vase and poured water on it. He wiped her face with it.

“How do I look?” asked Maria Estrella.

“You’ve lost two teeth,” her father said, “and you’ve got a fat lip from where you cut it.” He pointed at her right eye. “Expect a black eye,” he said. “And your nose is broken. I’m almost sure of it.”

“But how do I look?” said Maria Estrella. Her hair was disheveled, her makeup ruined. Her face was puffy with the glisten of tears and blood.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“That’s all that matters then,” she said, and did her best to smile.

Tia Matilde came into the room. “We’ve got a problem,” she said.

Maria Estrella, Marilynne, Diosdado and Tia Matilde exited the back door and found a Mi Destino security guard holding Rudy Sharpstone by the collar.

“I found him smoking pot on the property,” said the guard.

“Are you arresting him?” said Maria Estrella.

The guard looked at Rudy, his eyes blood-shot and sheepish.

“I’m tossing him,” he said. “Sorry, missy. It’s my job.”

Maria Estrella leaned towards him.

Rudy tried focusing his eyes.

“You are a comemierda,” she said.

“I don’t speak Spanish,” he said.

“You ruined my fiesta de quinces.”

“I didn’t want to be at your stupid party anyway,” he said.

“That’s enough out of you,” said the security guard. “Let’s go.”

The security guard shuffled Rudy away and the last thing Maria Estrella heard was Rudy ask how he was supposed to get home now.

“There goes my waltz,” she said. She looked at her parents. “Hospital?” she asked.

“I can dance with you,” said Diosdado.

“Sorry, Papi,” said Maria Estrella. “But you weren’t at the practices. You wouldn’t know what to do,” she said.

“What about me?” said Marilynne. “I was at the rehearsals.”

“Yeah,” said Maria Estrella. “But you’re my mom. How embarrassing is that?” she said. “Let’s just go. Tell everyone I’m sorry,” she said.

“Urnavy was at the rehearsal,” said Tia Matilde. “He knows the dances.”

Maria Estrella paused to think. “Ask him,” she said.

Urnavy joined them in the alley.

“I know the dances. Enough to pretend,” he said.

“Might as well,” said Maria Estrella. “What else can go wrong?”

The couples lined up once again and Maria Estrella stood in the middle of the dance floor, together with Urnavy. DJ Al Rescate cued Chayanne’s “Tiempo de Vals.”

“Listo?” asked Urnavy.

“Let me lead,” said Maria Estrella, her face pink and fat and missing two teeth in the middle of her mouth.

“It’s your quinces,” he said.

Maria Estrella and Urnavy slid to their right and the court slid along with them.

“I still don’t understand why you brought me the flowers,” said Maria Estrella.



“You remind me of me,” he said. “Confused. Alone. Wanting someone to love me.”

“You don’t know me very well,” she said.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said.

Their feet moved in unison.

“What makes you think I’m alone?” asked Maria Estrella.

“We know our people. We see it in each other.”

“Are you still alone?” asked Maria Estrella.

“Used to be alone,” said Urnavy. “I’m married now.”

“You’re married?” she asked.

“Well, almost,” he said. “Estoy prometido. I’m promised to someone.”

“But you’re like my age.”

“Things are different in Cuba.”

“Is she still there?” asked Maria Estrella.

“Yes she is,” said Urnavy. “Watch your step.”

Maria Estrella and Urnavy looked at their feet, established their rhythm again.

“So why are you here?”

“For money. For citizenship. Once I have my papers, I can claim her as my wife, and she can come to Miami. It will be better for us here.”

“Do you love her?” asked Maria Estrella. “Like, really love her?”

“I was adopted,” said Urnavy. “That’s why I’m not really your cousin. She was the first person to love me without having to.”

The waltz came to an end and Maria Estrella and Urnavy stopped. The audience cheered, applauded.

“That wasn’t so bad now, was it?” said Urnavy.

“It’s better than nothing,” said Maria Estrella.

Maria Estrella sat back stage, re-applying her makeup. Her mother walked in.

“So?” asked Marilynne. “Success?” She hugged her daughter and looked closely at her face. She peeled back her daughter’s lip, took a look inside her mouth. “We have good insurance,” she said. “They can fix those. Nobody’ll ever know they’re fake.”

“Except for the people at this party,” she said.

“Half these people you’ll never see again,” said Marilynne.

“Where’s Papi?” asked Maria Estrella.

“Your father went home,” said Marilynne. “He’s working at a gas station now and has to be there at five in the morning. He says, he thinks he can buy a stake in it but, who knows?”

“I’m glad he came to the party,” said Maria Estrella.

“You should probably spend some time with him. It’ll be good for the both of you,” said Marilynne. “Coming to this country was hard on your father. Maybe harder than I understood. Here,” she said. “He wanted me to give you this.”

Marilynne handed Maria Estrella a small white box wrapped in silver twine.

Maria Estrella opened the box and pulled out a heart-shaped locket. She flipped open the lid and inside was a picture of her father, her mother, and her, as an infant. On the back, engraved, it read, “We have always loved you,” in English.

“Let’s go back to the party,” said Maria Estrella.

“You want to change into your other dress?” asked Marilynne.

“No sense in bleeding over two dresses. Let’s return it. Get our money back.

Maybe go out to dinner with Papi. Somewhere nice,” she said.

Maria Estrella and her mother walked outside and joined the party. Tia Matilde was handing out cake, and the members of Maria Estrella’s court led the party in dancing Gangam Style. Urnavy twirled an imaginary rope over his head like some silly cowboy.

“Seems people are enjoying your quinces,” said Marilynne.

“I think the DJ is giving my friend’s rum,” said Maria Estrella.

“This country,” said Marilynne, and shook her head.

“Don’t worry,” said Maria Estrella. “I speak the language.”

CAPE FLORIDA, 1836

W.B. Thompson sits in a Boston rocker and builds a mound of bullets by the bed stand. It's July. The air is hot and full of steam. Behind him, through the second story window of the keeper's cottage, the sun sets red into the ocean. The mosquitoes are ravenous at dusk, so W.B. waits. Soon, he'll climb the wooden stairs of the Cape Florida Light and put a match to seven of the seventeen lanterns inside the lens room. John Dubose, the keeper of the lighthouse, is away in Key West. W.B. is but the assistant. He stands and pulls a suspender over each shoulder. He crosses the room towards the dormer windows and looks at the island. He knows they're out there. Forty miles since last detected.

W.B. hears the thump of Carter's footsteps approaching from the hall. Carter enters the room and sees the pile of buck W.B. has been preparing, sees a percussion rifle against the window, another two atop the bed.

"Isn't gone be enough," says Carter.

"I know," replies W.B.

"Last of the sloops leaves in the morning. Considering being on it?"

"It isn't my duty to leave on the sloop," says W.B. "Isn't your duty to be thinking about leaving either." W.B. looks at Carter. Lopsided shoulders, one eye wild, sweat running off him in rivers. W.B. pities the Negro, looks away from him, looks around him. "You should leave," says W.B. "Nobody will think less of you for it."

"You're saying I should run away? And how am I going to explain that?"

"I'll say I ordered it."

“And when you’re dead and buried? Think they’ll take me at my word? It ain’t gone work like that, W.B. We got to leave together. It’s the only way. I’m too damn old to be thrown in prison or to be catching beatings or, hell, whatever worse they come up with.” Carter leans into the doorframe and it rights his posture.

“I’m not leaving, “ says W.B. “But I’m not responsible for you either.” He walks towards Carter and places a pistol in his hand. “Leave, and make your own lot.”

Carter looks at the gun, and at W.B. “If I run and leave, you’re going to die, and Lord only knows what’ll happen to me. This world ain’t kind to runaways.”

“You’ll live, more and likely. No sense seeing it any other way.”

“And if I stay here, if I don’t run like you telling me to? We both die.”

“That’s about right.”

“Then why aren’t we leaving, W.B.? Makes no sense to me. It’s like you’re trying to catch hell.”

“I was trusted with the protection of this lighthouse, Carter, and that’s what I intend to do. Can’t explain it any more than that.”

Carter takes a look at W.B. At his guns, his bullets. “Like I said,” says Carter, “isn’t gone be enough.”

W.B. stands on the porch of the lighthouse keeper’s cottage and wonders what it is he’ll be remembered for. For the salvaging of wrecks? For laying claim to goods in the name of country? For tempering Indians and runaways into jurisdictions? What jurisdictions are there *here*? thinks W.B. Just one desperate island after another.

W.B. has heard his share of stories about the frontier, about the open, unfailing land, and in his heart he knows the truth. The men out west, beyond the Mississippi, they'll be the ones credited with building this country, with the setting of track and trail. He knows it like he knows the sun will set, the mosquitoes will rise and when the Seminoles find their way to him, there won't be much he can do about any of it. W.B. slings a rifle over his shoulder and heads into the jungle as the first shimmers of the moon glisten against the trees.

W.B. heaves himself over the giant husk of a dead oak. The smell of vegetation is dank and earthen. Every footfall crushes something. There are birds upon birds here. There are deer and bear and rattlesnake. The jungle throbs with bush crickets. A chorus of toad-frogs thump. Owls commiserate in the darkness. And the mosquitoes, an incessant, baleful noise. For a moment, W.B. does consider deserting his post, but between dying or pitiful shame, W.B. will take the one he can live with. He cuts north and west and hits the hard white sand at the ocean's edge. He looks out towards the sea, dark and still. He looks to the moon. He looks to the lighthouse.

W.B. doubles back through the tangle and heads east towards a small inlet. The air hums with mosquitoes. The prop roots of the mangroves knuckle into the muck and the earth gives way beneath his boots. W.B. looks for signs of anyone but him. He continues through the bush towards the opposite shore, crosses the dunes and the sea oats and arrives at the windward side of the island. Two cows and a lone hog stand still along the beach. A breeze passes. W.B. follows the shore and comes to the door of the Cape Florida Light. It's pinewood, heavy and broad and opens with a gasp.

There are barrels of oil inside. Smoke pans, lanterns, a shovel and a pick, candles, a half dozen muskets. W.B. lights a lantern and trudges his way up the spiral stairs. He steps out on to the gallery and climbs the wrought iron ladder into the lens room. W.B. lays his rifle down beside a hundred gallon drum of whale oil. He uses a tin and refills the exhausted lanterns. Before leaving the tower, W.B. says a prayer, and closes the door behind him.

Morning. The slow, lazy fingers of the sun palm across the island. W.B. passes the polluted cistern and enters the bathhouse with a wooden bucket full of salt water in each hand. He heats the water atop a small furnace and draws himself a bath, the iron tub just large enough for a lighthouse keeper's assistant. He removes his clothes and settles into the water. Carter passes and W.B. tells him to enter.

"There's a cartouche of bullets just inside the cottage," says W.B. "Assure yourself of sufficient powder."

"Talking like that'll bring bad tidings."

"What's one more?" says W.B. He rests his head back, closes his eyes, lets the water soak him to the bone.

"One more is one more," says Carter.

"You still thinking about leaving?" asks W.B.

"Still here, aren't I?" says Carter.

"You should'nt've stayed, Carter. I said as much." W.B. rights himself, sits up. The water from the tub spills out over the lip.

“Was hoping you’d come to your senses by morning.” Carter pauses. “Don’t reckon you have?” he asks.

“Have not,” says W.B.

Carter shakes his head, runs his fingers through his beard, pulls on his face. “If this were backward,” says Carter, “were it me had the chance to say if we stay or go, we’d be leaving, W.B. Don’t you doubt it. Not for a moment.”

“My apologies, Carter, but I’m not leaving. You got your way of seeing things, and I got mine.” W.B. lowers himself deeper into the filthy water. “Got no wife. Got no children. Even if I wanted to leave, where exactly would I leave to?” says W.B.

“The rest of your life ain’t enough? What about the rest of mine? That do anything for you?”

“This is my charge, Carter. Kicking back against obligation never changed nothing. It’s your charge too, says the government. You ain’t got to like it, but that’s the way it is. And if you don’t like it, well, you know what to do. You know where to catch the sloops.”

“Obligation? Charge?” says Carter. “You refusing to leave and keeping me bound to you, knowing what would happen if I try running off? This wasn’t ever about duty, W.B. It’s about you not dying alone is what it is. So desperate to save your life, you’re willing to take mine to do it.”

“I said leave, and you didn’t.”

“Because we need to leave together, W.B.,” says Carter. “I’m trying to save our lives, yours and mines, and you too blind to see it,” Carter pauses. “If I stay, my blood’s gone be on your hands, W.B.”



“Doesn’t have to be,” says W.B.

“You think you gone to protect me, W.B.? You think you gone to protect me like I was one of your own? Like I was blood kin?”

“Carter,” says W.B., “we been kin the moment you set foot in this shit swamp. Who says a couple 'Noles going to change that?”

Inside the kitchen, W.B. and Carter share coffee beans from a plant Dubose finagled from a botanist on the mainland. Its beans are rare and the process arduous. The men eat pokeweed and collards. The hog they butcher and fry its liver in a pan of its own fat. The rest of the animal they salt and jar and bury in the cool sand on the shade-side of the cottage.

“Of Captain Dubose?” asks Carter.

“Nothing,” answers W.B.

With the Indians’ blood up, Dubose had sailed to Key West for men and armaments. Been gone three days, intended back in another two. A solemn and severe man, Dubose. Tight hands and a temper. He was discovered to have been keeping a runaway in a house he built across the cut on the mainland. Settlers and cattlemen learned of it and soon officers in Jackson’s army were dispatched to retrieve the woman. The following day a ship arrived and bore with it a letter addressed to Dubose. Any further dereliction of duty would be regarded as treason, said the letter.

Dubose replied. He claimed the dangers of swamp sickness and of sand flies were less on the mainland, farming was better. He was relying upon himself to feed and strengthen his family. In an effort to assuage Dubose’s complaints, he was assigned the

use of two men, W.B. Thompson and Aaron Carter. Dubose insisted that men, any men, were a poor substitute for soil that refused to take, and promptly moved his family south.

W.B. stretches at the table, holds his hat and fans the flies from his face. He watches Carter as he finishes his drink.

“How old’re you, Carter?”

“Can’t tell really. All my life I been someone’s employ. You’re my fourth employ so, I suppose that makes me four.”

W.B. grunts. “If you’re four, I’m three and a half.”

“We’re nothing but babies,” says Carter.

“Poor, poor babies.”

“Is there any other kind?”

The two men laugh and belch and wipe sweat from their faces and groan.

“If we had left on the sloop,” asks W.B., “where’d you have gone to?”

“Antilles. Hispaniola. Anywhere. This place isn’t meant for me, W.B.” Carter shakes his head. “This war you fighting with the Indians?” says Carter. “I don’t want this land the way you all do.”

W.B. glances through the window of the kitchen and sees the branches of the trees lift against a sudden breeze.

“Might be a storm coming,” says W.B.

“Lots of things coming,” says Carter, “but a storm isn’t one.”

W.B. senses the mechanisms of his stomach churning. As he passes from the kitchen to the outhouse, W.B. doesn’t trust his eyes. Maybe it’s discomfort from the food but he sees the trees shift and move. The flowers and the fruits are of the wrong color.

The edges of the jungle twitch. W.B. sees a pair of eyes staring back at him. His stomach empties. The sun magnifies. His actions, all movements around him, slow and thicken. Birds flutter into the sky. Indians.

W.B. calls for Carter and puffs of smoke and flame burst from the Indian's armaments. A volley of rifle shots extend past W.B. Bullets whiz and whine by his ears. Carter breaks from the dwelling. He's carrying W.B.'s rifle in one hand and a flintlock pistol in the other and running as best he can. Both men charge the lighthouse. W.B. shouts at Carter to hurry. For a moment, W.B. glimpses the swarming tide. They wear fringed longshirts, and carry pouches and bandoliers made from trade wool across their bodies. They're shirtless. Their arms and chests are painted. They shine like oil in the sun. Carter slips inside the tower and W.B. seals the door as bullets buck at the entrance.

Carter's eyes are wet with fear. He holds his gun with both hands.

W.B. points Carter towards the door. "Not one goddamned Indian makes it through this door, do you understand?"

Carter vomits, and readies his pistol.

W.B. rushes towards the first open window, a musket slung over his shoulder. He hears the Indians' war cries outside the lighthouse, more leaping from the jungle, surrounding the tower, growing in numbers. W.B. nears the window, and takes aim. His hands are trembling. He fires, and misses. The Indians hoot and holler and fire towards the window. Chunks of brick fall away and the chalk floats up into the air. W.B. looks over the ledge and counts eleven, maybe twelve Indians. One rushes towards the tower, brandishing an axe. W.B. steadies his rifle, fires, and the man falls backwards onto the sand. W.B. runs further up the stairs and at the east window he sees a second body

circling the lighthouse, counts another six. Another three lashing together pieces of trunk and fashioning a ladder. W.B. crams buck into the front of his musket, fires without aiming and continues higher. He shoves open the scuttle door and lifts himself inside the watch room. Errant bullets shatter the glass above him. He walks out to the platform and sees the full magnitude of what's descending upon them. There are forty, at most, but W.B. imagines hundreds, thousands more. He imagines the states, the territories, crammed to capacity. He imagines not one parcel of land unspoiled by their terrible cries. He imagines the land before he arrived. It's a wonder there is any country left at all, thinks W.B.

The hum of narrow misses wakes W.B. He sees the dwelling house, reeling with flames, then watches as a small group pours a ring of oil around the base of the lighthouse, and ignites it. W.B. rushes down the stairs. He shouts Carter's name over and over, a fear so wild he can almost stroke its fur. The tower is filling with the plumes of small fires. W.B. chokes his way towards the landing. It's difficult to see through the smoke. He finds Carter on all fours, coughing, gasping. W.B. reaches for the pit of Carter's arm and Carter reaches up and snatches W.B. by the forearm with wicked strength. This is not Carter.

The man leaps and lands on W.B. and pins him against the steps of the stairs. His face is fevered, his strength supreme. The flames crack like whips at the timber. He wraps his hands around W.B.'s neck and howls. Smudges of smoke and oil are streaked across his body. He tightens his grip. W.B. anchors a foot beneath a step of the stairs for leverage, grips the man's fingers and tries to pull his hand away and the man cracks W.B.'s nose with the front of his head. W.B. goes dark, his eyesight failing him. He feels

the flames surrounding him. The Indian's face is little more than a blur to W.B. Yet still W.B. traces the man's face with his eyes, follows it until he finds an open patch of neck, and jams his knife in to the hilt.

Breath balloons W.B.'s lungs as the man's hands fall away. He removes the knife and corkscrews his way towards the topmost of the tower. The flames follow. The iron scuttle burns W.B.'s hands as he flips it open. Glass is everywhere. Spilled oil from the pocked barrels slicks the floor. He pulls open the door to the platform and crawls across. Below him, he hears the crackle of gunfire, the roar of flames, the terrible, terrible canting of the Seminole Indians. Carter is dead, the Light is burning, and there are more Indians on the Cape than W.B. ever imagined existing. He is panicked, but resolute. I will not die at their hands, thinks W.B. He envisions tossing himself into the sea, imagines placing the pistol against his own head. God damn me, thinks W.B. He opens the scuttle door and shoves a barrel of gunpowder down the flaming tower.

The barrel explodes, a vicious roar of fire and smoke, a tunnel of flames pointing straight to hell. But the tower does not collapse. W.B.'s life is not whisked away. The force of the blast blows the glass clean from the tower's top and W.B. is tossed against the wall of the watch room. He falls in a crumble. He is bleeding, but cannot tell from where. He's disoriented, his hearing sucked away by the sound of the explosion. The wood stairs burn and collapse and the flames dampen and feed upon themselves, a bonfire of timber and oil and gunpowder.

But W.B. is alive. Concussed, deaf, and stranded at the topmost of the lighthouse, but alive. He lies on his back and stares at the exposed iron framework of the lens room. There is not a tuft of cloud in the sky. Only a giant sun. W.B. knows that were he to avoid

burning alive at the hands of the flames, to stay here, sixty-five feet from the ground, under this blazing sun, would cook him just the same. He isn't frightened, or angered, but exhausted. Every ounce of strength, vaporizing into the air. W.B. thinks of Carter, envies him. His death was violent, thinks W.B., but it was swift, and somehow merciful. W.B. knows he'll get no such luxury. He'll be left to die here, soaked in blood and oil and soot, to suffer and perish, alone. W.B. knows he wasn't meant to survive. There can only be one ending, thinks W.B. He stands, wobbles, then stands. He loads the breech of his rifle and steps out on to the platform. W.B. sees the Indians looting the keeper's cabin for supplies. He fires and the clatter of the percussion rifle rings against the steel of the platform. A cluster of Indians fire back, and finally, W.B. gets hit. He catches three bullets in one foot, two in the other, and one in the thigh. W.B. collapses. In dying, he imagines heaven to be a place with good milk and no mosquitoes.

W.B. opens his eyes and sees blue. Empty and awesome blue. The sun is white. The pain returns, searing him from the inside. He is feverish and dehydrated, his lips shriveled into rinds. His legs are swollen and immobile. A soft wind pats his wounds. W.B. hears someone calling his name, as if from the clouds, asking him if it's death he wants.

"Still alive up there? W.B.? Can you hear me? It was me who brought them. The Indians, I mean. I tried getting you to leave but you and your senseless duty. You wouldn't let it go and look what it got you. W.B.? You hearing me? I hope you're alive W.B., and if you are, and you get down from there, I'm telling you to leave this place.

They're coming back for more, W.B. They're coming for everything. You're a good man, W.B., but you're hard luck. You hearing me?"

W.B. rolls his body towards the ocean-side and there, along the shore, stands Carter.

"How?" asks W.B., his voice creaking like an old door.

"How? You all shot up and dying and you want to ask how?"

"Why?" asks W.B.

"I have a wife, W.B. And two children. They ran away and joined the 'Noles and sent word to me what they were planning. I held them off until Dubose was gone. Tried getting you to leave too, but you just too damn stubborn."

"How?"

"How what?"

"How," says W.B.

"I'm telling you what happened."

W.B. gathers what little saliva he can, tries swallowing. He closes his eyes, opens them again. And there's Carter, on the beach, looking up towards him.

"You went on about duty," says Carter. "Made it seem like dying was your duty. I never could understand it. All the freedom in the world and you done chained yourself to that damn lighthouse."

"I don't," says W.B, his eyes blinking, trying to hold on to Carter.

"I came back to see if you was dead is all," says Carter. "I understand if you're angry. I wouldn't blame you. I been angry all my life. I say keep that anger, W.B. Soak it up. It'll keep you alive. Lord knows it did me."

W.B. opens his mouth to speak and nothing but a dry wind escapes. He looks for Carter but Carter is gone. W.B. shuts his eyes, opens them. Still, no Carter.

The following day, the Navy arrives. W.B. wakes to the sounds of men footing around the base of the lighthouse. For a moment, he believes them to be the Indians, back to finish what they started. But no, these are marines. He hears their voices, hears them debating how best to rescue the stranded keeper. Someone calls to him.

“Thompson? W.B. Thompson?”

“Are there any other survivors?”

“We heard the blast. Twelve miles out, and we heard the blast.”

“Can you guide us across the rocks?”

“If you’re alive, give us a sign.”

With his remaining strength, W.B. reaches for the railing and drags himself enough to peer over the edge of the platform, His vision is blurred but he can make out the sails of a double-masted schooner whipping in the wind, the word *Motto* tattooed across its hull. He turns on to his back, and fires his pistol into the air.

"Well I'll be goddamned. He's alive." A sailor in blue trousers points towards W.B.

I'll be goddamned too, thinks W.B.

Large purple welts grow alongside his wounds, the infection spreading like webbing. He can hardly move his left leg. Can't bend either knee. No water. No food. A racing fever. All moisture being sucked out of him. If they can rescue him, that'd be grand, thinks W.B. If not, that'd be easier.



Another ship arrives. And then another. W.B. howls with pain. The men on the ground wait for the dying man to quiet, then tell him to prepare to be rescued. But not a single kite makes it to the ledge of the platform. The breeze is that puny. W.B. hears the men argue beneath him, hears the chopping of wood, the fashioning of steel. W.B. stares at the sky but somehow sees everything happening on the ground beneath him. He sees the rubble of the keeper's cabin, the checkered patches of blood from the few Indians he managed to hit. He sees the navy men, sees their mouths and their moustaches, sees the rope and twine wrapped around the iron ramrod fired from a musket, sees them raise a tail block and stanchion to deliver the assistant keeper down to them.

They place W.B. on a stretcher made of oak and cowhide. They cut his pant legs into strips and remove them, wrap a soaked towel over his wounds and carry him towards the ship.

“We found your Negro,” says the Captain. The man is square-jawed, eyes like cannonballs.

W.B. tries to sit up and the Captain places his hand on W.B.’s chest, lays him back down.

“Care to identify him?” asks the Captain.

W.B. nods and the men carry him towards the body. Two sailors are bent over, looking at the corpse. The sight is gruesome. The stink is worse.

“Staircase burnt him something awful,” says the Captain.

W.B. looks at the body, looks at the jungle. "Any other bodies?" asks W.B.

"Can't say that there is," answers the Captain.

"I shot two, maybe three of them."

"The Indians drag their dead back with them," says the Captain. "If you did catch any, there'd be no way to tell."

W.B. considers this. "We bringing him on the ship with us?" asks W.B.

"A body like that? No chance. No telling what kind of sickness he'd bring on. That's why we brought you over. You want to say anything before we bury him?"

"No," says W.B., then changes his mind. "He was a good man. Never told a lie."

The Captain summons three men and directs them to begin digging a grave.

"Goddamn Indians," says the Captain. "No respect for life. Least he died a noble death. Protecting you, protecting the lighthouse."

"He had his priorities in the right place. No doubt about that."

"Listen, Thompson. We've got ourselves a newspaperman with us. Says he'd like to speak with you. When you're better of course, no rush, but you fought yourself an entire army of Indians and survived. Not too many out there can say the same. You're a real hero, and he's going to make sure everyone knows it. W.B. Thompson, Indian killer. You should be proud."

"You got doctors on that ship?" asks Thompson.

"Only the best."

"Have them patch me up, then send your man over. I'd like to talk to him while the details are fresh."

"It's a hell of a story," says the Captain.

"That it is," says W.B. "If only Carter were around to hear me tell it."

## THE GUSANOS

It's a quarter after ten. The moon sits smudged behind a curtain of clouds, roiling with the threat of rain. The cover, thick and squat and not looking to budge, steeps the air with so much moisture Wilfredo Menendez imagines wringing it dry. He's thirty-nine years old. His face is acne-scarred, his skin a shade of fryer grease. His eyes are raw-rimmed and leaking water from the sulfur and saltpeter. He lifts the visor on his police helmet and jams a pair of giant knuckles deep into his sockets. It's the third bombing in as many weeks. This time a jewelry store, a joyeria in West Hialeah that sells wristwatches and rings and thin chains with studded leopards dangling from their center. Today is the sixteenth of August, 1973, another day in a month of days looking just like the one before it. It's been twelve hundred and eighty of them since Wilfredo left his home in Cuba.

Wilfredo shakes loose a cigarette from the soft pack he carries in his front pocket, blows smoke from beneath a bristle-thick moustache and scours the scene. The front door blew off the hinges like it was late for work and the exit, an all steel security door with a peephole, melted along the frame and brought a chunk of the roof along with it. Beneath his boots, it's all glass and cheap wood, collapsed stucco from the ceiling, burnt paper fluttering like wings, the ground still hissing with smoke. The shop's vendibles were laid out in a horseshoe, in three rectangular cases joined end to end. Now, they're burnt out baskets and sitting in the center case is the melted mound of a cash register. The fire raged hell hot and the trucks poured so much water on it that the charred remains of the store glisten with a sheen not unlike the ocean when Wilfredo's child sank in it. This is

like all things with Wilfredo. He sees one thing, but thinks of another. Wilfredo looks through the storefront that housed the displays and sees a pen of police cruisers frustrating the gawkers, sees too many reporters straightening their broad ties. With every bombing, every rally turned riot, every report of yet another paramilitary group popping off in the swamps of south Florida, it seems the camera only pines for him.

And he assures them, the families watching in their homes, in an English he speaks slowly, that an investigation is taking place. Yes, they are doing everything in their power to stop the violence. No, the police have no reason to believe these bombings are connected. No, he has no additional information at this time. But he's lying. He has information that'll take the force a week to uncover. He knows the owner of the shop, Andres Rigoberto. Knows him personally. He knows Rigo named his shop *La Caridad* after his wife, and that the name is a guiding light, a beacon announcing Rigo's willingness to shell out loans to exiles. He also knows Rigo recently appeared on the front page of *Democracia Now*, a small political newsletter that promotes democratic talks with the island, his fist hoisted in the air like a wrecking ball.

Wilfredo knows that the last three years have seen thirty-two acts of arson within the city limits but the parrots on pirate radio have started squawking their loudest since April, since the murder of Elias Corriente. Released into exile after nearly a decade in prison, his arrival in Miami was celebrated with all but a parade. Two weeks later he was assassinated at a downtown newsstand. The shooting deaths of Raymundo del Rio and Orlando Purrino, the gangland execution of Jesus Cartas, owner of the *Corazon Politico* bookstore in Little Havana. For a while, Cubans killing Cubans only interested other Cubans but when the Independence Day bombing death of Tonio "La Tiñosa" Barquez at

the Lauderdale Marina claimed seven other lives in the blast, there wasn't a typewriter in town that could hold on to its carriage. Wilfredo drops his cigarette to the floor and leaves it smoldering. His lieutenant walks over.

"Sergeant?" The lieutenant is thin, hawk-nosed, a mouth that's never known the meaning of lips.

"Other room," says Wilfredo, pointing with his thumb. "East wall is fake. Radio equipment, books. All burn. A safe too. With money, and a .38."

"Fake wall?" asks the lieutenant.

"Yes. Maybe he keep real money there. Maybe is a safe place. Very little is left."

"You say there was a radio?"

"Every Cuban listens to radio. National pastime."

"But not radio equipment. Any chance he was broadcasting?"

"Always a chance."

"What about the safe? How much was in there?"

"Don't know. The fire burn open the door. Everything inside is gone. Album of pictures. They burn too."

"You talk to the media yet?"

"No."

"What're you waiting for?"

"The man?"

"Rigoberto?" The name sounds like strange food in the lieutenant's mouth.

"Yes, Rigoberto."

"He's alive. Barely. But alive."

“What do I say?”

“You say nothing.” The lieutenant tosses a look over his shoulder, then turns back to Wilfredo. “Far as they know, there was no one here. No injuries, no fatalities. This happened after hours and no one was around. Near miracle we got him out and to the hospital before the news showed. If he makes it, the Captain’ll want first crack at him.”

“He can talk?”

“Doubt it. Looked pretty fucked if I tell you the truth.”

“Same kind of bomb?” asks Wilfredo, knowing that it was.

\* \* \*

“Hermanos, tonight we find ourselves at a critical juncture in our struggle.”

Carmelo Milian sits on a pleather ottoman in the living room of his home in Southwest Miami. There are newspapers in three different languages stacked in the corner. A low bar, crowded with books and notepads, separates the dining area from the kitchen, a corner set up with a Frigidaire refrigerator, a four-burner stove, and a hanging basket with limes and mamey and a rope of garlic. There are too many windows and each one has shuttered its blinds. The furniture has been arranged in a circle, and the hands on the clock go tick.

Carmelo is twenty-four, and married. He wears a pressed white button-down open at the neck, a pair of eyeglasses with large black frames and a thin moustache along his upper lip. His hair, combed and parted, is fashioned in the mold of Cuba’s academic elite.

His wife Inez lays out the mariquitas de platano, the moros, the rum añejo, and the last of the dried papaya. Her eyes are pale sky blue. Her hair is a jungle mystery. She wears a sleeveless maxi dress with an orange floral pattern that dangles over the baby brewing inside her. She sits beside her husband and tucks the fabric of her dress beneath her legs.

Erlan and Becah Ingerman are the newest to join the group. Erlan's hair is long and combed behind his ears. He wears a collection of crosses and a beard thicker than a bramble. He is their newly elected treasurer. Becah, his wife, is sixteen, wears a pair of gabardine pants flared at the bottom, and nestles into the nook of her husband's arm. She blinks her eyes as if to focus them. They are the proud and thoughtful members of a powerful Christian sect. Their spirit is true. Their connections are wide. Both are high, and filled with something akin to joy. The church they belong to is quite profitable.

Ruben Irizarry is the first to make for the food. The front of his neck is bloated. The back of his neck is bloated. The man's body is a barrel. Ruben's father was a mulatto musician who migrated to New York during a jazz tour in the forties. Ruben's mother was a Harlem bar back who spoke no Spanish. He's the worst of both worlds, a man who speaks broken Spanish with an American accent. He swabs his plate then crosses his massive arms across his massive chest and exhales loudly through his mouth. He sweats through a green work shirt that reads Tropicana Landscaping. His pant legs are overrun by poor man's patches.

An empty seat—a wicker rocker with curlicue arm rails—separates Ruben from Rolexy Cardez. She's hunchbacked, pigeon-toed. Her teeth are misaligned. She's pushing seventy. She chain-smokes and exudes the smell of wet dog, a wet dog that eats

cigarettes. She wears a bandana over her head and wears earrings in the shape of tear drops. She's neighbor to Inez and Carmelo, who she calls Melocotoncito—Little Peach—the way his mother did before she was incarcerated. She had been friends with Carmelo's mother since childhood. Rolexy was friends with the woman who ratted even longer.

“Last night,” says Carmelo, “I received a phone call informing me of the attack on *La Caridad*. This morning,” he says, “I found this.” From the pocket of his pants he removes a triangle of paper. He unfolds the sheet. The note reads: You are NECKS!

“There are many factions in this war,” says Carmelo. “There are those, like us, who preach democracy, who preach true revolution. And then there are those who live in the shadows,” he says. “They were once our brothers and sisters but they've grown single-minded. The hope in their hearts has turned to hate. Mark my words,” says Carmelo. “We are being canceled out.”

“They shoot our people like dogs and we can't riot in peace,” says Ruben. “Yo quiero,” says Ruben—he wants—“justice.” From beneath his seat he slides out a dark green canvas duffle with a palm tree bent backward sewn on its side. He unzips the bag and it's all rifles and pistols. “I won't be sleeping when they find me. And if they make me a martyr, I'll make them one too,” he says. He hasn't stopped sweating.

Inez inhales everyone's air inside her. “We've been fed to the wolves, I agree,” she says, “but this can't be the answer.”

“The United States can't make up its mind,” says Rolexy. “They don't want us going back, but where's the future for us here? I'll tell you, it's the dirt beneath our feet, and we should be grateful for even that.” She lights a new cigarette with her old cigarette.



“Rigoberto was a good person, a good member of society. Ours and theirs. And look what he gets.”

“You can’t solve hate with guns and fire hoses, man.” Erlan’s eyes are locked on the weapons as if they were vipers. He shakes his head and corrects his slouch.

“Communication, man. You’ve been fighting the good fight this long. Why you want to destroy it?” Becah registers the anxiety in her husband’s voice. She tries opening her eyes and reaches for his face.

“Because the United States has pledged us the freedom to have our voices heard.” Carmelo exposes his left palm and jabs it with his index finger. “That is the lone principle of America. A safe haven for the persecuted. But what if we are persecuted even here?” asks Carmelo.

Becah needs water. Rolexy crosses one leg over the other, uncrosses them.

“Violence is a deathtrap, man.” Erlan is sober as the Sabbath. “There are other ways, Carmelo. We discussed other ways.”

“And they all failed,” says Ruben, spinning the chamber on a thirty-eight.

“Everybody wants to know what’s going to happen. I’ll tell you what’s going to happen.” The gun all but disappears in his hand.

“Our people have never been so splintered,” says Inez.

“This is precisely what our enemies want,” says Carmelo. “We cannot fall apart. And we cannot do this alone. This is why I have called you here today.” He has their attention. Say what you will. People listen to Carmelo. “*Democracia Now* has developed a following we never could have imagined. By partnering our distribution with powerful forces such as *The Final Hour* in New York and *La Cronica* in Puerto Rico, we have

discovered channels of access and information never before available to us. One of those channels, my compatriots, has lead us to Victor Ochoa.”

Inez looks at her husband like she'd never seen a human before. Her eyebrows coil into question marks. “Are you sure it's him?” she asks.

“Every day it's something new,” says Rolexy. “He's in Brazil living with a poet. He's been enlisted by the CIA. He's in Cuba, gathering guerillas as we speak. Imagine that. Escaping Isla de Pinos only to swim back to the island. Some say he's already here, in Miami. Who believes this?”

Erlan shakes his head. “The Church is willing to support our Cuban brothers and sisters but, guns, and...activities?”

“He's a hero,” says Rolexy. “One of the few left.” She pours rum straight into a cocktail glass, crumbles an empty soft pack and unwraps a fresh one.

“Pretending to hunger strike then breaking out is genius. He escaped with the guards so you know they knew. Killed four people in Fidel's army and, poof. Nothing since. So,” says Ruben, “how you know you found him?”

“Because we've been corresponding directly for several months now. That it's him, I've never been more certain,” says Carmelo.

“Dangerous waters, man. You think the feds don't know you're pen-paling? The last thing the Church needs is to draw attention,” says Erlan. “And Victor Ochoa draws attention.”

“All precautions have been taken care of,” says Carmelo. “In fact, more precautions than usual.”

A gush of headlights floods the interior of the home. The sound of tires over gravel.

“He said he would be punctual,” says Carmelo.

The engine goes quiet.

“Mi amor?” his wife asks.

A knock on the front door.

Ruben snaps the slide on a semiautomatic.

“Don’t open that door,” says Rolexy.

Carmelo opens the door and finds a man standing there, taller than six feet. He wears a blue suit and a thin red tie like a wound. Broad shoulders and a posture like he was built with steel rod. He’s bald and his face, his whole head, is covered in burn scars. He carries a bridle hide suitcase.

“Is this the home office of *Democracia Now*?” the man asks. His voice is calm.

“Welcome,” says Carmelo. He turns towards his editorial staff. “Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you, Mr. Bernadino Benes, an associate of Mr. Ochoa.”

Bernadino steps inside the home and scans the faces of the strangers. He turns to Carmelo. “You didn’t say there’d be others,” he says.

\* \* \*

It’s a quarter past noon. Wilfredo parks his cruiser outside the Ryder trauma wing and exits the car carrying a tray of arroz imperial. The sun is a fat orange ball bouncing

heat off the asphalt. The sky is clear and the clouds are few. Earlier this morning, an unidentified male was found burned to death in a Buick outside WQBA, a locally owned radio station broadcasting entirely in Spanish. The man was nude and his lap covered in quarters bent at the edges. During breakfast, someone broke a chair over another man in a Miami Beach restaurant. In Allapattah, six shots were fired inside of a children's clothing store. Four were injured. Witnesses said the argument was over a baptism outfit. And now, two days since the bombing of *La Caridad*, Rigoberto has regained consciousness.

The hospital lobby is decorated with paintings of sailboats and wildflowers. There's a television, a sixteen-inch portable model, bolted into a cranny. On it, a man with glasses and a sports coat reports the news with the volume turned down. Wilfredo sees a pair of plain-clothes officers reading magazines and posing as visitors. He sees a woman, bent over a cane, speaking to the receptionist in Spanish. The girl behind the desk, her skin red and mottled and ill suited for the Florida sun, holds up her hands in answer. A man with a straw hat and a cigar stares at Wilfredo with a pair of eyes like a puppy in a poster. Wilfredo has seen confusion like this before. He remembers the day he left.

He had stood at the bottom of the small auditorium and reminded his journalism students that the individual, not the state, defined integrity. The air in the room was still. The desks were perfectly lacquered. "Words," he said to his students, "provide order. Frustrate language and you surrender to chaos." Wilfredo returned home, packed all the clothes and money he could fit into a single suitcase and, together with his wife and his two-year old son, took to the ocean, his request for boarding passes denied yet again. For

six hours they waited, up to their waists and hidden in the mangroves. When the boat finally arrived, there were twelve others already onboard.

Inside the elevator, Wilfredo punches the number eight. The doors open and the floor is calm. Someone answers a ringing telephone. A nurse dressed in white pushes a patient in a wheel chair. A middle-aged man carries balloons. Sunlight fills the hallway. Two officers stand outside the final room in the corridor. Both are young. Neither speaks Spanish.

“Sir.” The boy with the blue eyes hands Wilfredo a set of gloves and a mask. Wilfredo enters the room and sees Rigo in bed, his head bandaged, a large wad of gauze over his right eye, his body covered in a padded garment meant to prevent thickening and scarring. Wilfredo places the tray of food on a table with wheels and slides it beneath the window. He pulls open the curtains and sunlight falls on his friend like a piano. Rigo groans and Wilfredo whisks the curtains closed.

“Looking good, Rigo. Doctor says you’re going to make a full recovery.”

“You’re a terrible liar. So are the doctors.” Rigo coughs. The corner of his mouth is stretched as if by fish hooks. There are long, deep patches of pink along his face. They look the least of his trouble.

“At least they get paid to tell the truth,” says Wilfredo.

“How much to have them bend it?”

“Probably more than you’ve got.”

Rigo forces a laugh, then coughs. Dribble escapes his mouth. He inhales, and it is loud and dry. His chest barely rises.

“You talk to the Captain yet?” Wilfredo sits in a plastic office chair and rolls himself nearer to Rigo. He can barely hear the man.

“I no speak English,” says Rigo.

“Tell me, then. The night of the bombing.”

“It was almost nine. Cari called and complained about me coming home late. And it’s true. I have been coming home late. But what we’ve been busy lately. It’s hard to believe, but it’s true. So what do I tell her? I tell her we should be grateful.”

“Was she angry, or was she worried?” asks Wilfredo.

“Ever since that magazine we’ve been getting calls to the house.” Rigo swallows hard, licks what used to be lips. “The other night a car parked in front of our house and revved its engine like it was going to explode. Must have been two in the morning.”

“You get a look at the car?”

“Some Oldsmobile. The kind every Cuban drives. You thought things were bad in Cuba? Shit. I trust people less here than I did over there,” says Rigo. “It’s another man’s land, Wilfredo. The rules are different here and no ones bothered explaining them to us.”

“There’s a reason someone came after you, Rigo. Why, and who?”

Rigo lifts his chin, closes his eyes and tilts his head. “Arroz imperial, no?” asks Rigo. He turns his head to look at Wilfredo. “Tell me, did Rosa bake this herself?”

“You think my wife would let me bring you something store bought? After everything you’ve done for us.”

“I did what I could, Wilfredo. I guaranteed passage. I wish I could have guaranteed a safe one.”

“The past is in the past, Rigo.”

“If everyone could let go of the past like you, maybe I wouldn’t be here.” Rigo’s eyes blink, and water. “Do you know why your wife’s cooking smells so wonderful to me, Wilfredo? Because it smells like being ten years old and taking the train to Havana. Growing up in the mountains, I’d never seen anything like it. The city was so busy. Everyone drove a car. Everyone had somewhere to be. And the smells. Every home, every restaurant, its windows thrown wide open. Now, here, I smell those same smells everywhere I go.”

“I don’t follow,” says Wilfredo.

“We’re flooding this country, Wilfredo. Every day, more and more Cubans. We’re coming by plane, by boat, on rafts. It doesn’t matter anymore. It’s like Fidel opened the faucet on the island. By the gallons we’re pouring out.”

“What does this have to do with *La Caridad*?” asks Wilfredo.

“There is something I remember about that day, actually,” says Rigo. “A man came in. Just after six. Cuban, of course. Tall and strong, but tired. He tells me he’s been here a year now. Him and his wife and his two daughters. He tells me he sells cars on Calle Ocho. He says the gringos don’t want to buy from him and the Cubans keep asking him to sell cheaper. At night, he washes dishes at a hotel bar in Coconut Grove. He tells me his eldest daughter is turning fifteen and he can’t afford her a party but he’d like to get her something nice anyway. I show him a gold heart and tell him he can engrave a message on it if he’d like. I show him a nameplate, a nice set of earrings. I show him the deal I can work out for him and he almost drops dead right there. Just when I think he’s about to ask me for a loan or more credit, you know what he asks me? He asks, how long you think before we can go back? Can you believe it? Almost fifteen years now with this

revolution and he's asking when he can go back? I tell him not soon enough, but you know what I really think? We're never going back, Wilfredo. You want to know why someone planted a bomb in my shop? Because I'm a terrible example. I own a successful business. I'm happily married. I have a home, a car, and enough money to pay the doctors to piece me back together after someone tries to kill me for having the courage to say, I am happy here. I didn't waste a single tear on Cuba and look at me now. The American dream."

"Anything else?" asks Wilfredo. It's the responsibility that exhausts him.

"I just told you everything you need to know," says Rigo.

The door to the hospital room opens with a creak. Someone walks in. Rigo expects it to be a nurse or a doctor, someone that'll ask him to leave, to stop exciting Rigoberto. A second person steps out from behind the first. It's Carmelo and Inez.

The young couple walks hurriedly to Rigo's bedside. Inez is horrified. She tries to cover her mouth but the water in her eyes is already rising. Carmelo's face is a furnace.

Wilfredo rises from his seat. "You're the last one who needs to be here right now, Carmelo," says Wilfredo. "It's for your own good."

"Who's own good?" asks Carmelo, looking at Rigo, at the mess they've made of his friend.

"Everyone's own good," says Wilfredo.

"Poor everyone," says Inez, like she's never known a day of joy in her life.

"Inez, por favor, talk to your husband. This is an investigation—"

"And you should continue your investigation, officer," says Carmelo. "This city depends on you. You owe it to the citizens of this city to protect them, to get to the



bottom of whoever is committing these heinous crimes and restore order to the Miami States of America.”

“It’s my job and my duty, Carmelo.”

“We all need distractions, don’t we?”

“The revolution is over, Carmelo. What else needs to happen before you understand that?”

“A policeman,” says Carmelo. “Who would’ve believed it?”

“This is no classroom,” says Wilfredo. “The danger around you is real now.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” asks Carmelo. “Don’t you think I, more than anyone, know what’s at stake?”

Wilfredo turns to look at Inez. With both hands she worries her stomach.

“No,” says Wilfredo. “I don’t believe that you do.”

\* \* \*

Carmelo stands at the edge of his lawn. He kisses his wife, pulls her hands together and kisses them both. He sits inside his Oldsmobile, twists the key in the ignition and smiles at Inez as he pulls away. He puts the car in drive and angles east. It’s ten in the morning, the sun still crawling across the sky. Carmelo drives past a moving van and several mailboxes with the flags at attention. A park, a school, two churches. Green grass. It’s a burgeoning suburb here. He merges onto the main avenue and drives past a strip of hardware stores and furniture outlets. He sees a grocery named after his hometown. He sees construction, sees more cars than he’s ever seen before. Carmelo punches the knob

on his car stereo but the station is on a commercial break, announcing a sale on household appliances. He gives the knob three quick twists and finds a spot on the dial he's memorized, another pirate station, another host coughing up theories for *La Caridad*.

He heads north and needles his way through wild patches of sunlight beneath a canopy of banyan trees. He takes a jagged pattern through residential neighborhoods. Houses like adobes, gardens like Mediterranean islands. He indicates left but turns right. He looks to see if anyone is following. He bisects the heart of Little Havana and business is booming. Offices opening. Signs being taped on windows that read: No Hablamos Ingles. Carmelo turns left, crosses Flagler, then rides Seventh Avenue until he hits the Miami River. A body shop, a glass manufacturer, a seafood distributor. West of downtown, the city dissolves. Nothing but warehouses and shrimpboats. Crab traps stacked like faulty castles. He rounds the bend, arrives at the River Inn and parks his car. The sun is so bright it seems almost silver. He raises his hand to shield his eyes and sees a gang of cats scraping at crustaceans, sees derelicts convening under the freeway, trading alcohol for toilet paper. There's a swirl of gasoline and garbage in the air, of rotting fish, of sewage. A chevron of birds escapes towards the ocean. Carmelo walks towards a black iron gate, shoves it open and enters.

The main house is a two-story belvedere bungalow with a limestone porch and a pair of dormer windows lighting up the face. The wood of the steps is slash pine, and a collection of potted flowers hang from the eaves and crowd the entrance. A stone path winds to the right of the house through a tangle of bougainvilleas and opens on a central courtyard. There's a pool here, a croquet court fallen out of use. Smaller units sit with their backs turned to the main house. A Negro man, tall as a ladder, prunes the trees and a

pair of exiles sit on stoops and smoke cigars. They follow Carmelo as he passes. The amber buttons on their cigars grow bright. Carmelo steps over a pair of cats that could be mistaken for dead, and comes to an efficiency in the far end of the lot. The air is alight with the scent orange blossom.

Carmelo knocks on the door. No answer. He tries the knob and it turns freely. The room smells of sweat and decades old wood. Bernadino sits on the edge of the bed. He's barefoot, shirtless, chewing a stalk of sugar cane. His body is hairless and covered in sheets of burn scars like his skin were made of parchment. Carmelo walks in and shuts the door behind him.

"Have a drink," says Bernadino.

With the room so small, there's no need for directions. A dresser. A television set. On the nightstand, an ashtray, a box of cigars, a lone finch flitting inside a cage. The wallpaper is a poor excuse for wallpaper. The closet door is shut. The bathroom door half-open. There is no air conditioning. A ceiling fan stands still. The windows are open and the blinds are open and sunlight pours in as if from a pitcher. Carmelo slides past Bernadino towards the fridge. It's empty but for six canned beers. He removes two, opens them, places one in front of Bernadino. There is no chair for Carmelo to sit in.

"Your revolution grows soft in the shade, Mr. Milian." Bernadino chomps into the cane, splinters the fibers and slurps at the sugar. He tosses the husk into the wastebasket beneath him. To his right, there is a fresh bundle of stalks inside a grocery bag. "Every day, Fidel's forces grow stronger. The island is his. Those that oppose him are left with only one choice. Prison or firing squad? Any surprise your efforts have failed?"

“You’re wrong,” says Carmelo. “Our network has never been stronger. Our message is being heard. Our forces are gathering.” He drinks from the beer. One gulp, two gulp, three.

“Ink and paper, Mr. Milian. You’re speaking ink and paper.”

“Rigo was nearly killed for his contributions. *Democracia Now* would be nowhere without him. That our enemies would go to such extremes to eliminate one of our biggest supporters is evidence of what we can achieve when we join together. Do not deny our voice its power.”

“Your friend is powerful, Mr. Milian. And you yourself have attracted some notoriety. However, you are not without opposition. Your methods for the cause have been, shall we say, called into question.” Bernadino wipes his chin. He glistens with so much sweat.

“Rigoberto is a hero. He fled to this country and immediately set upon unraveling the communist dictatorship. For every Cuban that was exiled, Rigo helped provide a home, a job. For many, he was the first voice to tell them they needn’t fear oppression any longer. I simply provided a platform for that voice.”

“Are you denying that he angers people, Mr. Milian?”

“They are all fascists. Bane of the true patriot.”

“You anger people, Mr. Milian.” Bernadino pulls another stalk from the grocery bag, uses it to point at Carmelo.

Carmelo spins the last of his beer around the bottom of the can. “I do what I can to keep the waters churning,” he says. He finishes the drink and plants the can on the television.

“A dangerous way to live, Mr. Milian.”

“So I’ve been told.” Carmelo adjusts his spectacles, folds his sleeves to his elbows.

“What else have you been told, Mr Milian?” Bernadino cracks into the cane.

“Rigo was working late. There was no way his attackers could have known he was there. That Rigo was caught in the blast was an accident.”

“That he survived, Mr. Milian, was the accident.”

The moisture cements the air in the room. The door to the bathroom creaks. Carmelo moves towards the refrigerator and removes another beer, peers into the bathroom as he passes. The dark is inky.

“This is war, Mr. Milian. There are no accidents in war. If Rigoberto was caught in the blast it was because Rigoberto was meant to be caught in the blast.” Bernadino continues to gnaw at the bark, sucking sugar. “The only question I need to ask you is, are you prepared for this war?”

“All my efforts, all my beliefs, have lead me here.” Carmelo opens his can of beer and it makes a sound like spitting.

“With your newspapers and your pleas for democracy?”

“The answer is yes, Mr. Benes. My only fear, as I’ve explained, is that my methods may have exhausted their usefulness. As I understand it, Mr. Ochoa has more effective means.”

“Mr. Ochoa has a vision, Mr. Milian. He understands that war wears many disguises. Sanctions, for instance, wears cufflinks to a dinner for the starving. In times of war, we all become our own greatest monster.”

“These are precarious times.”

“That they are, Mr. Milian. As you know, Mr. Ochoa is a great admirer of yours. He once said to me that your convictions have been made glorious, his word, Mr. Milian, glorious, by the injustices you have survived. You have suffered for your convictions have you not?”

“I have made no secret of my family’s past.”

“When the regime came and ordered your father to surrender his plantation, your father refused. He ordered you and your mother away, and when the army returned he tried to escape through the fields. They encircled him, and lit the plantation on fire.” Bernadino removes the stalk from his mouth and exposes the flayed end. “The following morning the army harvested the sugar, your father’s blood and all. Understand this, Mr. Milian. There are two fronts on this war. One is fought with typewriters and radio stations. The other front understands words are never heard above the din of gunfire.”

“I will not take the lives of others,” says Carmelo.

“Please, Mr. Milian.” Bernadino leans away from Carmelo. “I believe you have me mistaken. I am simply a man who hungers to return to my homeland. What I miss most, are the simple delicacies of our country. Our sugar, for example. Not these withered up husks.” Bernadino tosses the half-chewed stalk into the trash bin. “If you, Mr. Milian, were hungry enough, I believe I know a man that sells the sweetest cane you’ve ever tasted. It’s marvelous, Mr. Milian. You’d believe it came straight from your father’s plantation.” Bernadino reaches into his pocket and hands Carmelo a bent quarter. “It will cost you no more than this,” he says.

\* \* \*

Carmelo wears a three-piece suit trimmed in purple. His shoes are swanky. His bowtie, a propeller. It's just after seven pm and his replacement, an elderly gentleman with thin spectacles and a face like an avalanche, has just arrived and taken his place behind the host station. Carmelo informs the maitre d' he will be one waiter short during the tonight's shift, then reviews the evening's reservations. The bell attached to the front door tinkles, and the old man wishes Carmelo well, then looks beyond him to welcome the first dinner guests.

Six months out of the year, Jeffrey's traffics in crab the size of baseball mitts. Because of its seasonal operation, the well-heeled from all parts frozen flock to the eatery. During those six months, the entire staff—the busboys and the waiters, the bartenders, the floor managers, everyone inside the kitchen from the chef on down—earn enough keep for the remaining six. It's an institution, Jeffreys. The floors are Spanish tile. The tables, indoor and out in the courtyard, are wrought iron. The decorative foliage is all native vine, lush and blooming. The wine list is longer than the menu.

Carmelo shoves open a swing door and enters a room marked Employees Only, finds another door that reads, Gentlemen. He enters and walks towards an alcove with lockers and a pair of parallel benches and removes his coat, his tie, and his pants, and hangs it on sturdy wood hanger. He changes into a pair of slacks and a tan guayabera, exits, and leaves his uniform with the secretary in the management office. Tomorrow, when he returns, there'll be a freshly pressed uniform waiting for him. He washes his

hands in the restroom, slaps water against his face, runs his still-wet fingers through his hair, combs it, and heads towards the kitchen.

Inside, the staff is all male, has been for almost eighty years. The men are dressed in checkered pants, and are up to their elbows in crab. Carmelo says his goodbyes, some in English, some in Spanish. He pushes his way outside and feels the warmth of the late afternoon. He walks down Washington Ave and heads towards the employee parking lot.

The gulls are out, squawking. Fishermen walk in a slow line towards the pier. A young family pushes a pair of twins in a stroller and a woman, pony-tailed and huffing, jogs in place. Some of the day's moisture has lifted off the streets and every automobile glints a piece of the sun. In the distance, a jazz combo plays from the patio of a nearby café and the notes float along the breeze like pollen. This is Miami Beach. Once the sun sets, the city will glow even brighter.

Carmelo sits inside his car and reverses out of the employee lot. He waves his goodbye to Jean and Christopher, a pair of Haitian twins—black slacks, red vest, white shirt, black tie—who man the valet. He swims through traffic like he's been driving all his life and rides up onto the highway heading south.

When Rigo first delivered the car—a two-door Delta 88, the color of a fresh plum—to Carmelo, he explained how the new models built the antennas directly onto the frame of the windshield letting you pick up any radio station from here to Havana. Rigo explained how they increased the wheelbase three quarters of an inch and it increased the grace of the ride ten fold. He explained V8 engines, explained positive valve rotators. He showed him how the air conditioning worked, when and how to use high-beam lights. Rigo detailed each and every improvement from the '67 and '68 models. Then he



explained how Carmelo would pay for it, how credit works. Rigo explained that *La Caridad* could not be left alone so, as to avoid any inconvenience, every month Rigo would send an employee to collect the seventy-five dollars until the car was paid for. Rigo then handed Carmelo an envelope with the car keys, a driver's license and the car's tag and registration, explained what he would need to show, and say, to a police officer should he ever be confronted by one.

At first it was a burden, paying that kind of money. But Rigo explained to Carmelo how he needed his own car if he was to work a meaningful job, one that would earn him money, a decent salary, and allow him to buy a home for his new wife, another effort Rigo was undertaking on Carmelo's behalf. Rigo then drove Carmelo to Jeffrey's and introduced him to Jeffrey Turiaf, the owner and grandson of the restaurant's namesake. Turiaf spoke some Spanish and convinced Carmelo that Jeffrey's was the perfect position for someone with his interests. He explained that his restaurant was a meeting place for journalists and politicians, city councilman, television broadcasters, celebrities of all sizes. Turiaf explained how Carmelo would start by washing dishes, like everyone else in the kitchen. Two dollars an hour. As Carmelo's English improved, so did his pay. Two-fifty. Three and a quarter. Four. Soon, he was making six dollars an hour welcoming guests with an English stamped by a Spanish accent, an accent that drove the tourists dizzy.

Carmelo continues past the exit for his home and headed south, further south than he's ever driven. He removes a map from the latch-box glove, checks his progress, the route outlined in red marker. He snatches a trio of stale pine trees from the rear view and adjusts the reflection. He spots a Chevrolet he remembers from the beach, but the car

soon veers off an exit ramp. Carmelo accelerates. The air conditioning is spitting beads of water, cooling, then failing, then cooling again. Rigo has a gas station and a garage just outside Coconut Grove. Carmelo makes a note to take the car in.

Carmelo needs no reminder of all Rigo has done for him and Inez. After his father died, and his mother was incarcerated for activities against the state, Rolexy ran with him deep into the country. There, they met a man who represented Rigo, who said Rigo was an American now, an American with power and connections and was helping Cubans like Carmelo escape persecution. Carmelo told the man he had no money and no way to earn money and the man insisted Rigo would address those concerns once he arrived in Miami. Rolexy knew Rigo, vouched for him, told Carmelo it was their only way out. From La Yuma she said, we can work to have your mother released. Using false documentation fabricated in the DR, Rolexy and Carmelo boarded one of the first flights out. Upon arrival, the news media surged onto the runaway. Cameras and flash bulbs, microphones the size of small mammals. The reporters pressed Carmelo for thoughts and comments but his eyes were widened by the commotion and he descended the stairs speechless. During the initial registration process a woman pulled Carmelo and Rolexy aside, they were to be processed in a separate room. There, Rigo was waiting for them. He introduced himself and said they could relax, they were in America now. And he would take care of them.

Carmelo floats down the exit into Florida City. To his right, a gas station, a bait shop, a souvenir store selling t-shirts, towels, seashells, gator heads. To his left, a pirate mounted on a marquee announces an eight dollar all-you-can eat seafood buffet. He pulls up to the traffic signal and notices a man shaped like a wine cork, short and stout, his legs

seemingly too thick for his sneakers, one arm in a cast, his shirt stretched by sweat. The man sits in a plastic lawn chair with a hand drawn sign that reads Flowers, \$1, Soda \$.50, Sugarcane, \$.25. Carmelo lowers his car window.

“I’d like a bag of your freshest sugarcane,” he says, and hands the man the quarter, bent at the edge.

The man looks at the coin, back at Carmelo.

“Do you think you have what it takes to become a hero?” asks the man.

“I was born certain of it,” says Carmelo, wondering how it ever came to this.