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The Mango Snores

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE MANGO SNORES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Michael S. Garcia

2021

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

This thesis, written by Michael S. Garcia, and entitled The Mango Snores, 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.

Ana Lus c yns a

Debra Dean

ohn Dufresne, Ma or rofessor

Date of Defense March , 2021

The thesis of Michael S. Garcia is approved.

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

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Vice resident for Research and Economic De elopment
and Dean of the Uni ersity Graduate School

Florida International Uni ersity, 2021

DEDICATION

For Mami.

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And thanks to Cami, for always laughing when I said I might not have what it takes.

A STRACT OF THE THESIS

THE MANGO SNORES

by

Michael S. Garcia

Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

Set in Miami at the start of the twenty first century, THE MANGO SNORES is a seriocomic crime novel chronicling a year in the life of Sam Espada, Cuban American writing professor and author of the Mango series of detective fiction. Reeling from the sudden dissolution of his marriage and the abject failure of his latest book, Sam finds himself embroiled in a plot right out of one of his novels when his newest pupil, private investigator Leonard Cobb, is found stabbed through the eye with Sam's fountain pen, leading homicide detective Vernon Harley to peg Sam as the prime suspect. With no leads, no access to the crime scene, and nothing to go on but Cobb's casebook, Sam and his neurotic sidekick, Malcolm, must unravel the plot that killed Leonard Cobb before the plot unravels them.

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MIAMI, 2002

In the beginning, there was the city, or the cities, of Miami a place that was at once singular but fractured, scattered into dependent parts, discrete yet connected, a patchwork, a multitude where the neon tinted, rum-soaked urbania of South Beach, there the strip malls and gated communities of Kendall, of Miami Lakes none of them within the city proper, but still Miami, always Miami, all Miami, as Miami as the neighborhoods inside its real borders where ever they were Little Havana and its exiles, men commiserating at cantinas and telling stories at domino tables the old hippies and new shopping plazas of Coconut Grove the suits drifting through the conference rooms and offices downtown, skyscrapers lined with cranes, promising more buildings, more condos, more Miami Liberty City, Overtown, Wynwood, just trying to hang on, hoping the suits don't plow through them with another highway exit ramp, another condominium, another mixed-use urban revitalization shopping mall, another fracture.

And there was Sam Espada, son of exiles, newly displaced, and wearing middle-aged like one of his Dan Marino jerseys, like it was too big for him, too loose, too gaudy to take it out in public. On this day, Sam was stretching the limits of his old home, the one he'd shared with his estranged wife, in South Miami, the City of Pleasant Living, though it was more like a neighborhood, a splinter, a patch in the patchwork. Why was he there? Out of habit, he told himself. He'd lost his wife, his dog, his house, but he didn't see any reason he had to give up his routine of visiting the neighborhood blockbuster once or twice a week. So he sat in his red Oldsmobile, which sat on U.S. Route 1, which was South Dixie Highway but also Biscayne Boulevard. Sam preferred the latter in traffic that inched and lumbered forward, slow and hot in the bright, burning August daylight.

Coming from the road behind him, Sam heard honking, shouting, cursing in Spanish. A glance in the rearview yielded nothing. He chalked the commotion up to road rage—somebody cut somebody else off, or didn't let them merge, as common here as the heat, and forgot about it. He didn't see the young woman, desperate, breathless, leaning between cars—Shannon at birth, Candy once she dropped out of Pensacola High, but Nikki no, Nikki as soon as she'd gotten here, like the palm trees themselves had whispered it in her ear. No, Sam didn't see Nikki at all, didn't see the men with hard faces not far behind—if he had, he might have recognized them later.

Nikki, for her part, had seen them. She'd clocked them coming up on her heels down Sunset Drive. Two of them, flunkies with bullet scars, cauliflower ears—typical Miami muscle. One was tall and thin, the other short and stocky—yeah, like a fucking gaudy routine, just without all the funny parts. She'd seen them around, she was sure—these same gofers, henchmen hustling for one rich asshole or another. She couldn't place them with just a quick peripheral glance, but she knew the type well enough to know they were tailing her.

Adrenaline spike, fight or flight chills, and Nikki trying to temper herself, to breathe deep, to not let her steps quicken with her pulse. How could they have known? It didn't matter how they knew, she figured, not allowing herself to be slowed or stalled in speculating. All that mattered was the tape.

Nikki had planned to take the Metrorail north to her contact, but now that No Way the tape would make it here it needed to go if she let these prickles follow her onto the train. What were her options? She was on Sunset, and Escayne Boulevard was half a

block ahead. She wracked her memory thinking of a place nearby where she might be able to stash it, until it came to her, the perfect place, just around the corner.

Nikki flipped open her phone and hammered out a text—*change of plans*, it said, *they r on me*. Overhead, the train was rumbling and screeching to a stop on the South Miami platform. Maybe, if she could lose them in the crowd. . .

She turned off the sidewalk and approached the Metrorail entrance, fingers numb, rhythm section in chest. But would the timing work? She was coming up to the turnstile now and took a handful of ride tokens out of her jeans, trying to sell it, make like she was getting on the train, like she had no idea about the thugs on her six. Another backward glance, just a peek. They were getting close.

Up ahead, no one, not a soul. Had the train been empty? *Fuck*. She glanced at her watch. The noon train wasn't usually empty.

Nikki stopped just a few feet short of the turnstiles. Another silent *fuck*. They'd called her bluff, and now she was stuck, nowhere to go. She could hear footsteps coming up behind her, even though that should have been impossible, with the din from Biscayne and Sunset nearby, and the hiss and rumble of the train, but she heard them, heavy and inevitable, coming up just behind her now.

And then, all at once, a crowd of passengers was at the turnstiles—two dozen, easy.

Nikki took off, weaving between the crowd of scrubs and suits. Once threw, she ran hard, the beat in her chest pounding louder than her shoes against the pavement. She glanced back; one of the lackeys was struggling to swim through the crowd, while the other had tried to push through the wrong guy and was caught in a shoving match.

Nikki got to Biscayne Boulevard, the sprawling six-lane thoroughfare, and stopped. The light was changing, but cars were still coming fast. Nikki knew the crowd trick would only stall her pursuers for so long. But the cars on Biscayne were still coming fast, slow to slow down, as always, making her hair dance in their wake.

All that mattered, she remembered, was the tape.

Nikki exhaled, inhaled, steadied herself, and stepped onto Biscayne Boulevard, just a few car lengths behind Sam Espada, who saw none of this.

He didn't see the tape Nikki carried, wouldn't have understood its significance if he did. He didn't see her dash into the Blockbuster, tears and sweat indiscernible as she scanned the aisles, looking for one free of patrons, of eyes that might pry. Sam didn't see her speed-walk into a vacant row—the one with the least popular selection, the oldies, Sam's favorite section—and stash the tape on the shelf behind a Marx Brothers movie, or hammer out a text that said *Cocoanuts*.

Sam did see Nikki dodge out of the rear of the Blockbuster—he was right up on it now, scanning the street for an open space—but thought nothing of it, except that, in this town—or city?—seeing a lady take her jogging route through a Blockbuster probably wouldn't be the strangest thing he'd see this week.

And he wouldn't be wrong, what with—well, shit. . . you know what? I think I'd better let Sam tell the rest of the story. Nobody can tell this story like Sam Espada can.

I. EXILE ON EIGHTH STREET

CHAPTER 1

There was something about them, those lines, circles, triangles, all yellow, pink, and orange, swimming in blue. Something that told me there was a pattern, a deliberate design, and if I looked at shapes long enough, or from the right angle, or changed my perspective and considered them in just the right way, I would see it: see the pattern everywhere, from one edge of the store to the other, a unifying theory of nothing.

I'd been doing this a lot lately. Homing on minor details, focusing on the little things, shit that maybe didn't matter, making it take up space in my brain so I could keep the bigger things—Victoria, Mango, Ozzy, there they were again—keep them from screaming and clawing their way out of the dark, tearing open old wounds and begging for my attention.

A voice pried at my concentration, then—the faint, distant call of something that sounded like Sam. And my attention was taken blissfully away from my searing thoughts—Victoria, Mango, yellow triangle, orange spiral—and brought to rest at an aisle of a Blockbuster Video, and the bespectacled stare of one Max Plotkin.

“Sam,” he said, clearer now. “What happened? You lose a quarter or somethin?” Max's Brooklyn upbringing had shaped his mouth so that it pushed out the word quarter with a rounded sort of heft.

“No, I was just—the carpet, see?”

Max glanced down.

“It has like, these shapes. I was just wondering if they, you know, formed a pattern.”