

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Jennifer Cornell

In 7 composite stories—shifting from the roads of Southern Colorado neighborhoods, the fields and unpaved roads of Northern New Mexico, and the streets of Culver City, California—*Penitence* follows Relles Ortiz and the bleak peripheral existence of the voiceless suburban people living in disorder and disorientation within the harshness of their common American surroundings and circumstances. Relles' story is told in a fragmented and laconic style as Relles explores the flashes of his violent past, his severed relationships as well as confronting his stubborn addictive personality. In "Blues Skies Under Culver City," Relles recounts his troubled marriage and relationship with his daughter after years lost in the Army serving in Macedonia. In "Return to Cacaville" we learn that Relles' problems are perhaps greater than himself as they seem to be patterned by his familial tree. "Backyard Marriage" recounts the marriage of Relles' mother and father from the perspective of his Uncle Lolo and the neighborhood priest, Father Dwyer. In "Hamburgers in Macedonia," Relles recounts the main source of his inner demons—a tragic tour through Bosnia and Northern Macedonia. "Penance" and "Laundromat Story" both beg the question: are individuals 'fucked up' or are they simply 'fuck-ups.' In the "Highland," Relles learns that his actions and decisions perhaps can rise above his weighted thoughts and relentless memories. Overall, these stories mark this author's journey from honest journaling to honest story-telling and crafting of fiction.

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Penitence

by
John Paul Jaramillo

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John Paul Jaramillo, Author

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Blue Skies Under Culver City

Sometimes I would work at a halfway house in Colorado when I wasn't living at the place. This was only part-time work, but I had some money again and was starting to feel like I'd turned from a piece of hard metal into more of a full person.

The first man I'd met while working there had become my friend and gave me a place to sleep in his basement out on La Vega Road. He drove me around town searching for fluorescent liquor signs on Central, Northern and East Ninth. He was like me but shared *posole* and mashed beans at his dinner table that he cooked in a coffee can, just like my *Abuelitos* in New Mexico used to. I found out the man's name was Luis. I liked to watch while he worked on cars out in his garage, this large double-building full of tools and spare parts he had put together. I told him my problems, but mostly I was there because I couldn't stand any other place.

This one time while we were drinking beer I told the man, "How much longer you gonna fuck around with that Chevy?"

This man Luis told me, "A lot left to do here, Relles."

"Looks alright to me," I said. "All I need to do is drive it." The half-primer, half-purple Chevy was a '76 and was the finest thing I'd bought after the Army. At first I didn't want the thing, at first I didn't want the responsibility. But this man Luis took so much time fixing the thing up for me, buying it was all I could really do to pay him back. I mean his wife and kid landed up dead-meat in the thing out on Interstate 25 about two years back.

Sometimes he would take me to the crash site. He kept going back there. I remember how he couldn't stay away. And one day while he showed me the *descansos*—the flowers he placed and the crucifix he'd made of wood—the gray-haired Luis cried and went on into his puke-colored handkerchief. It was horrible.

That Monte Carlo, though, was a piece of shit afterwards, mangled and smashed. But all his work on the thing had an amazing effect. He dropped a new Windsor V8 and banged out all the dents to smooth the body. He lowered the thing two inches—fixed her up with a new set of 13" basket rims, all chrome and clean—so it couldn't take much more than a speed bump head-on.

"Yeah, it's drivable, kid. I could drive it—"

"Well that's the point, right?"

"You somethin, Relles."

"What?"

"I told you the history with it."

"Yeah."

"Drove you out there—"

I didn't say a word.

"*¡A que cabrón!* I hate to tell you, *manito*, but the things you say make you look kind of *sonso*." He wiped his long forehead with his dirty fingers, shifted his cigarette from underneath his moustache. "I didn't want to just sell the damn car."

"Sounds like more work, that's what it sounds like, Luis. I mean you can drive it, and I already paid you for the thing—"

"Ain't no use workin on it if you're just gonna drive it."

"What else would you do with it?"

His Navajo eyes squinted at me. "*Manito*, you're somethin'."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Ain't nobody teach you how to look at things in a deeper sense, *manito*? Ain't nobody teach you?"

"Don't get too tricky with your thinking, old man," was what I told him.

And that same afternoon when I wasn't drunk, the man Luis went on over and airbrushed a picture on the hood so that the thing was completely his. The man introduced the hood as art, but I didn't know him as an artist, never been around one before. The woman he worked on was an image that had angel wings, and her eyes seemed gray because of the primer—her flawless arms crossed low at her waist. I could never think of anything so beautiful, and I think I even told him that's why I needed the keys, just to get to my wife. But the man Luis would've killed me if he knew I was driving his creation on the long ride out to California.

I pulled into Culver City around nine in the morning, going all night and stopping only once to eat and piss at the head of an entrance ramp. I was high on amphetamines my brother Romes had given me, and my head sort of felt hollow—carved out like a pumpkin.

It was good to have reached Culver City inside of sixteen hours. The city and streets were as I had remembered them, but it had been a couple years. I stopped in an AM/PM for gas, gave my troubles a case of Bud Light. The woman's face behind the counter was veiled in bulletproof glass, and I made out the name "Lynn" on her nametag. She had no waist at all. The woman had spit curls in front of her ears and the tattoo of an eastern sun on her neck. Her hair was long and appeared fire red in my mind. "If we were in love," I told her, "would you ever leave me?"

That morning the streets of my old neighborhood were black with rain, and the air hung heavy and wet. I put the Chevy into park. I'd like to say Loretta's house that

morning, our house, remained just as I had explained it all to Luis the past couple of months living in Colorado, but it seemed small, much smaller than I remembered. All the houses on the block were flat roofed and earth-toned and built by the same company, you could tell. But this one stood out because of the chalk drawings on the sidewalk and the immense garden towards the street. Loretta still had her garden in front with her plants and things. Gardens were always her hobby. When we still lived on Cardinal Avenue, she had a small one at our apartment that consisted of a few oversized pots. Here on this street she had a fine section towards the narrow road for her roses and marigolds. The neighbors would always admire her. Once when I was drinking, I took a shortcut through the garden in a straight line for the door. Loretta said, "Don't do that. It's disrespectful. Can't you see that's disrespectful?" But I'm afraid I didn't see, and then I said, "Jesus, Retta. Just flowers." She broke down crying. The roses stood beautifully that morning, though, in the cold, wet earth.

But before any of this, on the road to California, I saw Romes in a squatter's house with his hair combed back and his collar up, suffering through the cold of a New Mexico night. He looked strung out and thin. I really thought he was in jail or dead.

People were always fixing him drinks, rolling the fattest blunts to get him to slow down, making him talk while they quickly guzzled—all in the worst locations. The people at this particular party, this particular night, I didn't know very well and I was confident didn't know Romes all that well either. He had just lost his house and his wife to divorce and wasn't focused—wasn't much there at all.

I hadn't seen him in over a year. He got routed out of the service for possession—didn't go AWOL or anything like I did. When we would catch transports out

of Europe to the States, the MP's would never check our bags, wouldn't even think of it. But Romes had pissed off enough people in his long stretch in the service that they quickly found his weed this one time at Peterson Airfield. This lawyer somehow got him out of it without having to do any time, without having to stay in the Army.

I put my hand on Romes' thin shoulder and took the cigarette out of his mouth.

"How'd you imagine finding me, Relles?" he asked me. He was the only one laughing. Out of everyone at the party, he was the only one laughing.

"I'm headin out to California," I told him. "From Colorado."

"A lifetime ago, *manito*. I was in Colorado a lifetime ago. I'm a completely different person now." He smiled widely with his big, yellow teeth.

"I decided to see what she's doin."

"Jesus, Relles. Everything you do end in shit, or what?" He shook his head furiously as if he had been there with me the whole way, every mile. "Don't have me around to get into evil with you, that's the problem. Order your ass around." He took a long drag from the Camel after taking the filter back into his shaking hands. "See what happens when you don't have me to order your ass around."

I told him to take it easy. I was talking to myself.

Next we started telling stories about Macedonia and the 7th Infantry, and I was surprised how all the bad things we had seen stayed inside of him—the mud we slept in and the dead-meat we used to stuff into UN body bags, how he was able to keep the faces inside of him. At one time my brother had tried to explain everything to me. How the girls out there had been taken and what it meant to their parents. He explained everything I saw to me. How if a woman in Macedonia was taken by KLA or our side, how she was dead to her parents anyway, how the entire family would lose their respect

for her. He explained it all to me at one time, but now he kept it inside. I came all that way and the bastard kept it inside.

Only the drinking and the weed came out that night. We only talked about laughs. He was in high spirits after receiving his latest VA check. At that moment while on that disgusting little couch, I noticed how his curly hair was clean and blonde, how things were going to be alright for him for the next couple of weeks, until the money ran out.

“That shit happened a long time ago, *manito*,” he told me.

“Do you think about it? Did you tell your wife about it all? Do you tell anyone at all about it?” Some of the most horrible things in my life happened in the company of Romes, and I couldn’t let any of it go the way he could.

“It was almost two years ago, Relles.” He looked serious for a moment and then laughed. “Two years ago. So don’t ask me no more, Relles. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Don’t ask me.” Then he ignored me and started talking to one of the other sad people at the party—there were so many people there like us. Romes kept talking and sounded glorious.

Later he told a lowrider junky-looking girl that he was working in Riverside as an usher at a baseball field, and then he told another woman who I never saw the face of that he was living closer to the mountains and restoring old cars. He asked another girl if he could sleep at her apartment, and then he told another girl who was fighting with her boyfriend to meet him in the narrow street out front and to forget about the little man she had come with, that he had a Monte Carlo outside.

Everything my friend Romes said about his long existence in San Juan County was a lie. So we drank and we smoked our dogshit from New Mexico—everybody said it was dogshit—out of a pipe, most of it pretty well burned up, the dark smoke filling our lungs. I found out his real name that night. It wasn’t Romero; his name was Huett. I

found out that the name was German, that the elaborate name tattooed on his back was only borrowed, was only shared with the father who had raised him. Romes was twenty four years old.

Out in Culver City, after finally leaving the Chevy, I managed the steps to Loretta's front door. It was missing a screen, so I reached my hand through to feel the knob. The metal felt cold and reminded me of loneliness; it came up locked, so I rang the bell three or four times. I looked in through the living room window—there were no curtains—and I saw toys on the floor: a little plastic kitchen and a spotted horse on springs. The room seemed warm but unkempt. I knocked faster and faster at the wooden door until I was pounding.

Then I walked around back to a small window on the side of the house that led to the laundry room. I took the coat I had bought at a truck stop twelve hours prior in the Land of Enchantment and wrapped it around my elbow, testing the blows in the palm of my other hand for pain before I rapped at the glass. It took a few tries that sounded like limbs breaking before it broke with a much louder crash than I had expected. I thought for sure someone would hear. The window stayed intact, just coming off the insulation and dropping down whole to the laundry room floor where it exploded. The floor was concrete around the drain, dirty clothes piled on the floor. I thumped down pretty hard, falling over the washing machine and onto broken glass.

Inside, the green carpeting to the bedrooms was stained, and I could feel the blood pumping through my shoulders. Loretta's bedroom was cluttered and sad. The door frame had been fixed from when she locked herself in there this one time, and a queen-sized waterbed filled the room. Two antique-looking dressers stood side by side

near the closet. Her work clothes were stacked neatly on her bed. A necklace rested on one of the dressers. I held the metal in my hands; it smelled of Loretta's perfume. I found some money in a jewelry box folded into a small square that added up to about fifty dollars. I put it quietly into my jean pocket. It took me a while to notice the man's work shirts hanging on the door to the closet or maybe I didn't want to notice, but the gray material of the two shirts looked pressed with the top button done up with care. The logo over the pocket read Allied Electric.

I sniffed around like a dog, continuing through her drawers and her jewelry. I touched everything from her watches to her pearl necklace that had once belonged to her *Abuelita* out in Puerto Rico. I tried to touch her through her things: the heart shaped pendant for our second wedding anniversary, the ring I gave her when we decided to get married, along with the turquoise bracelet bought that time we drove to New Mexico. I went through his things too; I smelled the material of all their clothes. I found pictures of strange faces until the Polaroid's taken just before I had left to Macedonia, one of the same pictures of my daughter Belle that I had kept in my wallet until it was too worn to stay together.

My daughter Belle posed in front of a large tree. Her clothes were too big for her frame, and her face was mischievously young and rosy, her perfect nose small like her mother's. A young man standing in front of the small house appeared in the next photo—a handsome looking man with a white face and a red beard. His t-shirt is a bright red and he is smiling wide, patiently waiting for the picture to be taken.

Around the corner from our bedroom I edged to where our daughter slept. Toys lined the dirty carpet of the small room, and I had to clear a little path to get into the

center. Her books littered the long shelf over the picture window, looking out into the back yard. I imagined her reading and watching the afternoon in the warm view.

Loretta or someone had painted a blue sky to the ceiling, a sharp contrast to the grayish sky outside of the big picture window. I remember thinking that this sky must have taken hours to complete. I marveled at Belle's skyline. The rest of the walls up to about four feet were an institutional brown and reminded me of Luis' room at the halfway house. Here they were painted to look like a prairie or rolling hills, but the sky met them at the level of the bookshelf and the small dresser that held my daughter's clothes.

The blue met the horizon in majestic purples and turquoises, fields rolling backwards into small hills and then finally mountains, and then on to amazing distances, billowing, cloud-filled horizons. I am no artist and in fact the closest I've come to anything like this is Luis' airbrush work. Next, I made my way to the small double bed noticing some pink mixed in around the skyline. It all reminded me of Colorado. I had been living near the mountains for the past two years, long enough to recognize a beautiful southwest twilight. I mean the clouds were so real they felt God-like, weightless, and I lost myself in view of those faultless clouds, along the tops of trees that extended on the walls and some white picket fences added for detail over the brown hills. The light fixture poured warm sunshine over me.

Near the light switch were three palm prints, the same green as the tree line and must have been done at the same time. The smallest, I assumed, was my daughter's, and the mid-sized hand I thought to be Loretta's, while the largest one had to have belonged to the electrician. There was a dead sweat in my teeth.

And in that lowliness, the memories started to talk to me. Loretta had pushed me at one time to get ahead. She said that I needed to be realistic and get out and get some of the money out there. But I think I was being realistic. I knew I was just a fuck-up and didn't have an education, no qualifications.

And I should have been happy to get a job cleaning up at this bar I used to hang out at. Loretta was great for sticking with me as long as she did, and being worried about me working in a place that was less grill than bar showed that she loved me, and I should have been happy. I mean she thought I had choices in California, and she had faith in me and all that. She wanted me to tell her I wanted to work in a bank or I wanted to start my own business or I wanted to go to community college and study something. I know she meant well, but I don't know what world she lived in sometimes.

My thoughts were moving pitifully, and I heard the mailman come and place the mail. The phone rang a couple of times and I lost my beer buzz. I felt sick and weak and had to vomit in the bathroom, and then I returned to Belle's blue skies and the bad thoughts. I didn't care if I woke in hell or a hospital. But I thought of Belle under such artwork every day of her life. I was falling in and out of sleep thinking about that. My thoughts soon turned into sobs and coughs, horrible spasms in my stomach. I lost control and had a dream my face was falling from me. I dreamt of my father and I dreamt that his cheap Silvertone guitar he used to play flamenco tunes fell out of my hands, the way he always warned it would whenever I picked the instrument up out of its case.

I held the small .38 Romes had given me in case of trouble. I had the piece in my sock, and every once in a while I would pull it out just to hold it. I put the muzzle to my temple. I pulled the trigger several times to hear the piece pop without a bang. I couldn't stop. I kept pulling back the hammer and letting myself have it. Romes never kept the

gun loaded, which is how he planned to keep himself out of jail for armed robbery. That was something I regretted at that exact moment in my daughter's bed. My eyes squeezed shut and warm tears cut down my face. My whole head ached, and I concentrated so hard my thoughts felt like hammers on my brain. I never heard the footsteps.

Loretta carried a bag of groceries and her flawless hands held a dress in a plastic dry-cleaning sleeve over her shoulder. I heard them slip to the floor. She stood in the bedroom doorway.

"Oh my God," she said, "Relles." It was almost a question. Her face was quiet, the features trying to make sense of me in her daughter's bed. I hoped the lips would smile or give a sign that she had missed me. I didn't know what to say. I stood and looked her over for something familiar. I hadn't seen her since we met in a parking lot just before I went overseas. That was almost two years ago. She went that day to put the rest of my things into the back of my friend's truck, to see me off. Now, her hair was cut shorter and thinner. Her green eyes looked like she didn't want to recognize me, I supposed.

"Retta?" I slowly stood. "You don't return my calls or letters. I've sent so many letters—"

"Can you even imagine in your stupid fuckin head what I have to do to explain to your daughter or to my family where you have been and what the hell you have been doin?" She was calm. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ball to the back of her head—if I regret anything from that day it's that her hair wasn't down. "Jesus, Relles. I can smell

the fuckin beer on you.” She shook her head. “I’m callin the police and you are leavin!
You hear me! You hear me!”

And then she eyed the gun. Before I could say a word she had the cordless phone unit off of one of the dressers. I had forgotten she was left-handed and so was our daughter.

“Fuck, Relles.” Her round face had no makeup whatsoever, pure as a saint. There were no imperfections in her skin from the past two years showing through in the little girl’s bedroom. She was still something: a raw, Puerto Rican beauty. Her round face had remained close to porcelain, the most beautiful woman I had ever known. Her jeans were a man’s cut and fit her thighs baggily. I regretted that her waist was hidden under a work smock, but she appeared the same.

I shook my head. “I’ve passed on.”

“What!” She was dialing quickly.

“Loretta, I’ve moved on.” I got closer and grabbed the phone so that we held it together. I hadn’t touched her in years. She was shaking.

When she got a better look at the piece, her face held death. She stutter stepped into the wall behind her. “You hear me goddam it! Goddam it! You see,” she said, “you see. This is why I didn’t care where you were! This is why I didn’t want to know where you were when they said you went AWOL!” Her fingers shook as she continued to dial. “You fuck.”

“Loretta, please.” She didn’t listen. “I just want to see Belle.”

“You’ll never see her,” she said. “You’ll never—“

“Loretta!” I was almost crying.

“This is why I don’t return your calls or letters! I don’t want Belle to know. Relles, you fuck! You fuck of a man!” Her face cracked and she began to sob. And then she

looked me dead square in the eyes. "Didn't you get enough guns out there, you fuck! I know what you are! You fuck! Should have killed yourself out there! Should have killed yourself! No one deserves this, Relles! Fuck!"

Everything she said made me want to stop breathing, but I started in on everything: I told her about Colorado and my stay with Luis and how he really saved me out there; and then about Macedonia and the mud and the dead faces I had seen, the women and old men; how I needed to drink and how I couldn't come down for anyone, even her. That I couldn't help what I wanted. I apologized over and over again. I blurted the past two years and every insignificant detail in a single mad rush.

I followed her as we struggled around the bed. I still had her arm, squeezing down to bone. I pulled her to me and that's when I felt the life on me. I could feel what was alive on her, that pregnant belly against me. And that's the moment when it all ended. All attempts at being a person. That's when it all ended. Months later a caseworker at the Highland back in Colorado would ask me if that was the point when it all ended, and that is the moment I always go back to. That is the moment.

And so I lifted her straight up off of her balance, and with the blue skies around me, I knew she wasn't listening. She didn't want one detail of the faces I had seen, and I swear I wanted to hurt her. I wanted to break her goddamn arm.

She jerked from me into the hallway, and I lost my grip on her Wal-Mart smock. I lost the material and her nametag broke from its metal clip. I grabbed at her shoulder and then at her hair. The plastic phone fell to the hard wood floor, useless. Loretta ran down the long corridor of the house away from me until she backed up against the linen closet.

"Ah, please Retta," I repeated, still holding the gun. "Shit. Fuck. God."

She ran outside and I followed. I threw the gun in an under hand motion down the sidewalk. It was in that last look of my wife—in a full, short-legged sprint, still bawling—that I knew our goodbyes would never be real, that they would have to stay inside.

And after two days of me drinking and haunting around Retta's neighborhood, they picked me up in front of a Denny's. As the Anglo officers had the cuffs on me—between parked cars, and as they tossed my body over the trooper's hood—I stared at the lonesomeness that was Luis' Monte Carlo. For several less-than-conscious moments, I stared at the woman on the hood and her naked, airbrushed frame. It's important for me to remember the man Luis' car and his angel, that it could have been any man's car.

Return to Cacaville

I met up with my brother Romes as I was leaving from a festival down at St Francis' Church. It was some sort of holiday, and I was being dragged out to the parking lot by this kid Ando. I had arrived with my *Abuelitos*, but it was other people who kept giving me drinks.

I hated the two of them—my *Abuelita* and *Abuelito*—especially now that my father was dead-meat and buried. They both reminded me of another life, and so I couldn't stand their faces.

That evening, in between parked cars, we decided to slide into Ando's primer-colored Ford Ranchero and kill time by visiting my *Tio* Lolo out in New Mexico. Ando drove and Romes was passed out in the back. I strained over the bench seat, excited to talk. My brother was nineteen, and I hadn't seen him since our court dates.

Previously, Romes and I were only into random acts of vandalism, but then we had gotten mixed up together, burglarizing garages for chrome and parts for cars we would never own. That's when we were all dropped in jail. There we formed a crew more or less based on some sort of vile understanding of the Youth Offender System.

First, we drove out to the side of town they called Dogpatch, where not many people lived, and we bought something to smoke, enough to last about the whole month. When we pulled up in front of Ando's house, that's when Romes sat up with his thick bald head, looking around for something familiar. Ando disappeared and returned with some nasty brick packed shit. He kept nodding his head and smiling, "It was so cheap, *manito*." That's what everyone called me back then.

I smoked as much as I could as Ando drove south. "Fuck," I said. "This is strong shit." I was drooling all over myself with freedom.

Ando laughed, keeping his eyes on the road. “This shit isn’t even cured,” he told me. “Real dog shit.” He was just another local kid like me, but he was a few months older and looked it, more of a hulk with a stockier build. We grew up on separate sides of the county, and I couldn’t remember the kid growing up. Ando swears we knew each other from middle school, but I could never place his harsh features except from juvie. When I met him, he was smashing out windows at the food hall.

“I need sleep,” Romes announced from the back. Romes had always been more of a drunkard than me and Ando—not so tall, but pretty broad with a shaved head. He could order us around just with this deep voice, and I was envious.

“Then sleep, you fuck,” we told him.

“How the fuck can I sleep when you sleazes are lighting up in the car?” We laughed and lit another blunt, giving a low light to the dark interior.

“Why are we headed to Lolo’s, Romes?” we asked out on the highway.

“I have to sleep.

“Come on. Why are we driving out there so late?”

“I got a girly to meet,” Romes said.

“We driving out there for some *hoja*?”

“Not ‘a’ *hoja*,” Romes said. “‘The’ *hoja*.”

“Armenda?”

“Then don’t ask me, *cabrónes*.”

Romes had met this girl Armenda in California and the two were a horrible couple, sticking it out for a while before leaving one another. Romes held jobs in Wyoming, New Mexico and even Kansas, always to come back to this girl—just couldn’t stay away.

This particular trip took us eight hours because Ando's junker threw a tire on the border of Colorado and New Mexico, just outside of Trinidad. Out on the highway, Ando kept pointing at the tire and repeating, "I ain't never been in a situation like this, *manito*. Never been." I watched him from the side window. The roar of an endless stream of eighteen wheelers and tourists heading south rose and fell.

We finally drove down to Espanola, and then to a small town called Dixon about five miles from the old highway. We passed an all-night Sinclair station around five AM and a faded sign marking the Rio Grande. The pavement ended four miles from a one lane bridge. Romes directed from the back. "Take this left—take this road here—slow down and take this right—" There were no real maps of this territory, and the trailer was not visible from any of the roads. But there was Lolo's trailer out on about three or four acres of land—all spaced in the middle of an abandoned-looking lot, facing simple rows of apple trees and littered with a layer of dead green apples turned black and brown.

"This the place?" Ando asked as he made a u-turn. The space around the trailer was dirty and littered with beer bottles and rusted machine parts. The headlights of Ando's Ford lit up dust and weeds—the morning was cold stillness. A sleeping gray dog was the only sign of life. The eyes looked silver and wolfish. Absolutely nothing happened when we honked the horn.

"This is the place," Romes said.

Lolo had been around forever. The last time I had seen him was before I was in trouble. I did have a picture of him when he was still young. In the picture he was just in

a t-shirt with a pocket over his big heart, and he had his guitar case leaning up against him. That old turquoise Bronco of his was in the background. He was close shaved, wearing dark hipster glasses and a cabana shirt like Elvis wore in *Viva Las Vegas*.

He had tried to stay with my *Tia* for a while after a string of crash sites. I remember the day my *Tia* had attacked him and threw him out. She was behind me holding my shoulder and breathing hard; I imagined her tears were warm with anger and love.

He'd lost his work when the steel mill closed and his clothes were in a garbage bag—I think the girlfriend even took the Bronco and the guitar. Later my *Tia* told me that Lolo had refused AA and meds that would help his depression. She didn't know what else to do.

Romes was up to the door of that trailer by this time. As Ando and I exited the vehicle our eyes came across a cardboard sign up on the trailer. The sign read—Cacaville. Ando howled. "Caca is shit, right?" he asked me and I nodded.

After driving pretty much all night, I was about half dead from drink and lack of sleep. My throat was full of sandpaper, but Ando was alive with energy, dying to meet Lolo after all I had gone on about him. He kept slapping at my bald head, stinging the cuts of my freshly shaved scalp. He shook his head and looked at me. "We made it, *manito*." We always felt better in New Mexico's climate.

Without bothering to knock, Romes went around to the only un-curtained window and looked in. The trailer was aluminum-looking, standing all by itself with two posts for a makeshift clothesline. The wild grass had grown around the wood planks acting as a doorstep. The apple trees gave the whole thing cover and the only window was dark and nothing was clear to Romes, which made him look back towards us and slowly shake his head. My eyes were tired, and I wasn't sure if the grayish looking man who came to the

screen door was Lolo or some other sad soul. I could barely make out just how wiry and grizzled he'd gotten over the past five years.

This morning, he was smoking weed out of an old pipe and wearing old tan cowboy boots and a vest with no undershirt. His hair had grown out quite a bit and made him look like a rough Chicano. Little Joe and *La Familia* blared from a small eight track player. The voice begged a woman in Spanish to pass herself around.

"In a month of weird shit, man, you *chivatos* here at my door look about the weirdest," Lolo announced. We all slapped hands. Lolo gave me a sloppy, drunken hug that cracked my spine. "You're too damn skinny, *cabrón*," he told me. "What do they feed you in that jail?"

Inside the dimly lit trailer, we all got the full tour of a mattress and a small loveseat squared in front of a 19" television. Most of the places I knew my *Tio* Lolo stayed were like this. They had one bedroom and a broken down bathroom the size of a closet, and a kitchen the size of a bathroom—never with any running water or heat. The place had a low fog of smoke and smelled of dog hair and motor oil. Inside of two seconds we were invited around a tiny breakfast nook and eating fried potatoes with onions and green chile he'd cooked on his camping stove. Lolo even warmed *tortallitas* and *posole*. We drank a pot of coffee and poured rum into the black liquid. "Enough to eat, my brothers?" Lolo wondered. "If you'd called ahead, I'd have made a cake, no?" He laughed and wheezed.

"I came to help you with your troubles," Romes explained. "The Dodge, I mean. I hear you ran it into the ground, *Tio*."

"You ain't got a car?" I asked.

Romes ignored me and said, "Ando knows more about cars than anyone. Thought he could help you with the job." Ando nodded and smiled through a big spoonful of potatoes.

"My balls are too heavy to fix it." Lolo grabbed at his crotch. He grabbed the handle of a green coffee mug and took a tremendous swig. He exchanged his pipe for a cigarette. "Need someone to do the work—not help."

In minutes the work was settled. Romes would drive out to Espanola for his girl and for some drink, and he would try and cash some kind of check. Ando and I would get the Dodge running.

While we spoke, Romes' foot was tapping under the table. "It's about that time, *manito*," Romes said. "Hey, *Tio*, you got a phone around here?" He was anxious to find the 'fly honey' on her way from Culver City. He looked around wondering if this little spread of Lolo's would live up to the promises he had made to Armenda over the phone.

"No. No phone here," Lolo said. He pointed out the door to his dog who had just caught a mouse. The mangy thing was sort of pawing at it, and not really knowing what to do with it. "Got one!" Lolo screamed and then laughed. "Give the *perro* the message. He'll deliver it."

"Come on, *Tio*. I need a phone."

"Come on, my brother?" Lolo interrupted. "You just drove up."

"I told you, *Tio*, got to get to my girl," Romes said.

"Women are the death of you, and you don't mind dying, no?" Romes agreed and the two slapped hands.

Out front Lolo and Romes split the contents of a bag filled with fungus or weed. They passed each other green-backs, and for a moment I fell asleep, right while I was at the table.

Later I stole codeine from Lolo's stash, and then we headed out for his truck through another break in the woods that Lolo called a trail. For a while the afternoon was clear.

Lolo handed me a can of gas, handed Ando two quarts of oil and a bucket full of rusted tools. My limbs and torso were stiff after sleeping on the cold table of Lolo's trailer, and I had a hard time catching up to my *Tio*.

As we moved I pointed at the thin, white medicine strings on his wrists and elbows. "I'm getting old, *manito*," he told me, thumbing at them. "Need help from the spirits out here." He gave me a mystic look, reminding me that I had entered a place where people believed the devils that inhabited us could be seen. I suddenly remembered I was in New Mexico.

"*Brujo*," Ando whispered to me.

Soon we came to a grove of apple trees and a small clearing where Lolo had built a makeshift foundation. He had placed a few boards out on the leveled earth, marking his plans for a small house. It was all about the size of two mini-vans. The area was dry and smelled like shit. Blackbirds were squawking and the whole place looked like a gravesite.

Lolo told us that he had been carrying some plywood and two by fours out in his old Dodge, and the engine he'd rebuilt decided to lock up. The propeller decided to just quit turning, and the whole assembly followed, leaving the truck in the center of the open field. It had lived there going on two months. The battered Dodge with its whitewalls looked like a wounded pack mule loaded with the lumber of make-shift window headers and plywood for the walls.

"I could have fixed her," Lolo assured us. "But I was drunk and got the messages that flow the molecules from my brain to my fingertip receptors all discombobulated. It's all chemical, no? They teach you that in school?" I shook my head and stood and watched helplessly as he staggered over and threw open the massive hood. He climbed up into the mess. He pulled a small screwdriver from his front coverall pocket as a doctor would, pointing out the complications to Ando as if on an x-ray. He pointed out the bad liver and then the failing kidneys. "What's happening in here seems to be the trouble," Lolo said.

Ando and I peered in and nodded our heads. "Just needs some oil," I told him. Lolo smiled and started to agree with me. And then we began to experiment. We poured oil and put gas into the carburetor. Ando checked all the hoses and the spark plug wires. *Tio* told me the engine was rebuilt about a year or so ago and it hadn't been driven over a couple hundred miles. I got behind the huge steering wheel and tried to turn the motor over. First, the monster just coughed and clicked. A little oil weeped through one of the rings and smoke started to slowly seep out into the morning air.

"She needs new plugs and a look at the wiring," Ando said. Lolo rubbed his stubbly chin. Ando made quick work doing what he could and then he motioned to me to try the thing again. Again, she cried and coughed before finally exploding and firing up.

"*¡Metaló!*" Lolo howled at me through the cracked windshield. For a few minutes he just listened and watched the assembly roar with intermittent, awful timing.

"Ain't riding on all cylinders but she'll move," Ando said.

"This truck was your Great Grandpo's," Lolo yelled through the windshield, which surprised me. "Before your *Abuelito*. You know that?"

I shook my head.

“His Grandpo’s,” Lolo relayed to Ando. “That old man once drove me through the streets of Huerfano County—where your old man grew up. I remember he had this Dodge goin about eighty.” By this time Lolo had lit a Marlboro and laughed at the punch line before he even got to it. “Ninety, even. ¡*Chingow!* Up and down old Carter Lane to that old house on Box Elder, right, and he pulled up the driveway not stopping one bit. And bang.” He slapped his hands together for effect. “He goes through the back of the garage out into the alley out back and fucks up all the garbage cans, the trash pit and everything else back there.” We all smiled and began to laugh. “And this old Dodge holds up, man. Holds up better than anything today, you know. That old man could drink.”

“Sounds like you, *manito*,” Ando said. He wiped at the grease at his chin and along his neck.

“Fuck you,” I mouthed.

“Yeah, your Grandpo JR was drunker than shit,” Lolo said, smoking that cigarette down to the filter. “Never even got out of the truck. Slept there the whole night. Didn’t dare get out to meet up with *Abuelita*. Oh, you think your *Abuelita* Montoya is something. Well, my *Abuelita* was a devil. So the old man just slept in the car until the next morning with his face all bloody and cut to hell—his head all full of stars.”

“Didn’t even get out and try and hide or nothin?”

“No, no. Fuckin Grandpo stays in the car. Neighbors show up pissed and he’s in the damn truck sleepin. Fuck, that old man could drink. I remember he used to bring people home from the bars and from jail or wherever he spent his days, people like him, you know, and surrounded himself with them. Just brought ‘em in like old friends to Sunday dinner like he knew ‘em and sat them down for your *Abuelita* to feed ‘em.”

“Crazy old fuck,” Ando said.

“Your old man, *manito*, never got used to it. Used to get so sick of it all. Crawled under his skin something awful. He had a Malibu he used to fix up, and he sort of focused on that until he left to the service. You ever ride around in that Malibu, *manito*? He ever take you around in that Chevy?” I didn’t say a word. “Fuck, that was some beautiful car. Candy red. He loved that car. Drove it out to California with your mother. Lowered it and chopped the hood—tricked out the suspension. Your old man could really work on cars, *manito*. We used to call him that too. *Manito*. You know that?”

“No. I didn’t know that,” I finally said.

“Yeah. Yeah. Drove that car for years. Right up to the day—I mean—You know—” “By then Lolo had the hood down and the tools in the back of the truck. “Let’s get to town, *cabrónes*, I’m starving,” he said, dropping into the passenger seat. “I could eat a bowl of lard I’m so damn hungry.”

I found the shifter on the column, which I was not used to, but I did my best. I grinded through all four gears, out past Lolo’s planned house and then down a back way past his trailer. For a minute, after a long stretch of dirt road and mud, I thought the woods were going to crash through the windshield until we reached the old highway.

We drove and drove until we passed a stone handmade monument to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Someone had gone to some trouble to set it up out there in the middle of nothing, and Lolo explained the merging of Christian and Mexican gods to us. Out in Colorado, Lolo couldn’t hold a job or keep a wife, but here in New Mexico, he was a keeper of old *brujado* secrets and knowledge—a real mystic.

Twenty miles down the highway I still didn’t recognize any landmarks, until we reached a McDonalds and an old drugstore along side the Hong Kong Lounge. The three of us were a tight fit in that old truck, and I almost complained but then the road forked, revealing the main drag. Espanola appeared as a sad sight to see. It all called up

thoughts of ghost towns and dead Indian reservations. We headed out to the truck stop for gas and smokes. "This whole place is a real shithole," Ando said.

Then we stopped at a burger drive-thru place called Jorge's and spotted Ando's Rancho parked down the block near a 7-11, out next to a tricked out Impala and Mazda pickup. Romes sat out front in the center of a crew of kids holding the skinniest girl I had ever seen. It was his girl Armenda, and she looked naïve and unsatisfiable. She squirmed around in Romes' arms. They were rubbing up against each other, and Romes had his hand down the front of her pants.

And after we ate, Lolo gave Ando some money for more RC Colas, and he headed into the place. Lolo asked me, "What are you doing out here, *manito*?"

"What are you doing out here?" I answered.

"Well," he said. "Your Great Grandpa left me the land here after he died and so I guess I ain't got no other home to get to but Cacaville. That's what the family used to call it as a joke—your Great *Abuelita*. No one liked your *Abuelito* staying out here, especially her. They knew he was on a bender or in hiding when he was out here but they managed to keep him away." He lit a fresh cigarette with his old cigarette, and we both puffed on it for a while, passing it back and forth. "And what are you gonna do? Go back to school?"

I shrugged.

"Probably only thing you can do, no? You can't stay here." I gave him a puzzled and hurt look. "Well, you can't. Your *Tia* and your *Abuelita* is gonna be looking for you in a few days. They gonna want you to get home and you got to check in with somebody—an officer or the sheriff or something, no?"

"No."

"Romes tells me you do. Well, if you not around then they gonna get your *Abuelita* in trouble and you don't want that, do you?"

"No."

"Well, you've had six months to figure out what you gonna do." He took another long drag. "I didn't want to tell you nothing because I ain't your old man, *Manito*. I mean you're thirteen—"

"Fifteen. I'm fifteen," I told him.

"Fifteen and you've already lost six months of it to the state. I know your old man's gone but I don't think he would want to see you followin in Romes' footsteps. I just don't think he would."

I stared at the dead bugs on the windshield.

"And I am sure he didn't want you runnin around like those other *cabrónes* and *pachucos* with your pants falling down—showing all your ass." He seemed to be talking right at Romes and the group out around him. "I lost a lot of hours down there at the mill, me and your old man we both did." He looked right into me. "I can't put my life back. I've fucked up and just don't give a shit no more." He flicked his *vacha* out the window and lit another cigarette. "I mean—I just mean—Hell, when I was a kid we wouldn't take a piece of fruit without asking."

I nodded and almost cried; it was a lot easier than saying fuck you I won't do what you tell me.

"I'm just saying I want you to give a shit to what goes on around you. Don't be like me, you know? Don't be a fat piece of shit. Be a real person and care about things and don't drink so much and—and—" He took another long drag and forced me into a paternal, almost stern stare I hadn't seen from his eyes. He handed me his cigarette. "Like I say, I know I ain't the best one to give advice, that's for hell sure, but man you

can't keep going around like this. It's bad enough you call him your brother. I mean don't you think that's strange to be lookin up to him? I mean you followin in his footsteps perfectly if that's what you trying to do but I just want you to grow into somethin better."

I started to choke on some tears.

"You know that's where Romes is headed, don't you? *Los Soldados*. That's where you're headed."

"What?" I asked.

"*Soldados*," he repeated. "*Adios mio, manito. Gringito*. The army. The army." This news was a real tragedy to me—a real fuckin-to-God tragedy. "That's why you're here. He's sort of saying goodbye to everyone. Gonna try things in the service like your old man." Lolo looked at me. "All you have to do now is get forced into the army like him. And that shit ain't easy if you ain't ready for it."

Lolo hadn't given me a sermon I wasn't used to. It was just more wisdom from people worse off than me. I somehow knew it all would never stick. I mean I didn't mean to be disrespectful to Lolo, but everybody I knew at one time or another had some piece of knowledge from some trouble they knew about and they all had given me some sort of an illusion of choice. It just never seemed to apply to my trouble. Never felt the same to me. I gave him another puzzled and dazed kind of a look. It's what I thought he wanted.

Later Ando walked up with RC Colas, and my *Tio* Lolo yelled, "Hey, Ando. Ain't you got nothing better to do than hang around with *manito*?" Ando could only shake his head.

A wannabe musician named Ronny from Kansas, this fat, quivering girl named Chalky, and the pretty little thing, Armenda, arm in arm with Romes, were all down

beside me back at Lolo's trailer. Under the New Mexican night sky, we sipped on cans of Bud Light and makeshift rum and RC Colas.

Ronny introduced himself as Armenda's cousin. Or maybe he just said he was her brother, I can't be sure. But he looked older and rougher than all of us—except of course for Lolo. He stood taller than hell, and was a Cherokee, or at least that's what he told us. He went on and on about this job in Kansas he worked with Romes. "They give you a bloody smock and like galoshes and a tin helmet and that's all the training."

As he kept on, I felt sicker and sicker.

"That's all. Then they send the hams at you and then the blood splashes you and splashes you and you can't keep up." He went like this for an hour, smacking his lips and gulping beer. Somehow I didn't feel right about Ronny. "And then your arms go dead and you can't carry anything anymore and they still send them at you. Big fat bloody carcasses."

Romes just nodded in agreement. "Sickest shit you've ever seen." That's where I started to fade out.

My friend Ando mouthed the word 'narc'.

"Tell your boy to chill his wheels," Ronny told me. I noticed Ronny's head was narrow, and a silver safety pin pierced his left eyebrow. In a minute he rose up drunk and serenaded the campsite with some old Flamenco tunes from his guitar. The beer made his chords and rhymes from his songs sound incomprehensible to me.

By nine that evening, Lolo made an appearance and got a fire going. Half a case of Bud Light was gone. We had nothing to do but sit around and look at our drinks.

"Hey Uncle Lolo," Romes said. He was drunk and feeling brave.

"Yeah."

"Do you get scared out here? Out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"No. No. No. I got a lot of guns." Lolo swigged from his beer and then put it down to answer. "Got one under the sink in there and under my bed." I could tell he was drunk too because he was staggering around the camp site. "Got one under my pillow," he said. "Got'em everywhere." He struggled up to his feet from his lawn chair and moved past the campfire to his screen door. Ando just looked at me. Lolo returned with a small handkerchief wrapped around a small metal piece in his left hand—a fresh Bud Light in his right.

The piece turned out to be a .45 clip-loaded job. I saw the gun under the red handkerchief probably before anyone else. He moved behind Romes and his girl to where Ronny had been playing guitar. He held the piece out into the deepest and darkest part of the foliage and quickly fired three rounds—slam—slam—slam. The empty cartridges flew straight up.

Armenda fell backwards. "Oh—Oh!"

Romes and Ronny both jumped. Chalky was probably the worst affected. The fat girl Chalky jumped and screamed to me, "If that man comes near me with that thing I'm crackin his fuckin head!"

I saw the rounds coming myself and I still jumped.

"What the fuck, Lolo," Romes screamed. "Jesus Christ."

Lolo wheezed and laughed. He continued to empty the seven rounds, but the last one sort of stuck in the chamber. He had to pull at the metal cylinder.

In those few seconds of muzzle blasts, I could see the skeleton faces of drunken spirits building up inside of him—maybe for his whole life? "Fuck, Lolo," I said. "Ain't you worried about people calling the cops, man? You crazy fuck."

"No cops out here. No cops. Nobody gives a shit." He took a drink and spat all over himself with excitement. "You gotta let the spirits know you ain't fuckin around out

here. Gotta let em know you ready.” He smiled and released the clip, replacing the whole setup in his coveralls. “*¡Ya se cavo!*” he said. He looked at us. “Oh, come on,” he said. “No one out here for miles and miles. It’s St Ides heaven out here, *manito*. St Ides Heaven,” he bellowed at the top of his lungs before going inside. I could see Chalky and Armenda squirming and not knowing if they should pack up.

The clouds didn’t move that whole night after that, and in the dark I could barely make out both of the girls and their cut off jeans and t-shirts. They must have been freezing, but they were too drunk and stoked with too much hashish to care. They were even sadder looking close up.

Chalky was the worst. She had a jaundiced-looking scar on her chin from a nail in her momma’s couch that had caught her—somehow the thing only made her look more pretty. I found out later that Chalky was half-Indian like Ando, and that she was Armenda’s half-sister. She wasn’t as pretty as Armenda—her hair close cropped and mannish—which quieted her personality and demeanor.

Later, I didn’t want to talk but she sat so close. As my eyes adjusted she looked about twelve or thirteen. She was just the right size for me.

“Who is that stupid old man?”

I shook my head. “Sometimes he’s my uncle.”

“Sometimes?” She kissed me, and I could tell her eyes were outlined in black. I thought about all the other girls I had kissed or had ever been with—their legs and breasts. “I don’t like those guns,” she said.

“He’ll be asleep,” I said.

“Your family all has caca in their brains,” she said.

“Shut up.”

“Your brother. And your ‘sometimes’ uncle, too.”

“Jesus, you bitch,” I said.

I drank and talked to her only a little, but the sight of her straight hair and dark skin down her round face made me happy. Her legs were beautiful, resting square in the mud along-side me—I couldn’t keep my eyes off of them. Every once in a while she slapped at mosquitoes and scratched at the small bites. The only thing that saved me from destroying her was that smell of vanilla perfume and that smile.

“Where’d you get that piece of shit tat?” I asked, noticing a horse with wings inked on her arm. It stood up on two legs ready to jet from her skin.

Chalky strained hard to look at her shoulder. “You’re a real fuck. You know that?”

Later, I heard my brother Romes ask Armenda, “What about you? You feel safe out here with me?” Her arms and legs looked so thin she might have been crushed with his hugs. Armenda answered him with a long, hard kiss.

I felt so damn tired I started to drink more and more and just wanted to continue.

At daybreak, I woke with that crazed feeling of being in an unknown place like I used to back in juvie. I’d felt like I hadn’t slept but that I had just blinked my eyes. I didn’t have my shoes or my shirt. Blackbirds were circling, and the shadows were gray in the darkness. I only had one of my *Tio’s* sleeping bags draped around me. I was wandering for a place to piss when I found my friend Ando. Out in front of Lolo’s trailer he was holding his leg tenderly where a small, black hole had formed in the meaty part of his thigh—about the size of a cigarette lighter burn. Blood had formed a muddy black puddle on his jeans and on the ground around him.

“What’s your problem?” I asked Ando.

"Sorry ass queer stabbed me," he kept repeating over and over. "Fuckin queer stabbed me!"

"Lolo got you?" I asked.

"No. Not Lolo," he said. "That fuck." He pointed at Ronny who was sitting arms-length across from him. Ronny looked white and sick, holding his own bloody mess across his face. His flannel shirt was untucked out over his pants, his long hair that had been tied behind his head had come loose, and he had lost what looked like a mouthful of teeth. He spat blood out onto his chest and legs. His guitar had imploded.

"Well," I said, looking to Ando. "Pull it out."

"What do you think I did?" he said. "Do you see the knife in me, *cabron*? Do you see a blade anywhere? Jesus, *manito*." I looked over the campsite at the empty bottles standing around at attention and couldn't scan the blade anywhere.

"The sticker didn't even get in there that far," Ronny said. He was digging through his shirt pocket for cigarettes. "Didn't even twist it. It'd really done something interesting if I'd twisted it."

I have half a recollection of what went on while I slept that night—more of a dream, really. I had been taking codeine and hadn't eaten anything, and it was all affecting my stomach pretty badly. I slept it off in the back of Ando's Rancho, not sure of everyone else. But allegedly my brother Romes had kicked his girl Armenda in the stomach while they were sharing a sleeping bag. I'm not sure if they were fucking or fighting. I am not sure if it happened because Romes was drunk or because my brother was just mean as hell. Could've been all those things. Maybe he was like me and woke up not knowing where he was and freaked a little bit—I couldn't testify to any of this.

Suddenly and stupidly, Ronny walked right over with a knife. Somehow he managed to run it through Ando's leg. The little sticker went right in and broke off—that

would come to light later. Then my brother Romes and Ando reacted in a self destructive move like we were all known for. They kicked and elbowed the hell out of Ronny—tearing at his legs and his chest while he fell. Armenda just lay there on the ground crying and begging for them to stop.

Then Romes staggered around looking for his girl's forgiveness. But not much later, she would get in Ronny's Mazda and roll out of sight of Romes' pleading face, deserting the fat sister and the bleeding Ronny into my stunted care. All I know for sure is when I got up the whole mess was done, and the wind was crying through the campsite.

There was a minute that morning, however, I could have gotten Ronny by the neck or bashed him with a tire iron and killed him. Stranger spirits have been in New Mexico. But he turned away, and I walked the five steps into the trailer's side door. I went in for my *Tio's* reaction and for some towels. All I found was half a roll of toilet paper and more pills. My *Tio Lolo* was resting on his bed in his clothes and in his hipster dark glasses. His hands were resting on his belly without a care—he hadn't heard a thing.

What I am sure about was the long, winding drive out to the hospital. In the Ford were Ando, Ronny, the thirteen-year-old girl named Chalky and me—I was driving. Ando had the hood up on his sweat shirt; he bled over the seats and the floorboard. He cried over his wound, and it shocked me. Once, Ando had gotten into it with some kids in juvie who had tried to push his shit in. I remember Ando got his head bashed and didn't make so much as a grunt. He just punched and crumpled one kid down to the floor while I held his arms.

"Are you alright?" I asked Ando.

"What the fuck do you think?" he said.

Chalky gave me directions. I don't know how I found Parkview Hospital in Espanola—I had never driven in New Mexico—I had never driven. We sat in the waiting room and watched a television chained to the wall. Chalky wrapped herself in a blanket and sipped from a can of RC Cola. She had a look of not knowing what next. I wanted to put my hand on her shoulder or say words to console her.

“What'd you say?” she asked me.

“Huh?” I said.

“What'd you just say to me?”

“Nothin,” I said. “I didn't say nothin.”

By then it was noon, and we hadn't moved. I needed something, and the girl had cigarettes in a little case. She kept counting them nervously with her fat hands. She noticed my nails were yellow from smoking too much. Our fingers almost touched.

Backyard Marriage

Just before I was born, my Uncle, Lolo Ortiz, planned out a wedding in one afternoon, all while drinking beer. He spoke out loud to a small crowd of men that had formed in the garage.

Mira, the backyard will be open and we'll keep the guitar players in the garage, Uncle Lolo explained. He stood in the doorway with a cigarillo in his mouth, and he kept adjusting it underneath his moustache. We'll move all the cars out and we'll cut all the grass down and the patio and the driveway out from the alley will be the dance floor, he said. We'll make it all look real bueno.

We'll keep the alcohol in the kitchen, Chapoleen added.

Chapoleen was Lolo's friend and John Relles' best man. Of the three men he was the skinniest Chicano and had the thinnest arms and legs—that's why they called him grasshopper. He was twenty-five and had the general expression and build of a young boy.

No booze until after the wedding, cabrón, Lolo said. This is a wedding and I want to save it from all of that.

Yeah, yeah, Chapoleen said. His face held a child's deep grin. I'll keep a couple of six packs just in—

Are you deaf, cabrón. I don't want anyone drinking until everything is all done and over with.

Just then Chapoleen kicked at the Abuelito's dog that had been licking at his pants. The dog growled in pain and then ran out back to his food bowl and blanket out on the concrete.

Hey, cabrón, Lolo said. Don't be kicking my family's dog.

Well, tell the motherfucker not to be licking at my verga, cabrón.

The men followed the dog out back. And we'll be sure to tie up the dog, Lolo said.

What about the bride, cabrónes, John Relles said. What will the bride tell me when I tell her all of this?

In her mind, cabrón, she'll just have to get used to it, said Lolo. He had two months growth to his beard, and he wore Levis and a plain white t-shirt with a pocket over his big heart. In February he was thirty, three years older than John Relles—the oldest of the entire crew—and he'd been living with the Abuelito's since getting out of the Army. He did not know that for some people that was failure. He had been living in the basement for six months, and he had been drinking every day of it. First he said he drank because he had seen the last of his luck. Then he said he worried and missed his brother John Relles and then on John Relles' return it was all a celebration. Then I learned he drank because of a lost girlfriend. But now the family assumed it was sadness and habit.

Well, she'll just have to get used to it for a while, said Lolo. Without any money, cabrón, what else do you want to do?

While they walked around the yard, gulping from their cans of beer, Lolo was buzzed and had to concentrate to light cigarette after cigarette, explaining the whole ceremony to John Relles and their friends. He had been planning for months, borrowing and hustling ideas from his friends, from anyone who would bite, guessing at the position of tables and of borrowed chairs underneath the largest apple tree, the location for Father Dwyer to perform the ceremony, and also where the pictures could be taken.

That day he explained the whole situation again to more Compadres—his Tia Archuleta and his cousin Kiko—over the back fence. But Uncle Lolo noticed that John Relles had paid little attention to the details of the wedding until then. Uncle Lolo

assumed that his brother was pissed at the whole disgraceful situation, and that he had been avoiding the projects over at the garage where he worked with Uncle Santiago to devote all his time in worrying about the wedding. And for two weeks Lolo said John Relles had lost sleep, turning over and over again on the cot in the basement next to Lolo's bed, muttering something in Spanish that Uncle Lolo could not quite make out no matter how hard he tried. The dreams would blow John Relles out of bed like a shotgun blast and scared Uncle Lolo in a way that only one who served in los soldados during Vietnam could understand. Are you OK? Uncle Lolo would scream, but the young groom never answered, could never answer. But John Relles' worry softened in the mid-afternoon sun, while Lolo stood and made specific plans for the ceremony.

Abuelito had his rocking chair near the side of the house in his usual place, that's where he drank and cussed. He had always gone out there to get away from the pinche family and drink his rum and RC Cola. It was early spring and the air was warm—the apples were thudding from the trees. If you were to go out there some afternoons, I was told, he would be sitting and wearing those big wide ties of his tucked into a tight red sweater. Abuelito was Puerto Rican and called the drink a limon. He'd sit there and puff on his pipe, making smoke rings for the kids, and he'd watch his sons while they'd work on whoever's car they happened to have up on blocks in the back alleyway. No matter what the sons had going on, Abuelito would inform them of its imminent failure. One time they had John Relles' Charger up on blocks, trying to get the exhaust system to open up and get the car sounding like a beast, and Abuelito told them, You'll never get that shit going, cabrónes. Or he'd say, you'll never get the thing started, cabrón, or you'll never get that piece of shit going like a new one. To him the neighborhood was just one nest full of cabrónes. It had been that way when the steel mill would go through a layoff or one of the many shut downs or the union would have a lock out. Then he'd say, those

cabrónes are fuckin' up my mill again. The whole neighborhood just sat on the porch or in the back and was defeatist just like Abuelito, no matter what the subject. Uncle Lolo and John Relles were both a product of that. And despite Abuelito's eyesight, he could see the men that day and knew their plans to take away his best son as the Army and the war once had. Lolo said Abuelito sighed deeply that afternoon, he'd had it up to his nalgas over this wedding, and so he hiked up his pants and took his best pipe and pouch of tobacco and he moved the serious work of drinking inside.

How much you think this is gonna cost, Lolo? John Relles finally asked.

I don't know, manito, Lolo answered. I'll ask the Abuelitos for fifty and see if they give me twenty.

Ask for a hundred, said Chapoleen, who had started to chew a fresh wad of Red Man, his front teeth stained with the juice.

Cabrón, Lolo said. John Relles here has been worrying over this shit for weeks. The wedding's got to be vata bonita and the food's got to be good, too. I don't want to fuck anything up by getting greedy. Lolo began to scratch at his beard. So don't get involved, cabrón. This ain't even your family.

Chapoleen spat and gave an impatient look.

Do you think they'll give that much? John Relles asked.

That's nothing for the Abuelito's, said Lolo. And the woman is worth it, no? We should ask for at least fifty.

John Relles didn't say a word but only nodded—lit a cigarette.

So what about her people? Chapoleen asked. The Montoyas?

A hundred, John Relles answered. They've already promised.

Right on! Lolo slapped John Relles' hand. That's a pile of money, manito.

Yeah, manito, Chapoleen agreed. He was searching for the cigarette thought to be tucked behind his ear. That'll buy a ton of booze.

After the wedding, cabrón, Lolo said, giving Chapoleen a look. After the wedding. And we'll have to thank her family—

They're not coming, John Relles said quietly.

Not coming?

You know how it is, John Relles explained. Viejo Montoya won't even allow me in the house. Family is all wrong, you know.

Well, why don't you talk to him, manito? Lolo asked.

Yeah, manito. Why don't you just talk to em? Chapoleen agreed.

I tried. I told him I am here to talk about my life with his daughter. I told him that I swear none of what he has heard is true but he don't believe me, you know. Man, you know.

The backyard lay in the mid-afternoon shadow and more friends were gravitating towards the backyard to listen to the planning and participate in the drinking. It was April and the heat seemed more bearable in the shade of the house close to the stucco walls. When Lolo and the men finished their scheming and their drinking, they opened the door to the garage to pour sand over the oil stains down the short walk out to the cracked sidewalk in preparation for the big day.

The news had spread through the neighborhood since the engagement and then, as the backyard was prepared, on the day of the wedding. Thinking about the bride-to-be and his brother, Uncle Lolo waited for Father Dwyer to arrive and inspect the Abuelito's home.

There were a load of relatives and hangers on in the house and the food was being prepared and displayed on the kitchen table: plates of various rices, tortallitas and bowls of menudo and posole, great plates of fried beef, lamb and chicken, and Abuelita's sweet empanadas and tamales, Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner rolled into one. Father Dwyer inspected the table too carefully, without touching the food, thinking that in effect the food was picture perfect and much more beautiful than any he had ever dreamed of at any wedding or funeral.

What a marvelous celebration, Father Dwyer said. He sought out Uncle Lolo among the group of people and, fixing his trained Catholic eye on him, said, Your family, my dear Lloyd, would have been an extraordinary host for the Bishop.

Abuelita continued to load the table and almost blushed. She wiped her hands on her apron and swept the hair from her eyes.

Gracias, Uncle Lolo said.

You want a beer? Chapoleen said, picking at some of the tamales.

What's that? asked Father Dwyer. He was smooth and fat, almost like a woman, was how Lolo described the Father. He feathered his hair from his face, and thought for a minute. His voice streamed like a professor or a Latin-speaking monk and his attitude was distant but respectful.

I've got a twelve pack in the garage, Chapoleen said.

You know the food smells so grand, and I should really wait until after—

Thank you so much, Father, for performing the ceremony, Abuelita said in Spanish. She said it with such a radiant expression, like nothing Lolo had heard or seen in years—not since his return or his brother's return from overseas. Lolo remembered the look in her eyes when John Relles had arrived from the war. He had not called ahead so the afternoon he arrived with just his bag and in class-A dress uniform she fell

to the ground crying and moaning to the Virgen De Guadalupe. She had cried when Lolo had arrived but his unit had not seen combat, had not seen anything other than a Frankfurt, Germany staging area.

She says thanks, said Lolo, leading the Father further to the front of the house.

You are so white, Abuelita later said in Spanish, almost like a ghost. Like the young Montoya bride.

What was that? Father Dwyer asked Lolo.

She says you look handsome, Father, Lolo answered.

Oh, thank you, Mrs. Ortiz, he said, nodding. Father Dwyer was no stranger to the Abuelitos' home. Lolo told me that on different occasions because of his relationship with the neighborhood and his friendly way of dealing with his clergy, the Father had been called to pray from time to time by the Abuelitos and even Lolo himself. He was called once when Lolo had been drafted and just before John Relles was drafted. He came when there was no word of John Relles near the end of the Vietnam War. He even came to help out when Abuelito was strung out drinking along with his shotgun and wouldn't leave the garage for work or any family responsibilities. I can imagine Father Dwyer never felt at ease among the non-English speaking family. He couldn't speak Spanish and all he could do was nod and smile whenever they spoke to him, always looking to Lolo or someone to translate. I'm sure he'd think about them, their rooms littered with crucifixes and statues and that immense banner of the crucifixion that hung in the living room, just above the television and measured three foot across. When he entered the house, he couldn't move without someone offering him a plate of food or drink. He'd think about their large parties on Saturdays in front of the house, the Tejano music and the large amounts of beer and drinking, and he always experienced a feeling close to fear. He remembered the stories of brothers going toe-to-toe in the streets—rumors of

one night when one of the brothers was stabbed and rushed out to Our Lady of the Meadows.

Has John Relles arrived? Father Dwyer asked.

He's getting dressed, sir. He lives here, Lolo answered.

Has the bride arrived? Father Dwyer asked a few awkward minutes later. He looked at his watch.

She's at her family's house, replied Lolo. But she should be here pretty soon, and he added. She's walking over.

What's that? Father Dwyer said. He was very much perplexed with the thought.

She'll be here, Father.

I have mass at five thirty, Lloyd, Father Dwyer said.

Have you met my Tio Ruben, Father.

Ah, no. I don't think I have had the pleasure, Lloyd. Is that you mother's brother?

No. No, sir. Uh, he's my uncle on my father's side out from Montebello, Lolo explained. He's one of family that is playing guitar today. He's a musician.

Ah, a musician, Father said.

Yes, Father, Lolo explained. In my family the music is almost as important as the ceremony.

Father Dwyer nodded.

The two men walked out to the living room, through the main doorway out to the porch where Tio Ruben was sitting. He was out on the old couch that had been dragged through the front door to handle the crowd that would surely pile up later.

Ruben, Lolo shouted. How are you, Tio? Father Dwyer, this is Ruben Archuleta.

Ruben was an old man, obese and hairy. He was a body man by profession and used to work in the same garage with John Relles before moving out west to California. Lolo had not seen the man in months, until this moment on the porch.

The fat man sat on the couch with his tie already draped around the collar of his shirt. He turned to my uncle and the Father and said, Que, Que?

Father Dwyer, Uncle. This is Father Dwyer, Lolo repeated loudly. The front porch creaked with the weight of the men's arrival. Lolo remembers it giving beneath his feet if only a little. He's a little deaf, Father, Lolo said.

I barely got here, Ruben finally muttered. His guitar case was thrown to his side, the faded leather cracked and old.

Ruben! Lolo shouted, his arms falling to his sides. I want you to meet—

I'm fucked up, Lolo, Ruben said, pathetic with blind drunkenness. He was wearing dark sunglasses and spitting as he talked, realizing where he was sitting and who he was talking with. He kept pushing at his jacket sleeves and scratching nervously at the hair on his forearms. His forehead was completely covered with sweat.

Father Dwyer could not resist laughing and shaking his head.

That's why I don't like to drink at weddings, Lolo, because I get all fucked up, Lolo, Ruben said, motionless, without blinking.

Father Dwyer looked down upon him uncertainly. It's so good to meet you, Mr. Archuleta.

I'm so sorry, Father, Lolo said. For the first time since leaving the Army, Uncle Lolo was ashamed. He wished he would have stayed in California, wished he would have stayed in the Army and kept the respect that came with the uniform and the steady paycheck. For the first time in months he wished he didn't drink so much, and he wished he didn't sleep on a cot in his parents' basement. He wished he hadn't lost his job.

Pinche faggots in the church never respected the working man around here, Ruben blurted and spat. He was talking to himself, still disoriented.

Father Dwyer closed his eyes and took a step back on the porch, and Lolo thought he might have been praying or wishing he had not made the journey the few blocks from St. Mary's over to Spruce Street.

When the mill shut, where was the pinche church? Ruben said.

I'm so sorry, Father Dwyer, Lolo said. I'm so sorry.

Father Dwyer shrugged his shoulders and smiled nervously. He took a step back.

Lolo dried the sweat from Ruben's forehead with his best handkerchief that he had laundered and folded especially for the pocket of his suit. Then he helped Ruben up, taking his arm under the shoulder and helping the man over to the front door and then farther in towards the kitchen.

Let's get some café inside of you, Ruben, Lolo said. We must have music. A wedding must have music, cabrón.

All fucked up, Ruben repeated. I'm all fucked up.

The two men struggled over to the door, leaving Father Dwyer alone on the porch. The Father set himself down on the couch stiffly, avoiding the depression where Ruben's large body had warmed and shaped the cushions. He rested his arm on the guitar case.

Across the narrow street, on top of the Baca house, just over the garage, Father Dwyer was surprised to see a half filled basketball, a car fender, and two thick rims without tires. He couldn't imagine how anyone could cram the equipment onto the top of that house. He sat there and remained indifferent to the view, observing the spectacle as if it were a car crash.

And nothing happened for a long while, but I'm sure Father Dwyer felt as if he would never see this wedding through because now it was close to four o'clock. He felt like standing up and walking back to the church and the shade of the rectory. He had known John Relles and his bride-to-be Bruna Montoya since their First Holy Communion, but he also knew he would have to run to make five o'clock mass down the street after the ceremony. He would have to walk quickly or perhaps jog and sweat would fill his collar and the warm April sun would tire him.

Lolo finally returned with a glass of water for Father Dwyer and a plate filled with fried meat covered in onion slices. Chapoleen was right behind him with a plate of food and a fresh beer under his arm. The two men had just left Ruben who was passed out spread-eagled in the home's only bathroom, where he would stay for the remainder of the ceremony. And after leaving Ruben to rest, Chapoleen had talked Lolo into two shots of rum and in sharing half a can of beer before the ceremony. Both had agreed to only that before the ceremony. But back on the porch the two men sat on either side of Father Dwyer, innocently.

I'm so sorry, Father, Lolo said.

I hope he will be OK as soon as he sobers up, Father said.

He's never too sober, Chapoleen said, so I'm sure he'll be alright.

Lolo stared him down. I'm sure the bride will be here in a second, Father. I'm sure everything will be OK when the bride gets here, Father, Lolo said.

Lloyd? Father Dwyer asked.

Father.

The home across the street—

Yes, Father.

The white home with the blue trim—

The Baca's house?

Why do they put the car parts on top of the garage, Lloyd?

They put it up there so nobody takes it. They put it away for when they need it, Chapoleen explained. He pulled the cover from his tamale and then loosened the knot from his tie and collar. Small stains of chile blurred on the white laundered shirt.

I don't understand.

Please, Father, call me Lolo.

Lolo?

Yes, they all call me Lolo here in the neighborhood.

Interesting.

Yes, Father. All the kids and my family. All the guys in my old unit—

Your unit? Where did you serve, Lloyd?

I was in Frankfurt, Germany. But most recently I spent some time in San Francisco.

San Francisco.

Yes, Father.

Remind me, Lloyd, Father Dwyer said. What branch were you in, Lloyd?

The Army, Father.

And your brother? John Relles?

Army.

Father Dwyer took another look at Lolo. He examined the cool glass of water, then he sipped.

Lolo lit a cigarette and offered one to the Father.

Oh, no thank you. I forget, Lloyd—

Yes, Father.

Was it you that served in Vietnam or was it your brother, John Relles?

My brother, Father. With the 7th Infantry. You came to the house. You 'member?

Ah, yes. That's right, Father Dwyer said. He took another long drink of water.

Chapoleen cracked the tab of the beer can and pulled the tab loose from the metal and threw it under the couch. He looked at Lolo on the other side of the couch and smiled.

And what about you, Chop—Chop—? Father Dwyer asked.

Chapoleen. They call me Chapoleen. My name is Robert, Father.

Do you go to school, Chop-uh-len? Father Dwyer asked.

I worked in the wire mill? He took a long swig from his beer. He was balancing his plate of rice and tamale on his knee.

You both worked together? Father Dwyer asked.

Lolo worked in the coke plant, Father.

Father Dwyer nodded and shifted to look at Lolo. I used to go to school in San Francisco, Father Dwyer said.

Lolo nodded as he smoked. Chapoleen gulped his beer.

UC Berkeley and then I went to the University of San Francisco. I studied literature for a while before going to seminary school, Father said without being asked.

Why were you in San Francisco, Lloyd?

Lolo hesitated. He took a long drag and caught the ashes in the palm of his hand.

He was in jail, Father, Chapoleen said, slouching into his seat.

Oh, Father Dwyer said.

Yeah, the cabrón got caught—

Shut the hell up, cabrón, Lolo blurted. He stood up and instinctively the Father stood up to calm my uncle down. I'm gonna give you a butaso like you won't believe if you don't shut the hell up. Sorry, Father. But I swear I'll do it, cabrón.

Chapoleen started laughing and spitting beer into his hand. Yeah, Father, the cabron couldn't stop—

Lolo slapped Chapoleen across the top of his head causing his head to jerk violently—all just over the Father's head. Chapoleen then stood to return the blow when all three men suddenly crowded together. Father Dwyer put his hands on both men's chests repeating, Please—please. Chapoleen had to excuse himself into the house and then back to the kitchen. Lolo stared him down the whole way and Father Dwyer, again, stood nervously between the men without saying a word.

I'm sorry, Father, Lolo said. Forgive me but that sonso drives my last nerve sometimes.

Father Dwyer nodded and smiled. I'm sure the boy doesn't mean any harm, Lloyd.

I just don't want this day ruined for my brother, Father. I want everything to be salvamente, Father. And I—

Tell me, Lloyd, Father interrupted. Please sit and calm down.

Yes, Father.

Why were you in jail? I'm curious because I don't think I have heard this before.

Drinking, Father.

Ah, Father said, nodding.

I hadn't heard from my brother and well, you know, Father.

Ah, I see.

Yes, sir, Lolo said, taking one last long drag before throwing his vacha out towards the street.

Can I ask you one more thing, Lloyd?

Please, Father. Call me Lolo.

Yes. Yes. Lolo. Please tell me why you have gone to so much trouble over the wedding?

Well, Father, Lolo said, the Abuelitos always told me you had to prove your love in front of God or it won't be any good.

Oh, Father Dwyer said. That is very true thing, Lolo.

Just then, the youngest Montoya daughter, my mother, came marching up the front stoop with her picture perfect hair and her crisp new dress. The two men watched her carefully and with wonder, from the elegant lace flowers to her ivory shoes. And this was all one of the few times Lolo could remember satisfaction in being sober and even remembered losing his breath at such a beautiful sight. He remembered her light face was rouged and her elfin nose was red from the sun and the heat of the afternoon and the walk from the Montoya's home—I might have seen a few pictures of this dress but of this I can't be certain. Lolo would later tell me that he thought the pictures taken that day would never do justice to that moment on the porch and I want to believe him. The feeling of love he remembered as she moved like an angel or a saint, all while watching the ground and the train of her dress she held in her flawless hands as she walked.

And later towards the middle of the party, after the ceremony, Lolo would become drunk as he always would and passed out towards the front yard as the wedding party went on without him, as the dollar dance started and the guitar players began to play las mananitas. Lolo would pass out and rest on the front sidewalk, in the cool early evening shade of spring, crying over the woman he had almost married, crying

over the mill and the busted union. And later, after eating several plates of food, I'm sure Father Dwyer himself would walk past Lolo, step over the lanky body on the long walk back to the rectory and his place at five o'clock mass.

Hamburgers in Macedonia

The mud was like nothing my brother and I had ever encountered before. It was thick and evil, clinging to everything and consuming the surface of our skin and clothing. Our boots filled with the excess, and our limbs seemed to disappear into the earth with every step and jerk. The suction would keep the boots buried; each step was fire, burning on calves and knees.

Our unit spent the worst parts of February standing around and waiting for German or Polish troops to move, after arriving from Camp Bondsteel. We hoped for a transport or shelter after an all-week patrol without warm water or real food—something that would be comfortable to sleep in after humping it through wooded valleys and their steep, interlaced dirt tracks and pathways.

Days before, while heading for the Albanian border, we met more U.N. Forces, Polish and Macedonian troops disarming locals. We got a good look at the looted landscape and the skeletal people wandering with hunger—more of this land without a government. Mostly, we found young boys with old shotguns, pea shooters disconnected from their owners, and every once in a while, if we were lucky, we'd find a hunting rifle or an antique looking Kalashnikov or an AK-47 caked in mud to clean and play with. These patrols had been designed to search for weapons or 'KLA extremist activity', but mostly the only people my unit found that month were Macedonian citizens, a few families, old men and women scrounging the fields for potatoes to feed their families. Later, closer to summer when I was just an AWOL ghost, the whole place would become a disarmament depot, but now it stood as just a point along the one hundred mile border. A place for us to wait and then later head out from more rural and even more disgraceful villages like Tarsevic or Tetovo.

The six-member group, which included me and Romes, now had the infamous Sgt Ortega leading the stroll and took a slightly different route late Saturday afternoon. For two hours the unit climbed a water gully the Albanians called a 'draw', before linking up with an advance team at about 1:30 AM. The team we met up with included some Special Forces, a platoon of airborne scouts in red berets from the 82nd Airborne who shared cigarettes but never spoke except to laugh at us, and about 10 German soldiers we couldn't understand.

Our makeshift group found a small, stone building that used to be a church—you could tell by the crosses—and some old tenements that looked charred and looted by fire, the walls graying and old. The command group stayed in the main room of the church—that was where they slept and ate and schemed on the wooden floor. The only worthy amenities inside were a piano, rows of uncomfortable wooden pews and a dilapidated, malfunctioning fireplace that barely kept the minds behind the operation warm.

Outside, some of us slept under cars, while some of my group slept under trees and eaves of buildings, and others slept in their bags up against the stone of that church. The safest place to sleep seemed to be in the village's dead center, where the people were scarce and the traffic had all but disappeared. Romes and I were designated as runners, the only two that ran across a muddy street that resembled a small river, and we must have stood for six or seven hours inside an old stone vestibule, pulling checkpoint duty and trying to light cigarettes while blocking the rain with our ponchos. The buildings here were nothing but rubble, remnants of gas stations, remains of the Bank of Commerce and an empty marketplace. "Fuck me," Romes said, after designing our first makeshift checkpoint of tense rope and oil drums. "It's a fuckin ghost town."

Staff Sgt Ortega had a lean look like every other sergeant I'd ever met, thinhipped like a dark Gene Autry or some other *charo* of the west. He was muscular and a foot taller than any one in the squad, always nodding his head and yelling with a crazed tone like a Benzedrine addict—the worst of us all. He was the most infamous of our group, too.

Once, while out between these burned buildings and twisted wrecks on the roadways we heard a rumor about Ortega shooting a kid in Kosovo, while on a patrol just like this one. I heard that the official report said a SAW—which I was carrying at the time—had discharged 'accidentally' while Ortega's group was putting up fencing around a school in a village called Gornja Slatina.

The SAW was a real monster, a smaller version of an M-60 but using the same rounds as an M-16, a twenty pound piece and a bitch to drag through the mud—of that much I'm certain. They always told us not to have a round in the chamber, but Romes once told me, "What the fuck's the use of not having a round in the *pinche* chamber, *Manito*?" Some more reliable recounts I've heard said Ortega was drinking and some say he wasn't properly checked out on the SAW—neither was I so I guess that was why I was interested.

"Coulda got three years to his whole life but the *cabrón* is a smooth operator, operatin correctly, you know," was Romes' final thought on the matter. I also heard that two sergeants major, a first sergeant, a major, a captain and two lieutenant colonels had tried to testify, but Ortega still got off of all charges and specifications. I also heard speculation that the only consequence was transfer from the 2nd Battalion part of the Germany-based 1st Armored out to our little band.

We tried not to judge him, though. In fact, we held him in high regard for it—I mean he was no stranger to bodies and Macedonia, so later we all had questions. When I tried to nail him down on it years later, in a bar in San Antonio called Sharkey's, he told me again, "The only reason I was helping put up fences was because the air strikes and shit tore 'em down." He also told me the round caught the kid in the shoulder, and he bled out in less than an hour as they dragged him for help. "I did what I could but the kid was dead-meat, you know? There was nothing I could do." And that was the way he saw things—the way we all saw things back then. In our twisted view it wasn't really our fault in the first place.

Once in a bar in Germany, out on leave, the thirty-two-year-old Ortega sipped at a shot of tequila and told me and Romes stories that came from close to the Sangre De Cristo Mountains in New Mexico. He was born in Utah, somewhere near the Four Corners, and so he spoke a mix of English and Spanish slang that I could almost understand. He explained more of the Ute's creation myth to us—in one of his unguarded moments—and how the Rocky Mountains back in the states represent "a religion as important as Rome or Mecca or any other holy place you can think of." He wore his yellow teeth and full-pack with an awkward pride, and he gave me my first taste of European weed. "Hydroponics," he said, winking while the unit roared.

Much later, after the bodies, Ortega taught me Chicano slang and the importance of his Aztec tattoos as he flexed. I was nineteen that winter, and I remember asking him so many questions because it was my first time overseas. A combat 'virgin', said Ortega and Romes.

Late into that first night with Ortega leading us, out in my stone vestibule, the water continually fell down as I waited for sleep to try and overtake me. In front of that old gray building, while my brother slept like a zombie, I started humming one tune after the other to keep it together—to keep from crying. At first the sound came involuntarily through my teeth. The violent chattering was like an old flamenco tune that at one point in my life I had tried very hard to learn on my old man's guitar. I went slowly and shakily and then moved into a long steady pace. The memory strengthened as I soloed through and hugged myself tightly for warmth. There was a gray zone in my head, in those hours, while my brother and unit slept, somewhere between my waking and less than conscious rhythms and the little village around me. My mind wandered with these long stretches of fear and listening to the rain, the towns and counties of my home reflected in these European hills and valleys. My thoughts were left to race over the *llano* of my youth. In my thoughts I focused and feared nothing, and I was filled with joy in my memories—I wasn't homesick and I wasn't scared. It was in these hours during those first days, that my family and my wife were always close in my imagination—the last good things left inside of me.

From the kitchen I listened, while warm in my old bed, to my *Abuelito* shoving wood into the woodstove to stoke it for the evening. Later *Abuelito* toasted tortallitas on the stovetop and brewed strong smelling coffee and whispered his anger over his pipe to my *Abuelita* at my brother Rome's antics—his tendency to stay out all night and drink. A violin and a guitar played soft music from the radio that filtered through the walls of the small house. I nestled in closer to my *Tio* Lolo and my cousin Kiko who were sleeping

beside me, and I fell quickly asleep. During the early morning a sweet smell of cologne woke me. The lights in the house were on, but they were dim. I got up quickly and stood beside the kitchen door, peering around the corner to see my brother Romes. He sat at the table—entirely in Dodger blue—smoking with *Abuelito*. I know he came to live in Huerfano County shortly after his parents died, around the same time I arrived.

“What’s up, my brother, *manito*,” he said. He slapped my hands and sparred with me. “Whoa,” he said. “You’re getting strong there.” He gave me a fake left to the jaw, and I gave him a fake uppercut. I noticed a fresh gash on his forehead, scratches on his face, his eye bruised and blackened. My brother was sixteen, the young jail kid that I would soon become, and I smelled the beer on his breath before I heard him speak.

“One day you’ll kick some ass, *manito*, on some card somewhere. Fists of cement, uh,” he said. He loved boxing back then and always dreamed we would both prizefight if we didn’t have to work in the onion fields. “The Gillette Card or maybe somewhere in Albuquerque you’ll—.”

“It’s not right to fight,” *Abuelito* told us. “I’m tryin to teach respect and you teach him to be a goddamn *disgraciado* like you. Don’t want him to be no *pachuco*—no *juevon*.”

“My brother can do what he wants, *Viejo*.”

“He’s not your brother. He’s your nothin. He’s not your blood, your cousin, nor your flunky neither,” *Abuelito* said. “He’s your nothin.”

Uncle Lolo came in slowly, wearing only boxer shorts and scratching at his immense hairy stomach. He lit a cigarette and the tension in the kitchen quickly rose.

“Get down, protect your head, dodge and slip around my punches. Protect yourself, *manito*,” my brother continued, jabbing at me. “Always protect yourself.”

“Jesus, Romes,” Lolo snapped, crossing his arms. “Don’t piss off your *Abuelito*. At least not so early in the morning, uh. *Manito*, go get your work clothes on. We got work to do.”

I hurried, and as I dressed Romes came into *Abuelito*’s bedroom and slipped a bag of sage around my neck and under my t-shirt. The smell of leather and root was strong and I never forgot it. “For evil spirits,” he told me. His eyes had a weary sadness, from drinking and remorse.

Soon, we were in my *Abuelito*’s old Dodge in an onion field parked side-by-side with rows of ranch trucks and battered old cars. There was just enough light to distinguish a dirt path from the barracks of tractors to the quiet fields of onion plant and earth. The smell of grasslands and morning dew drifted on the wind. My *Abuelito* sat on the truck tailgate talking with a mix of other *charos*, watching my brother and Lolo and I slip on our gloves and take our shears and potato bags for the long day ahead. The men were all Chicanos, big and brutish and guzzling from metal thermos tops—all laughing at the sight of my *Abuelito*, and my hung-over brother and Uncle. They knew just by looking at Romes and the scars on his face that he had been up to no good, inflamed by drinking and fighting with other Chicanos from the surrounding area.

Just then a row of headlights, the sheriff’s and two others I was not familiar with, jolted down the old highway toward our group, the collection of men readying to start work.

“Oh fuck,” Romes whispered to himself.

“What now, Romero?” my *Abuelito* yelled. It was the first time my *Abuelito* called him by his real name, since he moved in with us.

Lolo just laughed and slapped my brother on the back as hard as he could. “Congratulations, looks like your goin’ for a ride, *chivato*.”

Romes' first reaction was to freeze and then to sprint through the field. I kept up with him for a while, but then eventually, I watched as two deputies held his arms and another gringo cowboy punched at his stomach and tore him down. They pulled him and cuffed him and crumpled my brother's body into the back of the squad car. In my dreams, I was paralyzed.

When I was fully awake and my brother was up and moving, I pretended I had a cigarette, and the cold Macedonia night air I blew was the smoke. The dry cold was the only thing familiar, like in Colorado, the only thing that felt good on my cheeks and bones.

"Don't do that," Romes said.

"Why not?" I said. "I smoked everything last night." I mimed flicking the ashes and taking another long drag.

"Why do you do that? Why do you help them fuck with you? Like you want it?"

"I'm just smokin."

"It's fuckin cornball and you ain't no baby. Should be sleepin instead of that shit."

"I don't need it, brother."

"The fuck you don't," my brother told me, suddenly perceptive and sad. "We all need it."

Sometime around dawn that next morning the fog came thick, like smoke from a burning building. I had taken a few pills to stay awake, codeine for my back, but only a few. We ate nothing but MRE's and I felt lucky though because I had M&M's in two of my meals and bottled water for three or four days. I kept time by when we ate and slept because my cheap watch had waterlogged.

In those early hours, I was reading two letters for the third or fourth time that month. My wife back in Culver City wrote she missed me, and that I should try and pick up something for her as soon as I could get away from 'camp'. Who knows when I will be in this part of 'the world' again, she wrote.

She couldn't believe how ungodly thin I appeared to be in the only pictures I had sent since basic. I remember that Romes and I had met up in the unit, and we were out in front of a sign that read Mountain Post Home of the 7th Infantry, Fort Carson, Colorado. We were wearing sunglasses and looking professional, posing for the only friend we knew with a camera. She hoped I was eating and getting enough sleep, she wrote. I had been away almost eight months, and I hadn't called or written once; my new baby at home was no more real than an image on a Polaroid. Sometimes I would choke up when I read them, or looked at that little baby's face. Romes would instruct, "You gotta keep that shit inside of you."

I got called into the church. It was cold and the wind kept blowing me back as I walked.

"Ortiz. Ortiz, get your ass in here," Ortega said over and over again loudly. I heard Ortega's size thirteen footsteps coming at me immediately on the wood floor before I saw his face. "I want you to make a run and get these guys some real food." He had a brown cigarillo in his mouth and spat all around himself as he spoke. "You got a problem with that?"

The pews around us smelled of wood and had been recently cleaned. The scars and dents had been varnished over and over, but I was sure they were still growing—I

remember thinking the only things with a semblance of up-keep here in Macedonia were churches and bars.

I was happy to be called inside because it meant warmth. I could hear the drops from the roof pounding out of tune to the young singers and piano player that would sometimes collect for morning concerts. The drops leaked through and filled their water jugs so quickly that the old woman playing piano had to empty them twice as they practiced. My inner ear was failing from sleeping through the muddy streets.

"What, am I talkin to a fuckin deaf person? Ortiz. Ortiz," he repeated loudly.

I started to nod my head. What had my attention was a group of young girls with brown hair and almost no waists at all that seemed to single me out even though I was about fifteen rows from them. I hadn't heard anything close to live singing in months and it all surprised me. They all couldn't have been more than thirteen. One looked towards me, and I want to remember she smiled as she sat next to her fat leader that was playing a piano. The group of singers looked in my direction. The older boys of the group wrapped in dirty fleece and moth eaten sweaters stood in the back and looked at me but did not move. American soldiers were to stay away from locals, the girls.

Ortega was restless and his attention towards me was lost. "Hey there," he called through his yellow teeth, through a pack of Special Forces. "Girl, come here. You," he repeated.

"Relax, man," I answered. "Let them alone." I stood in between Ortega and the rest of the pews and the church. "I'm here, sir."

"Soldier," she seemed to say in our direction with almost no syntax. The pretty young thing's face was thin and freckled. Her skirt was yellow and her sweater a sad gray and a mass of brown hair was held up under a scarf high on her head. I could tell

the girl was staring as Ortega moved a bit closer. "Girl," he said. "Yeah, you?" He pointed and made quite a bit of a scene.

The girl moved right up to the front of the procession of singers and musicians and smiled. Upon a better look, she wore a dress and had thin, angular limbs that showed through her skirt.

"You want food?" Ortega asked. "Food, huh?" He made as if his hand was going into his mouth. "Food? Food? Hamburger?"

"Jesus, Ortega," one of the Special Forces said. "They're Albanian, not deaf."

The little girl smiled.

"Fuck you," Ortega answered. "Hey, you want a hamburger? Hamburger? Jesus, Ortiz. Go get this kid a hamburger, and double time it."

I nodded and froze for a minute. I gave him a look and my lip must have quivered.

"You got something to say, Ortiz?"

"No. No, sir."

"Because if you do, you say that shit out loud, boy." By this time Ortega had his hand around the girl's waist, and the fat woman playing piano looked more and more uncomfortable. The young girl had fear welling up in her but she must have choked it down.

"Ortiz. Why are you still here?"

"Where am I going to get hamburgers?" I asked.

"Jesus, Ortiz. Were you not with this particular unit yesterday?"

"Yes, sir. I was—"

"Was the night that long for you?"

I shook my head.

"I know you were with us. But you don't act like it." He gave me a disgusted look. The Special Forces guys and the German guys were laughing. "We were in Bocinja?"

I gave a blank look. Just then the little girl became infatuated with a silver scorpion cast in silver that Ortega always wore around his neck, despite regulation. The little girl stretched up to get her fingers on it.

"Do you remember the village down the hill? Do you remember the drainage we passed? They sell them there! Christ!"

"I'm not sure where—"

"Jesus, Ortiz!" he screamed. "Romero knows! Go ask Romero! Ask your brother! He'll straighten your ass out!"

"Yes, sir—"

"Get the fuck outside," Ortega ordered as he held the girl tightly around the waist. "Jesus. Virgins fuck everything up."

When Romes and I finally decided to move, the heavy Macedonian clouds had shuffled over the entire sky, darkening everything. Around ten o'clock we were headed to the village for food, for a bag of hamburgers, when Romes stood still and said "Fuck me, we're lost, *manito*." He said it as if he had a map of northern Macedonia and the mountains here placed inside his head.

"This is all shit," I said. "Worse than shit."

"You're new. He always gives shit to virgins."

"I thought—"

"Your opinions and thoughts and point of views and whatever the fuck you have in your head better stay there, you fuck."

“What?”

“You’re the reason we’re here shit stompin through this, you know that, right? So shut the fuck up and keep that piece covered.”

The SAW was to be wrapped in a special tarpaulin at all times but I was always forgetting, dropping it to the wet ground. I fumbled with the safety and the tarp. I couldn’t control anything.

“And try not to shoot me in the head, a’ight,” my brother said.

We had heard several stories when coming in to this place. Stories we heard of refugees coming over the border to escape only to find more trouble, something I remember seeing on CNN while on leave. In person, I saw women disgraced and degraded like the girl in the church. They covered themselves and their daughters coming across the border from Kosovo into Macedonia with just blankets, sheets or whatever they could find. I saw families searching for their lost children through countryside that was very much a wet and muddy mountainous wasteland. I heard stories of kids lost for days in the rough terrain interspersed with small villages and attempts for community. After my first three months in the country, I felt very much like those people I had heard about and that I had seen, completely unprotected and susceptible to the environment. And it seems funny to say that because I was with the oldest of my unit. Romes was twenty-three at the time and very much in charge, my leader. We thought we were prepared for any crisis that could come up.

“Fuck if I know where we’re at,” Romes announced. He sat on a cropping of dead logs and tried to light a Marlboro in the rain. “Fuckin Ortega wants some shit then he can get off his dead ass and find it himself. *Chinga* Ortega and *chinga* this whole fuckin place, *manito*.”

Later that afternoon, as we jogged, the mud built on our boots and our pants. I had mud crusted to my thighs from taking a shit in the surrounding empty fields. I had mud in my boots and in my god damned shorts—everywhere. We were more tired than we had ever been after a full morning hiking and pulling our feet out of the mud that gathered on the shoulder of every muddy path and miserable stretch of back road we hiked through.

In rather pitiful time, we finally reached a village that looked like a possibility. The second building out of eight that had a small shack attached was littered with wood and what looked like cedar and alfalfa drowning in wetness. Under the wide metal eave, two old women with moustaches were selling American-style burgers—no cheese, though—and a few random newspapers. The only commerce I had seen here.

We went crazy and spent all of our money. A big chunk of our month's pay. We must have bought two-dozen burgers and their entire inventory of chips and warm soda. Romes was so damned happy he lent me more wages. The old ladies even had Winston cigarettes. My brother leaned back and chugged two sodas himself immediately.

We collapsed on the ground near the stand and put the order in my army issue. I carefully wrapped the treasure inside of my jacket. I wrapped it in my coat and then I tucked my coat down into my pants to give the food some extra protection from the rain. I hid everything from the elements. Everything except the SAW—I unstrapped that and sat it in the mud.

"Fuckin shit, *manito*," Romes yelled. "I ain't cleaning that piece for you no more."

"I just laid it down for a minute, *cabrón*. It weighs a ton."

"I know and I just told you, mother fucker, I ain't cleaning your piece again."

I tugged at my collar up towards my ears and zipped it all the way up to keep the food dry. We smiled greedily and humped it back.

And we didn't touch any of it, not one bite, forgetting that the valleys are rough and densely wooded in some areas. I wasn't thinking, I guess, because I got behind of Romes for a few miles. The clouds darkened again and moved over. I got so far back struggling with the food and the SAW my brother appeared as only a stick on the horizon.

And later into the afternoon I continued to struggle with the tarp and the SAW strapped around my neck, the 200-round box and the safety I could only remember to keep to the left. I stumbled in the mud, face down in a ditch just past an open clearing. My whole body trembled with wetness and the weight of my fatigues. I must have knocked the wind out of myself because I woke dazed and lost, half drowned. Blood spilled from my nose and mixed with dirt. I choked and spat—my SAW lost and buried beneath me. When I lifted my torso up to breathe and finally wiped up all the mud from my mouth and eyes, I found that this mud and mess of the country crept up under my coat and in all the burgers. I wiped and scratched but only made it worse. The newspaper the small stand used as packaging soiled away in the rain, and mud washed under the white buns. The ink from the newsprint appeared a dark black and ran all over the meat and buns, the ketchup and mustard. The grease and mud had mixed into black water underneath my coat and undershirt. I struggled with the paper. I desperately tried to separate mud from food, pickles and onions from rock. I tried to form the mass of grease and bun back into something resembling the shape of a hamburger.

It was an arm I saw first—gray and old. I scraped and clawed at the earth to get out, but I kept skidding down. The stench of human corpses hit me. I sobbed and screamed and dug. My fingers scratched rock and weed to free myself. I wanted nothing

more than to jump up, to sprint from that place. I could only struggle and scream, flail my arms for Romes' attention.

Looking down at the bodies, I could see there were women—partially bone and flesh—and something left of a man. Their bodies had been stripped and left gray, only covered with sand and driftwood. The rain and sliding mud had revealed their faces back upon the world. Their faces were rotted out, and they had gone dead-meat for a while. I felt the women's skin and their cold limbs for what seemed like hours before the soldier appeared. I was in the hole with them, and there was no way to avoid it.

My father's body after a car crash in Huerfano County. I was eight and the Chevy he worked on left crumpled and battered in an intersection. His limp body.

"Are you okay? Are you all right?" the soldier said, shaking me and yanking me to my feet.

At the funeral, the skin felt hard on my fingers, the limbs turning to cement underneath. When the horse spirit—the skinwalker—comes the body tenses into a hard shell, finally free of time and spirit and religion—all the soft devils inside.

For a while the soldier shook me and tried to get me to talk, as I thrashed about in a daze.

"Where are you!" the soldier said, wiping mud and mucus from my face. "Come out of your head, *manito*. Come out of your head."

Later we argued. "We gotta get em outa here," I said.

"Fuck that shit."

"At least bury 'em," I said. "Can't just leave 'em, man, it ain't right. We gotta at least report it."

"Fuck. You know they dead. Why you want to do that? Why you want get to get us into more trouble? I ain't playin with that shit."

"Please."

"Nobody knows we found 'em."

"Come on."

"You stay with 'em, then, because I'm gonna break out of this shit."

"It ain't right." I begged the soldier. "Please."

"Look, you fuck. They're already buried. And if we report it we'll just have to come back and I'm too fuckin tired and too fuckin old to deal with this mud."

Ten throbbing minutes later the soldier finally helped me bury them. The last dead face was an older man.

"Whoa, that guy is fucked up," the soldier said. The dead man had something wrenched in a bony hand, and he seemed to have been shot pointblank in the chest, only a crushed cave left.

The soldier did most of the work to cover the bodies—*descansos por los muertos*. "They say the dogs eat the people out here," the soldier said as he dug another hole.

I didn't answer. Talk. Breathe.

"And the people don't eat the dogs because they eat the corpses. How fucked up is that shit, uh?"

Another of them, the worst of them was a young girl stripped and in a narrow valley. Her limbs were thin and bound. The mustard from the burgers had made a yellowish clay. Mud had eaten the face and head. The soldier told me the suction pulled her down. I held her as the soldier dug. She couldn't have been more than fifty pounds.

"Bitch must have struggled something awful," the soldier said. "Must have struggled like all hell."

The people there in Macedonia would say that if you lose a woman like this it strips the whole family of a certain honor—a certain spirit.

“Had to get your shit pushed in sometime,” the soldier said as he walked.

The bile spilled from me. I couldn’t control any of it.

Romes admitted to making the tactical mistake. But I wasn’t or hadn’t ever been much of a soldier, and in my head I was thinking that the fastest way to anywhere is a straight line, a mistake.

“Diagonals, goddamn it,” Romes screamed at me through the rain. “I forgot about diagonals—about jagging and moving.”

He explained that he had forgotten the texture of land, contour of the hills and gulleys. This is the point that my heart started to race as my body felt marooned. Romes started to question his own decisions in the hours that followed. He questioned joining the service, and I questioned my marriage as we passed a cropping of trees twice in a circular haze. I questioned the birth of my daughter, convincing my wife not to stop the pregnancy. We were mature enough, I argued. We could do this, I said. It’s not a tragedy, I told her.

We started to run. We ran until I tasted blood in my mouth and felt it eating my throat. We thought of our friends, and Ortega.

“It’s not you. You’re a virgin out here, *manito*,” Romes said. “I’ve been here; I should know better than this. Can’t get fuckin lost.” He pounded at his aching knees like a little boy.

Just after the sun went down, my lungs left me, went bad as we again passed a barbed wire patch of broken down fence for the third time. Fear kept me going, searching.

The rain fell a little harder and Romes decided to head us straight west in a very unscientific move, since we had traveled east to the nearby village. In a small clearing that looked new and unfamiliar, I dropped to my knees with exhaustion and decided to make camp for the night. Darker clouds were moving in overhead.

I remember thinking that you can't hide from these elements when in the field. You can't get comfortable enough to sleep in the mud. You can't roll out a bed or stay down in it. You have to crouch almost in a ball and cover your body with the issued rain tarp. You have to let yourself take the rain—let the nightmares come. You have to sit through it, try and smoke under a tarp to pass the time. It's difficult to keep cigarettes dry or a lighter from flooding. Sleep comes an hour or two at a time without any feeling of rest.

The rain didn't stop but only got thicker—more complex. I couldn't dream or think. Everything I owned, my letters and my cassette tapes and the Walkman I picked up in Germany, the books I kept were soaked through with mud and sweat. I decided to give in to the immense despair and rage I felt at that moment. Perhaps it was fatigue or madness but I just curled into some underbrush and choked on about five hours of tears while the fog rose and filled the horizon like a sunset of bright dark and gray.

During the night I thought of my wife in California and my friends in Mijak, waiting for their food and their share of a large dinner that was still disgusting and soggy in my coat. I watched the dark, starless sky and did not move. To this day I cannot remember feeling more alone or as small as I felt that night. I have had many lonely nights like this

after leaving the service—halfway house after halfway house—but all these others have been a sad imitation of this first.

I thought I saw my daughter's face in the immense darkness and I fell asleep for maybe an hour or less. I couldn't sleep but rather could only listen to the strange and compelling night sounds that somehow told me I wouldn't get home and would never be fine. There were no sounds of human presence anywhere. I only heard what I imagined to be *la llorona's* horrible voice, as if it had followed me from New Mexico. And the rain, always the rain—things no one should ever have to experience. I heard my heart and heard my whole sad life story in Colorado and New Mexico and with my wife in Culver City.

At dawn, I still sat motionless, watching my brother Romes paralyzed with sleep. With that first light, we came around full circle. Perhaps it was the little rest or the thoughts of wanting to see my wife or my nameless daughter, but with the sun on my face we both rose and made our way through the drizzly, foggy morning of Macedonia and made it to a clearing and a small bit of water pretending to be a stream that we remembered passing the day before. We followed the water to a small valley that comforted us and we could see the village and church walls on the horizon. We suddenly realized just how very much off course we had been.

As we wandered into town, the squad was exactly where we had left them. I saw my unit and started to run the last couple of steps. We could see on their faces their night had been cold and tiring. Everybody still ate the burgers despite the mud and ink, never knowing the story; despite the cold, those burgers were all they had. And they were pissed, but they still ate them. My buddies hated me and didn't talk to me for the longest time, but they ate every goddamn muddy bite of those burgers—like Christmas fucking dinner.

Back in my church I knew I would have to explain the lost SAW and the night out, admit to my fuck up.

“Business is business, Ortiz,” Ortega told me in the church. He got right up in my face. “And you don’t own that weapon do you, you little fuck up?”

I shook my head.

“The taxpayers of the United States of America own that weapon.” He got right in my face and lit a cigarillo and chewed on the end. Blew smoke in my face. He took off his cover to stare at me. “And more specifically that weapon is the unit’s weapon. Which means that is my weapon. Do you hear me, you fuck?”

I nodded.

“In fact, I don’t think you own shit, do you, Ortiz? Maybe your pricker, uh? Uh?” He kept flicking at my crotch with his middle finger. Everyone was in the church standing around watching and laughing. He was standing next to Romes and a kid named Watson who was a year or two younger than me and who had just lowered himself into a nearby pew. They both had that ‘not a chance in hell you’re getting out of this’ look on their faces. Ortega turned to Watson and Romes and laughed, flicking his ashes. Romes was laughing.

“You fuckin *pato*,” I said.

Ortega spun around not believing what he had just heard. “What the fuck did you just—What the fuck did he just say to me?” Ortega said and spat. He looked at Watson and then Romes.

“You stupid raping mother fuckin *pato*,” I said. I had no control. I had nothing.

Ortega grinned, kept smiling.

“You fuckin murderin *pato*,” I said.

Ortega grabbed at my shirt and then at my neck, quietly and hard. His thumb pushed deeper into my throat—keeping me from swallowing or breathing. I tried not to whimper.

“You should watch your fuckin mouth,” he said.

I shoved at him, but I was exhausted, covered in mud.

“Hey,” he said. “Romero. Get your ass over here and tell your brother or boyfriend or whatever the fuck he is to you and tell him to learn how things work out here in the field, uh. Tell your boy here how to take orders and take care of his piece.”

Romes came over and put his hand on Ortega’s arm, but Ortega wasn’t having any of it.

“Your boy here is a fuckin pussy,” Ortega said. “Stupid tryin to act smart, uh? I thought you boys from New Mexico were supposed to be tough.” He watched Romes for a moment and smiled and then he slowly let loose of me. That’s when I started to cry.

Outside, I crossed our muddy street with orders to retrieve the squad’s SAW. I went down about a mile into a field of weeds and broken down metal signs that used to mark the roads closed. I stayed in the field on my knees until I heard Romes calling for me—until the rain stopped, and I heard the thunderous cavalcade of Humvees and Bradley’s.

“I’m sorry,” I told Romes. “I’m sorry.”

“What the hell’s the matter with you? I mean, shit, *manito*.” He took a look around. “If you can’t stop crying, you’ll be dead out here.”

“I’ll be OK,” I said, wiping the mud and mucus from my nose. My head felt hollowed out.

“Jesus fuckin Christ,” he said with a mouth full of spit. “You gotta be tougher than that. You got to keep that shit inside of you. Hey, you hear me? I’m talkin about survival,

manito.” He wrenched at my collar and t-shirt and pulled me to my feet. “How many times I got to tell you, nobody wants to hear that shit out here.”

I turned and swung my forearm wildly at his face, bashing at his nose and forehead. He stutter-stepped back. He nodded, he smiled, and then he clocked me perfectly along the jaw line with a hard right. As he disappeared I could feel the cold blood pumping through my face.

Penance

So much was off. My wife and daughter decided not to move out from Culver City as planned, the 7th Infantry was only a memory, and my friend Luis caravanned back and forth to New Mexico so frequently I didn't have the directions to do what I really wanted. It happened to be my birthday, and plans had me seeing a movie and visiting my great aunt, who lived forty miles north in Colorado Springs, closer to the mountains. If I'd gone, she would have proclaimed how handsome I was, and how she was sure I was on the right path again after getting the Army out of my system. She would preach how only devils do what they please and how God makes problems to see what we can stand. After a sea of rum and Cokes, she would reminisce about me now and me ten years ago, when my mother was still around. And yet it was more the new girl's face than it was the lowliness that day, drawing me to make the u-turn through Carter Avenue.

There wasn't any breakdown or crash site; it was just a pregnant girl on the side of the road. And up to that moment, when she dropped in the car, pushed in the lighter and finally lit her Kool, I had no reason to believe anything on the dash to be in working order. First I told her, "Can't be good for a baby."

"Yeah," she said, dark clouds spilling from her nostrils. She was staring down at her belly and then at the violet interior of the '76 Monte Carlo. Cradling her cigarette above her head, she leaned out the window to catch a spring breeze and a reflection of her round face in the Chevy's side mirror.

"I'm sure the father wouldn't like that, huh?" I told her.

"What?"

"The smoking."

"The sonofabitch left me," she claimed, straightening up in the seat. "The fuck."

After the first ten blocks, out past Union Avenue, I still had no clue where we were headed.

"This is Luis' ride," she said.

"I borrowed it," I told her, staring at her porcelain face, trying to remember her name. I found the colors in her Hispana eyes mismatched: one green and the other close to brown, striking.

"He's been working on it," the girl said.

"I'm takin care of it for him," I said. On the bucket seats, our bodies sat close, and we might as well have been holding one another.

"It used to be a real piece of shit, but Luis' uncle turned it around, huh?"

I nodded.

"Where's he been?" the girl asked. Her feet kicked loose of white Keds, pushing them up against the book bag she'd dragged along.

"New Mexico."

"I haven't seen him." She manipulated her half-cigarette. She hesitated for a moment to laugh at my cropped haircut, my excuse for a short sleeved shirt and tie.

"Hey, you work at a bank or something?"

"A bank? What do you mean?" My eyes left the road and then returned to it.

"The tie."

"No, I got a telemarketing job," I told her. "I gotta wear a tie."

"Oh. Looks like you work in a bank someplace," she said. "You sure you're not in a bank someplace?"

"No," I told her.

We drove for a long time until we reached her *Abuelita's* on the east side of town, just behind the old steel mill. The house was a small two-bedroom sandwiched between

a sectional home and the entrance to an alley littered with weeds and rusted machine parts. One dead-looking tree was planted out in front with a primer-colored '87 Ford Tempo parked underneath. By the time we pulled into the driveway, the pregnant girl's flawless hands had stamped out the cigarette onto the bottom of one of her Keds. The tires cried as I stepped on the brakes.

"I thought about chasing the fuck," she explained. She stepped out of the lowered car onto her street. "I thought about it."

I studied the way she lit another cigarette, watching her lips while she spoke.

"He's been gone about three months," the girl explained. "Always talked about Denver, jobs out there and shit, but nothing ever real, you know. My *Abuelita* says he has to marry me. Has to prove our love in front of God."

I couldn't think of anything to say to this. She was on her second cigarette. The light of late afternoon was shifting and a sudden dizziness hit me.

"You got a lot of tats," the pregnant girl said. "They hurt you?"

"Sometimes they ache," I said. I lifted up my forearms as evidence.

"No, when you got 'em," she said. "When they were needlin you."

"I was drinking."

"You can't get a tattoo when you're drunk," the girl interrupted, struggling to tap out another cigarette from the pack hidden in the breast pocket of her maternity dress.

"I was drinking," I told her. "I wasn't drunk."

"Oh, you don't remember the pain though, uh?"

"I guess I don't. I was eighteen."

"Well, how old are you now?" she asked, looking at me closely.

"How old do I look?"

She looked me over, head to toe through the passenger window. She nodded to light her cigarette. "Where did you get'em?"

"It was a mistake," I told her.

"Oh," the girl said.

"I was in the Army," I answered.

She nodded. "I got a small one." She slipped the straps to her jean dress and her bra down over her left shoulder, revealing a small set of initials: BS in a fancy cursive. I caught the slight curve down to her breast before seeing the tattoo. It looked like a prison tattoo, thick and blue. "You see this one? The fuck's initials," the girl said. "I remember every goddamn prick of the needle."

"It looks nice, though," I told her.

"Yeah, but BS. Jesus, can you believe that?" she said.

"His name?" I asked her.

"Duh, of course his name, but you know BS. Like bullshit, right?" She leaned her head deeper and looked over her shoulder, pushing her red-streaked hair out of the way. "Jesus himself can see it. There's nothing I can do to go back," she said. The smoke from her cigarette was now hanging, a low fog in the air between us.

I looked up at the tattoo, and nodded my head with her sadly. I said, "You didn't even say your name yet."

"Angie," she said. A dog was barking down the block, and I heard kids yelling. Her large eyes followed something across the narrow street, and she leaned deeper into the top of my customized Chevy, her head just coming into view. "Don't you think you're old to pick up girls in front of the high school?" she observed in Spanish before translating for me. I didn't say a word. "Too ignorant to speak our language, huh?" she

added. I was just about to pop the column shifter into drive when she slammed my passenger door. "I'm not afraid of you, though," Angie said.

The small house consisted of the *Abuelita's* bedroom and bathroom around a small kitchenette. It didn't hit me right away, but I might have been in this place before with Luis. I didn't notice until that meal, though, but the room was littered with crucifixes and statues. An immense banner hung in the living room, just above the television and measuring three foot across, intimidating as hell. "*Estandarte*," Angie told me. "It used to be my *Abuelito's*." I got a better look at it as Angie and the *Abuelita* conjured sweet smells in the kitchen. Next to it loomed a sculpture—ornate and made of wood—taking up what was left of the living room. It was leaning off of the floor and back into the wall focusing in on me. A deep, red, decorated Jesus with a thin frame and crowned head. His face sorrowful and hurt. A deep crack ran down his face opening wider around his chest, an imperfection in the wood. The sculpture looked as if it might jump off the wall, at any moment, to judge the living and the dead.

The *Abuelita* took a liking to me right away. She was hunched over an aluminum walker and pacing around the kitchen, complaining about what a shabby job Angie had done, cleaning the sink and counter. Her voice rang in Spanish and jumped an octave as she explained the proper way for her plates to be stacked in the cupboards. When Angie introduced me as a friend of Luis', I watched the old woman, gauging for a reaction.

"Name?" she asked. "Quick, boy. What's your name?" She communicated in a senile mix of English and Spanish, mostly Spanish.

"Relles Ortiz," I told her.

"Where are your people from?" she growled.

"San Luis."

"Valley people, uh. You an onion farmer?"

"No," I said.

"You work?" the old woman asked.

"I work," I said.

"Relles, are you Catholic?" she asked, taking care to pronounce the double-l, y sounds.

"Not anymore," I answered.

She laughed. "*?Habla?*" she asked.

I shook my head and looked for Angie. I noticed that the woman's hair was thin and balding, dark flesh exposed through dirty silver strands. "Ahh," she exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "Goddamm kids today!" she flared. "Goddamm kids don't know their own language anymore!"

Angie translated before we sat down for dinner and apologized. As I was seated at the card table the two of them used for meals, Angie explained how everyone invited in was made welcome and given a plate; that was the custom as in New Mexico. While we ate, the old woman exchanged her cigar for a small pipe, and the room filled with a pungent, cherry tobacco smell.

"*Disgraciado*," the old woman said.

"Not this one, *Abuelita*. He saved me," Angie said serving me a plate. "I would have had to walk home."

"Women should be with the fathers of their babies," the *Abuelita* argued with no one in particular over large plates of fried potatoes and red chili. The tortillas were fresh and steamed into our faces.

"People had religion," the old woman continued. "But today," she said, shaking her head, "they have no God."

"My *Abuelita's* husband used to be religious," Angie apologized. "She thinks we all have to be fanatics."

"It's in you," the *Abuelita* interrupted. She was still huffing on the pipe.

"What does she mean? In you?" I asked.

"My *Abuelito* used to be a *Penitente*," Angie explained.

"A what?" my mouth was filled with tortilla. I hadn't eaten anything remotely home cooked in over six months.

"Eh?" the old woman jumped, a slight spasm.

"He asked you what is a *Penitente*, *Abuelita*?" Angie said, louder.

"Good men," the *Abuelita* said. "That's what they were."

I gave Angie a perplexed look. I didn't stop eating, though.

"You like the food, eh?" The old woman pointed at my plate.

"Very good," I said, taking another large mouthful of mashed beans and red chili.

"They were an order of men in New Mexico. Men who worked in the mines there," she explained. "They'd get together during *Lenten*—"

"During what?"

"Jesus," she said. "They got together during Easter-time and would perform ceremonies."

"What kind of ceremonies?" I asked.

"Penance," the old woman said. She hadn't touched a thing on her plate. She just sat and attended to her pipe.

"Nobody really knows," Angie continued. "They would stay out on the llano for weeks. Read scripture and give each other penance."

"I don't get it," I said.

"They'd hurt each other," Angie said.

"Penance," the old woman repeated.

"They say that they would make each other suffer, you know, for their sins or faith or whatever." She shrugged. "I guess you gotta believe in that shit. Be Catholic," she said, smiling at me.

"Jesus," I said.

"Yes," the old woman added in English.

"Crazy," Angie observed, making slow circles around her ear with a fork. "That's where the crucifix came from. In the living room. They had'em up in the *moradas*."

"Good men," the old woman said.

"Crazy," Angie repeated. "That's why I'm not Catholic anymore."

"They never left me when I was pregnant," the old woman said.

Angie didn't say another word and was quiet until I helped her with the dishes. She apologized again for her *Abuelita*. "She just wants me to leave," Angie told me. "She wants me to go after Benito. You know how it is." She explained how Benito had become close to the old woman before he left. Angie explained how the old woman liked Benito at first because he threw out the garbage, fixed up her Tempo. The *Abuelita* even went so far as to say it was good to have a man around the house.

"What's keeping you from leaving?" I asked her.

"What's there to know, he's a fuck," she answered. After further probing and a few more cigarettes, I learned that the fuck had been in and out of the Youth Offender System in Colorado City since the age of sixteen. That road began with a few minor offenses ranging from siphoning gasoline, to selling his mother's jewelry. Later he stole some parts for a few customizations, which is where Luis probably met him. Benito had

passed from that life, though, after he met Angie. Things were working until one day in January when his brother Lloyd bought a truck, and Benito decided to make the move. Angie tried to stop him, but Benito was drinking beer and took a baseball bat to her. Benito didn't leave a letter or a phone message. He decided it would be best just to leave after the beating. "It didn't hurt that much, but no fuck of a man is going to do that to me, father or no father," Angie declared, shaking her head. "He never really had a problem because of leaving the baby, you know."

The walls leading down to her bedroom were wood paneling, and the stacked mattresses that made up her bed rested on a concrete floor. One simple dresser appeared in the windowless, dank room. I found a seat in a distressed-looking chair.

Angie sat on the bed and lit a cigarette. "Talk to me, I'm bored," she said. "Tell me about the Army."

"The Army," I said. "The Army's boring."

"Boring?"

"Hiking and waiting for leave that never comes. Guys talk about the same meaningless shit, over and over again."

"Really. Nothing good, huh?" Angie asked.

"How can you live down here?" I asked, staring up at the single exposed bulb that was the basement's only light.

"You can get used to all kinds of things," Angie said. "You travel much, like in the commercials?"

"I've been overseas a couple of times."

"I haven't been out of Colorado," Angie said. "Well my mother went to Hawaii once to meet my father at a naval base but that was about it. I was like five or six, I think. Very little and don't remember nothing. I think I was in Alabama once too. I've seen pictures. Where were you?"

"Macedonia," I said and then hesitated. "I slept in the mud there."

"In the mud?"

"I did everything in the mud. I was there in this one village for months this one time, and it rained every damn day."

"And you slept in mud?"

"Sometimes in trucks and in barracks, but most of the time during foot patrols we slept in mud."

"Sick."

"Learn to function in the mud. Eat and shit in the mud. Learn to stomach all kinds of awful things."

"What things?" she asked.

"Little things. Like sleeping in a squat. We had sleeping bags. But you can't do that because the bag fills with water too fast. You get more sleep if you sit up in your poncho up against your pack or a tree. Got to get used to it. Only thing you can do."

"Sounds pretty sick."

"It's not as sick as you'd think."

"Still sounds sick."

"You can get used to all kinds of things," I said, smiling, following the cracks in the unfinished ceiling. "You got more family here in Colorado?"

"What?"

"Family."

"I got a *Abuelita* upstairs."

"Well, yeah," I said.

"I got my father in Colorado Springs." She funneled her socks down to her ankles.

"You see him?" I said.

She looked straight at me. "What the hell do I want to see him for —"

"Sorry," I said.

"What about you?" Angie asked.

"I got a daughter."

"Daughter, huh."

"She's five," I said. "She lives in California."

"Where was your daughter when you were out there?" Angie said.

"What do you mean?"

"When you were out in Macedonia or wherever? Where was she then?"

"With her mom," I said.

"Why aren't you out there?"

"In California?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know," I said. "I got stationed here in Fort Carson and just never went back."

"What's her name?"

"Loretta."

"Your daughter?"

"No. My daughter's name is Belen," I said. "Her mom's name is Loretta."

"What's your daughter's name again?"

It had been a while since I'd mouthed my daughter's name, and I must have looked sad for a minute. Suddenly Angie was leaning towards me, touching me with her perfect hands and kissing the side of my face. Then our lips touched, and my stomach moved. She swept over my neck and shoulder to pull off my tie and shirt. The dress she was wearing came off over her head. I quickly learned her contours, her legs and thighs. I followed birthmarks and pock scars with my bitten fingernails. I followed them, mutely tasting the memory of my wife. The marks turned into flower tattoos down to the small of her back, and in my head I connected them, filling in the blanks down to her waist and thighs. She lifted a bit to help me maneuver under her. Our bellies were somewhat mismatched, groin to groin. I wondered out loud if this was safe, and she giggled. "Jesus, Relles," she said. "I'm pregnant, not dead."

Much later that night, Angie prayed with the Rosary beads hanging on her bed post. I thought she was asleep, yet she pulled herself out of bed, in the small, sleepless hours around two or three in the morning. Naked, she kneeled. Her hands clasped tightly, and I thought I heard her whispering. It was too dark for me to tell for sure. I pretended to be asleep.

Over crumpled sheets the next morning, Angie was sitting Indian-style on the bed, busy tracing the small tattoos on my forearms and the Navajo tribal patterns that made up the purple sleeves. "I feel comfortable with you, Relles," she said in an amorous murmur, biting her lower lip. "Can I show you something?"

"Sure."

"You won't freak?" she asked, hunching forward, elbows between her legs.

"That depends, I guess," I said. "On what you show me, I mean."

She pulled the comforter from her bed and pulled the yellow sunflower print around her large belly and thin frame, exposing her small breasts for a long minute. I waited while she moved to the dresser catty-corner from the bed. The antiqued top was full of knick-knacks and picture frames with unfamiliar faces. A large wooden box sat covered with a lace doily, neatly to one edge of the dresser. She moved a black and white picture of her *Abuelita* and *Abuelito* on their wedding day to get to the large case.

She dropped the box on my lap, the weight heavy and awkward, taking me by surprise. I sat confused as I flipped the metal binding that held it shut to find the shiny contents. In the box rested a large weapon, a nickel-plated revolver. Inside the case was a plush red and looked specially made for the piece, fourteen rounds points-up in the box. The gun was a large caliber with a black ergonomic-styled grip.

"It was my father's," she said. "He used to be a Sheriff's Deputy in Huerfano County. *Abuelita* didn't want me to have it. She hates these things, but my mom gave it to me after the fuck came at me."

I had never held a handgun with the weight of this one, like getting hold of a train rail. I read the words 647 Trakker engraved into the short squared barrel.

"Can you fire it?" I asked.

"Hell yeah. I'm registered." She smiled, pushing aside the wild, red mass that was her hair.

"It's huge."

"Well, it's a lot smaller than like in the movies, but it's just as effective. The fuck and his brothers won't mess with me again, you know. As long as I have this."

"Pretty hard," I said giving the piece back to her.

"Yeah," she answered.

As the sun began to fill the room I didn't have a clue what I was doing. With the gun between us I held her, and we lay there reliant on one another's bodies.

That afternoon we drove out to a range out on Northern Avenue down a street that looked tired and useless. The club issued us earplugs and two targets for practice, the kind with a bull's-eye attached to a man's head. She let me fire first. The six-shot gun was even heavier than I remembered, and my hands were sweating. I fired three shots and the gun recoiled violently. For a moment I thought it might come back and thump my face. The shot rang down the long alley; my ears popped and my knees buckled.

"No no no. Don't you know nothing," she said, reloading the spent cartridges. "Like this," she said, taking the large weapon with me. She tied her red hair back with a clip and then widened my legs with her hand. "Balance," she added, standing close to me. She held her baby against me and helped me to aim and to squeeze the trigger without shaking the weapon. With round after round I leaned in closer to her. She fired into the target's head, a tight grouping, not between the eyes but just close enough. "How to kill your man," she shouted, the barrel smoking. "Didn't they teach you nothing in the Army?"

Afterwards we made love back in her basement, and she asked me to hold her. I complied as we waited for sleep to overtake us. By this time her perfume left me addicted, and as I lay there, I wondered about our future, about our time together and about the fuck.

It was at that moment I decided to confess my sins. She just sat and watched me talk. I started with going AWOL from Fort Carson and the 7th Infantry, and then I told her about living in a halfway house after a false attempt to kill myself. I admitted to her that I had not sent one dollar to my daughter, and that the only thing I knew about the little girl

was her name. I confessed everything to her dark complexion, feeling vulnerable and child-like.

“Luis told me you tried to kill yourself, but I didn’t believe it,” Angie told me. “Did you really?”

“I guess I did,” I told her.

“When?” she asked.

“This time, about a year ago. Just before I got out of the service.”

“How did you do it? With a gun or what?” she asked, almost smiling.

I didn’t answer, and I didn’t know what to say for a long time while she kept on about it.

With Angie lying next to me like a stranger, I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted tomorrow to bring, and sometime after the strangeness of that day, I had a vision in my sleep. In the dream, I’m at the end of a slow procession of faceless men out on a prairie heading towards Angie’s house, and I am walking away from my wife and daughter. They don’t seem to recognize me, and at one point in the dream my knees are in the dirt and weeds, and this figure of death, *La Muerte*, was dressed as a woman, holding Angie’s gun, her face wooden and familiar; she is riding through the procession in a small cart getting closer and closer to me through the collection of men. My flesh is falling from bone, and my arms are weak.

No matter how good things may seem, it’s only a matter of time before they get fucked up. I was thinking this as I watched Benito pull in front of the *Abuelita’s* house in a large pick-up. The fuck arrived Sunday just before breakfast. Angie was still asleep, and

I was upstairs in the kitchenette wearing a pair of Angie's sweatpants. I was just about to make coffee when the fuck pounded at the door.

"Open the door, Angelita!" the fuck screamed. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!" he repeated.

The *Abuelita* was standing in the living room, and I must have alarmed her. I touched her arm, and she jerked away from me. Her eyes met mine. "*¡Mira!*" she squealed, staring out the front window; she knew I wouldn't understand more. Then that *Penitente's* wife looked flushed, morning smiles all but gone. "Goddamn boys are no good for anything," she said, frozen.

The face out the window didn't look anything like I'd expected, his hair a dark mane, long and dirty, framing his gray complexioned face. He was young and red-eyed. At first I thought the acne scarred face belonged to Luis or my brother, and I almost smiled. This man's frame was tall and built. Broad shoulders, large and round. He was not wearing a shirt, just a simple pair of faded jeans. I couldn't quite make out from the door, but he seemed large and menacing, the kind of kid I might have grown up with. His dark face was far from the mountains and the green of the ski resorts and campgrounds just outside of this rangeland.

Maybe he didn't know me by name, but he knew what was happening in this old house, and in that small basement. He glared through the glass, daring me to open the door with his brown eyes.

"And what kind of fuck are you?" the fuck yelled through the dirty glass.

"I'm a friend of Angie's," I replied.

"Is that right?" he said. "You're a thief!"

"A friend," I repeated, trying to stay strong. Now my voice must have cracked, or I must have stuttered because he read my fear. This made him grin even wider.

“Come on, thief!” he snarled. “Come on, thief! Open the goddamn door!”

“Okay,” I answered. “Jesus Christ.” I pulled the chain from the door and put my bare feet out onto the porch. The blood ran faster through my head.

The fuck looked over his shoulder and smiled out over the lawn right into the back seat of his extended cab pickup. I smelled reefer on his dark skin. I followed his eyes. I saw four glaring characters—his brothers or something. Each one looked as young and tired as the fuck. I regretted not staying behind the *Abuelita*.

The fuck moved forward, and I flinched hard. My knees buckled and I stutter-stepped backwards. He was on me quick, shoving me back into the screen door with a jolt. Next thing I know the flat portion of his hand hit me right between the eyes. His elbow hit to my head before I could blink or prepare for his long reach, and then his boot to my leg brought me down to one knee, and then down to the porch. As I lay on the ground, I kicked out at him in a pathetic couple of moves. I didn’t fight back at all, and I swear to God the fuck giggled. He dragged me further by the arm into the open space of the concrete porch. And then the rest of his brothers were around me in a circle. They clawed at me, kicking at me in fragmented movements at my back.

One of them kicked me in the head with the force of a cinder block, and I lost my bearings. One had weight to his punch like a roll of quarters. One got in a shot to my crotch before I grabbed onto his pant leg. I felt warmth on the top of my head, as if I had been drowned in water. The taste of blood ran through my lips, and the front yard flickered in my eyes. The men stopped and stood around me laughing and spitting in awe of their work. This lasted until Angie stood in the doorway screaming for the fuck and the fuck’s brothers to stop. She also screamed something in Spanish that I didn’t have the ear for. And for some reason I looked for the box in her hand, the thought ricocheting in my head. I thought it might be in her hand or at least close by, but nothing.

She begged them to stop. She did beg them to back away from me, and she held me close to her like a child. I think she held the gash on the top of my head, which was numb by this time.

She moved back into the house. She disappeared around the *Abuelita* who was out on the porch holding the wall for balance. The old woman was screaming. “*Disgraciados!*” My head was in a vacuum. She might have even spit at them. She looked Benito in the face and screamed. The fuck almost bowed his head while the others laughed and mocked, which exaggerated the *Abuelita*’s screams. Some neighbors were outside by this time and were outside for the show. Some dogs down the block were barking. I was certain Angie was going for the piece. I hoped with all I had that she was downstairs, loading the weapon.

It took me a while to grasp what happened next. I still feel hollow inside to think of it and to picture the way Angie looked that morning when she returned to the porch. I made a move from the ground, holding the wound on my head to spot what Angie had in her hand. I saw a backpack, the same pack she’d held on the day we met. The top of the bag stuffed with clothes. Time passed and no one on the porch seemed to move. The faces of the men flickered away, as I must have lost consciousness and then came back. What I do remember, though, was the *Abuelita* hugging Angie, walking her out to the truck.

I couldn’t see the whole goodbye because the blood and snot had smeared on my face and started to harden in the late morning sun. I sat on the ground like a fool, and didn’t dare move. I thought I might break. I do remember Benito leaning on the horn for Angie to come as she hugged her *Abuelita*. She didn’t even give me a look.

I wanted to go downstairs and get the piece, shoot myself right there on the porch. I didn’t care if I woke up in a hospital or in hell or anywhere. Time passed again

and nothing moved. I heard myself breathing through the sound of the Chevy Dually firing up, coughing and shifting into gear. And then something miraculous happened: a vision appeared to me through my semi-conscious state and kneeled down beside me.

The old woman helped me lean into the stucco wall to catch my balance, holding my arm until I could stand. "It's funny," the *Penitente's* wife said, "how God wants you," and the rest stands as something that has taken me years to translate, "and then He don't."

It was at that moment I saw the world through the eyes of a girl the morning after. I saw my world and the next months not working out for me, nowhere near my daughter and wife. A little while later, I got myself together and got into the primer-colored lowrider and drove. I could do whatever I wanted to, whenever I wanted to.

Laundromat Story

The night in Huerfano County left me distracted from heading my Monte Carlo out to California, and my shirt sopped wet against my skin because the damned driver-side window wouldn't roll up. I was starting to suppose that maybe that old Chevy didn't have one last trip left in her after all.

An all night Laundromat just behind the golden arches of a McDonald's and a Sinclair station stood as the only life for miles along I-25. At first I thought the lights were a sad hallucination, maybe some kind of a dream. And they probably were, but somehow I just knew that's where I'd be going.

So I pulled into the parking lot on 13" rims after a heavy and wet snowfall; it happened to be the day before Thanksgiving—even though it felt more like Halloween—and the strange sky had just opened up with a small sickle cell of a moon.

For the most part, the story is that I had been out haunting parked cars and neighborhoods looking for the men that had attacked me, had given me the black eye and bashed my forehead. I must have been sick to hang around here.

The two kids and I had an unspoken camaraderie before I had even gone into the place, before I started my laundry or before I even met their mother. The walls of glass that made up the place were miserable and fogged up, and I could only see the two kids and their round faces. At first I was nervous to go in, to get out of the cold, but the kids signaled to me with fingerprints and nose prints on the cold glass. Inside, I wanted to acknowledge them right away. They both had dark hair and were dressed shabbily—their cheeks greasy with fried chicken, both screaming and squirming around

with their dirty faces and hands. After driving all night, I just wanted to be sacked out and drinking.

Inside, the place smelled of floor cleaner and was burning my nostrils. The sound of washers churning reflected from the walls and drowned out my good senses for the better part of a minute. My face strained to adjust to the fluorescent lighting, it all seemed to be signaling to me: 30lb washers/ Save Soap/ Save Quarters/ Save Your Life. That's when I got a better look at the two kids, the mucus on the little girl's face and the boy's missing hightop. It was just after 12 AM when I noticed the two little kids and their bucket of chicken belonged to the dark-skinned Mexican woman on the pay phone. They had gone on to follow me around the place as if they knew me, or wanted to know me. This is something I always see around here, people waiting around for I don't know what.

I watched the low-rider junky girl's kids all over that long stretch of white machines, dirtying their hands and the boy's white T-shirt. For a while they were just running after one another and later they took turns locking each other in a dryer, holding the door shut on one another, until one or the other would freak out and scream.

First, I stretched out my two pairs of jeans and the t-shirt I was wearing on one of the washers and spread out on top to sleep, not caring if I slept or if I died. I pulled out a cigarette and lit it casually. Suddenly I was aware my finger tips were yellow from smoking too much. That's when the dirty looks came. I could feel them on my face like a constant pressure. I had my feet up and my shoes off, and I held a can of Bud Light to my bruised forehead.

Out towards the back of the Laundromat, the Mexican woman was on the pay phone and at first appeared composed. It was all pretty familiar.

“*Mi hermano,*” the woman said. “*?Donde esta Ronaldo?*” Her voice sounded tired and sick of it all. Most of what she said was in Spanish, which I regretted, and it’s taken me a while to really translate it all out in my head. “Yah. I’m with the kids. I’ve got ‘em in the laundry with me. Yah, well, what else would I do with them, *cabróna?*” She shook her head and her long straight hair, half of a Camel tucked neatly behind her ear. She was a big Mexican woman of the *llano*, maybe in her forties wearing tight, red jeans, and the tightest belly shirt I had ever seen slit down her large front exposing a tremendous bosom. “No, I told you, I don’t have a ride.” She was leaning against the wall and nursing a longneck bottle of RC cola. “Can’t stay here all night,” she repeated over and over again. “Can’t stay here all night.”

Then she hung up the phone and looked around—straightened up her hair. Every once in a while her voice rose an octave to say no to the kids or order them around, making everyone in the place jump to attention. She wasn’t afraid of anything. I remember thinking she was the one that might get me somewhere.

Later I had a greasy bag of burgers and fries from the McDonald’s that reminded me of the rain in Macedonia—the lonesomeness of everything you own being wet through and heavy. They looked so sad, the kids, I mean, like a couple of saints, so I couldn’t help but lean way over and give them my order of fries, couldn’t help dropping the bag in between them.

When the boy got the nerve to get closer to me, I could see his dark skin, his sloppy crew cut with an awful rat's tail down his back. He had a mouth full of yellow teeth and couldn't stop smiling stupidly as he threw pennies, targeting the dryer doors and his sister's face. The boy was acting dumb, that much I'd come to expect.

The kids finally sat and ate after several loud screams of direction from their mother. But the boy had a piece of chicken in his mouth most of the time and was holding a toy motorcycle. He was sitting on the concrete floor eating and didn't touch any of my fries—a sure sign that he didn't trust me. Later, he climbed up in one of the dryers, shutting the door behind. This silent kid just smiled and stared at me from behind the closed glass—no way in or out. I couldn't help seeing how this idiot kid was like me, without a clue of how he would grow up a freak.

A few less than conscious moments and memories later this little girl, Cinnamon shook me into sitting up and for a moment I couldn't quite tell what was memory and what was real. I was still on the washers trying to sleep. I thought I would never wake from this nap and for a moment she was my daughter Belle out in Culver City and everything was ok. For the briefest of moments my wife hadn't left me and hadn't met anyone else—it hadn't all gone wrong in Cali.

And what happened next was like a silent movie, like static in my head. She wouldn't leave me alone. The little girl stared through dark green eyes giving me a long quiet look all serious and thoughtful. She smiled and wiped her filthy hands along the front of her sunflower-printed dress. She handed me one of the pennies that her brother had fired towards her head. Payment for the fries, I imagined. I smiled back and took the

greasy penny from her little flawless hands in a pretty deaf and dumb style. She smiled widely and then yawned before running clear of me. She was almost my daughter.

And this next part isn't too clear in my head. But later on I think one of the Anglo women—the one who looked like someone's *Abuelita* and who had no teeth in her mouth—asked me how much time the dryers gave you per quarter. I was putting on a newly dried t-shirt over my bleeding head, and she had a fit when I told her nine minutes even though I had no idea. She was just washing her rugs. I think she surprised herself that she talked to me.

Another white lady with sunglasses seemed to be staring right at me, everything a reaction to me. I guess I should be used to it. Same shit had happened to me since the Army. I look like I can do things, ugly looking sleeves of tattoos down my arms and with a shaved head and all that. Sometimes I was prone to forgetting. There was somebody always singling me out because of how I looked or how I didn't look. Whether it was some other fuck giving me shit in a bar or some other place in the rangelands of New Mexico, it was always the same. I guess I should always remember but times like these I am prone to forgetting, to dozing off in the middle of things. I forget how things really work.

Anyway, I did forget as I was listening to this lady. I didn't hear right away when she told me not to smoke and as she pointed at the big picture of a cigarette with a red line through it. When she told me to think of other people, I never got the chance to tell her, "Why me? Why single me out?" I just got up and left to the other side of the place near the pay phone.

And another lady at the other end of the long, rectangular building wasn't much better. She was wearing black stretch pants that ran down her skinny legs into these snake-skinned cowboy boots. She had a little purse that was just big enough for her cigarettes and Bic and her car keys. She went on and on to another Anglo woman wearing a cow-skinned vest. I knew what they thought.

"You're so unlucky. You don't belong here."

Maybe it was all what my brother Romes called amphetamines, the gold paint sprayed into a sock or the beer and the rush of malaise it all eases, but I couldn't sleep and I was too tired and too overcome to respond to any of this. I couldn't say one word. My mind was like a light bulb breaking. I could barely fight the sensation of showing them just how sick I really was. These people couldn't do anything for me.

"Young man, Young man. I asked you if you were from Fort Carson. Are you from Fort Carson, young man?" she asked me, or someone just like her asked me. I was wearing a 7th Infantry "Mountain Post" t-shirt. I had forgotten I had that left. "Are you a soldier, young man? Are you from Fort Carson?"

"Yes ma'am," I answered.

"You don't look like one."

"No ma'am," I said. "No ma'am."

And then the woman Dona appeared in front of me. "I was thinkin you could help me with some money," she said to me. "Husband put me out." She balanced herself on her platform shoes, between the washers and the dryers.

I didn't know what to say. I had no more money—everything had already gone into the machines. I'd drunk some too, and was relying on a half tank of gas and a

crumpled twenty dollar bill to make it out to California, to Culver City. I hated to think about my own story, much less anyone else's.

There was a long pause and for a minute I didn't think there would be anything else other than those few words between us. I nodded and said, "She's cute." The little girl at this point was sucking on her dirty little fingers and the remains of some pink nail polish. "What's her name?"

"Cinnamon."

"What?" I asked. I almost laughed at the little girl, sitting Indian style with her corn rows to the back. She was guzzling an RC bottle of her own. Cinnamon's face was pale, and she seemed happy to be in the wonderland that was the Laundromat.

"Cinnamon."

"Why would you name her that? I mean that sounds like a porn star name." A long awkward silence passed as she folded her clothes and started in on a large pile of socks.

"You gotta admit that's a crazy name for a little girl."

"Well, I like it and don't give a fuck what you say about it." She was wiping her daughter's face with spit and a napkin she had pulled from an oversized bag. "Don't know me. Can't talk to me like that."

"I'm sorry, but what is your name again?"

"Again? Never asked me to begin with."

"I'm sorry but I didn't mean to be like that." I was trying to be charming. "Hey, maybe I can give you a ride and make up for things. What is your name, ma'am?"

"Ma'am," she repeated and laughed. "Dona." Her back was to me now and she was folding more clothes, the children's clothes.

"I didn't mean to insult you. I have a car outside."

She looked out toward the parking lot, and then she gave me a long dirty look. "Got my brother comin." She was suddenly guarded and sizing me up. She said, "Look high, kid. Eyes are all bloodshot and shit."

I was a little embarrassed and aware I had nothing. "What's the boy's name?"

"His name is Tenoch."

It took me a second to compute this and I couldn't help the following: "Man, you got some weird ass names for your kids."

"It's Mayan!"

"Mayan?"

"I wanted to name him something Indian."

"It's nice," I said.

She waited.

It had been a while since I mouthed the words, since I had to explain who I was to anybody. "Relles."

"What kind of name is Relles?" She looked me straight in the eyes. "See? I could make fun or say something stupid but it's your name and I ain't going to."

"Sorry."

"Don't care what you say, do you? Can't be like that to people. No one teach you respect? You don't know me from anyone and you want me to get into a car with you when you're obviously not right in the head." She was shaking her head. "Prob'ly the reason why you all swole up." And that's when she laughed at me. A little while later she said, "Where did you get your name is what you should be askin'."

"It was my father's," I said.

She nodded and repeated proudly, "Tenoch is Mayan." The boy suddenly ran up to her as if to confirm his existence. "Father was a *Charo*. Used to be, anyway. And I named the kid somethin' Indian. I ain't fuckin stupid. It's Indian."

"What's a *Charo*?"

"Mexican cowboy. Used to ride and keep horses. They died though. Couldn't take care of 'em no more." She paused mutely; as if she'd told me too much. She held the boy tightly against her leg. "Wanted me to give the kid a Mexican name, you know, like he wanted but I wanted to give him an Indian name. Just made sense to give him an Indian name."

I nodded.

"Yeah," she said laughing and looking sad. She scooped up her squirming son and held him and sort of bounced with him making him much younger than he probably was. "Little shit looks just like his old man." She gave me a half-smile, and I could see closely the time she had taken with her hair and cheap-looking make-up. I wanted to love this pretty bird, thinking of the life she had led in this country and in Mexico with her husband. I wanted to know everywhere she had been and everything she had been into. Her cleavage was dark and impossible for me to take my eyes off. "And he used to ride down in Telmpua sometimes. That's where we used to live. They have rodeos for weeks on end down there. It's like religion. He wished he could be down there." She gave me a little silent sigh. "Probly where he is now."

I'd never heard of the place, but I said, "I hear it's beautiful."

"Better than this fuckin place. You know they have some fuckin nice beaches down there. At least used to. The goddammed board of tourism closed and turned everything into resorts. Nothing's the same."

"Colorado isn't so bad. I mean, is it?"

"Look around this bitch and tell me that." She just about hung her head as if she had just come to the horrible realization herself. "Mexico has life. Everything is alive down there. Not like here. Everything seems dead. That's what my husband said. Only work is in the onion fields up in Las Animas. That's the only work around here. That's why he came here."

"Well that's because it's winter. The state's green in the summer, closer to the mountains, I mean. Away from the plains and all the shit out here. You should wait around for summer."

"Left me, I'll be here for more than summer," she admitted.

"I've never been to Mexico," I said. I put the twenty dollar bill I kept in my sock into her hands. She smiled and I thought she was going to cry. "Hey, you got anything to smoke," she asked tenderly before tucking her long black hair behind both ears.

"I got some Winstons," I said.

"No, smoke. You know, smoke." She pinched her fingers together as if she were taking a small, invisible toke.

"Got some stuff out in my car," I said. "But it's real dog shit. I got it in Albuquerque. Everybody tells me it's dog shit."

"I don't care," she said. "I don't care. I don't care."

And the men that had attacked me, I forgot about the men that attacked me. I never saw them coming either. I was in a bar called the Whitehorse and I couldn't find that shitty place again if I tried, but I do remember trying to make time with an eighteen year old Christian girl. She was wearing a scarf around her neck printed with small

hearts on it, I can remember that much. My friend Romes and his pills were long gone and by this point I felt like a stone skipped along the water, no end but to sink.

This girl had been singing along to the jukebox for what seemed like an eternity, which is how she caught my attention, saved me, really. She wanted nothing to do with me and she obviously felt no pain because she was fucking up the easiest of lines.

“Bottle up and explode, over and over! Bottle up and explode!” That was what she was singing but I don’t know what the real words were. When she did finally land up talking to me, though, which was more about boredom than attraction, she couldn’t stop talking about her father and how he was a preacher and how she prayed to Jesus every night after drinking. She said her father—just before becoming dead-meat—told her the Devil makes us do horrible things, how he gets into our actions and our dreams. It was all pretty profound.

While she was in a booth across from me, she told me her name but I couldn’t pronounce it as hard as I tried. And then I found out that both her father and mother were dead-meat like mine, that she didn’t have a place to go either. And that’s when she asked me if I believed in God. She told me how she used to think that only by believing in him would we be saved. That’s why she had a crucifix tattooed on her chest. I had no idea what she was saying because I’m not religious, but she had the deepest, most amazing green eyes like my wife had. There was a small blemish on her face where her boyfriend had taken a cigarette to her about a month earlier and she kept checking it in the mirror behind the bar. I could make that out pretty clear.

First she told me, “Buy me a drink. They won’t sell me any more.” And I did once, and then again and then a third time. And then after the sea of Rum and Cokes, she preached to me, “God told Job that the world has to be nasty sometimes. Can’t be perfect everywhere you know? It just can’t be.” She was drunker than me, drunker than

anyone in the place. She said, "I mean that alone leads me to think that there probably has to be more going on, going on behind the scenes, you know? You know?"

"God's a fuckin prick," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. That's my point. That's exactly the point, you know."

But I didn't know, and this continued out into the parking lot until just before she was about to get into my Chevy and show me more of that tattoo on her chest—until this fuck she had been dating and his crew rolled up on us in a lame ass El Camino. And this is the part of that night I wish I could say wasn't clear, that I can say I proved my manhood in some way. That I proved anything about myself or who I was becoming. But I can't say that.

But the story is really about the fat woman Dona. Later that night, I was out in my car with the woman, smoking my dog shit from New Mexico and trying to put my hand down the front of her pants. I was trying to get her to come to the Whitehorse with me, drive all over town—she wasn't having any part of it. Most of the time when I smoke my friend's shit from a pipe—something I had picked up from Romes—lucid visions of my wife come to me, happiness and sadness come in quick succession. The past comes as if I am living it again, everything around me an endless stream of reminders. I can almost feel everything like a medium feels a ghost. And I know it's no excuse. I know that much. But sometimes I want to see our house out on Union Avenue, and I want to see her pregnant with our daughter. I want to feel her lips and thighs, even if it's not real.

And then someone in Dexter Gordon's band screamed through my tape deck "*!Soy Califas!*" and grabbed Dona's attention. "The fuck's this?" the fat Mexican woman asked. "Kind of music is this? I ain't never heard this before."

"Dexter Gordon," I said.

"It's pretty." The dark smoke spilled from her nose in uncontrolled bursts. She was coughing and gagging on the pipe but she never lost composure. I think that's what I appreciated about Dona the most that night. "Pretty weird." She laughed. "Ain't never heard shit like this." She made a look like she was smelling cheese.

"He left the United States."

"Who?"

"Dexter Gordon. The guy playing."

"Oh," she said.

"Had to get out. Couldn't make sense of it here anymore," I told her from what I had read off of album covers. "Our man in Paris," I said. "That's the name of the album."

"Sounds like my husband," she said and laughed.

I smoked the last of my dog shit out of a pipe, most of it pretty well burned up. Her hair smelled like peaches and her skin was becoming darker and lovelier.

She looted around her purse and finally dumped out the contents out next to me. She showed me a picture of her husband Javier. He was in full *Charolatra* garb out on a *llano* somewhere on a damned gorgeous horse—maybe one of the dead ones. The horse looked pale gray and spotted—straight out of a Clint Eastwood movie—and the saddle appeared ornate, the leather a bright red. His hat was in his hand over his head. His face looked bearded and he had this big smirk on his face.

"Lone Ranger," I said, serious as hell. Dona laughed and made me smile. Her large breasts shook and for the first time she moved in closer to me. We were just about holding each other. We both hummed along to the tape deck. Every once in a while she would lean over her shoulder to inspect the Laundromat, and I swear I couldn't figure why.

Things weren't so bad out in my car with this woman. I remember thinking that if someone were to see us in this Monte Carlo, if someone were walking by they would think we were unlucky, that I wasn't born into all of this.

And then later on I said, "What answers you get, Dona?"

"Answers?"

"From him leavin you? From Javier leavin?"

"Ain't got no answers. He just left. Don't be gettin too stupid with your thinking, *manito*. He just left. Ain't no more than that."

"So why do you think he left?"

"Don't know."

"You can't think of even a little thing?"

"Cuz I'm a fat piece of shit, I guess."

"Really? That's what you think." For a while I left the car running so she wasn't so cold. The window I could roll up started to fog over and gave us quite a bit of privacy. I wanted to kiss her and tell her to come with me, but I had no idea how to take care of myself, much less her. "Do you remember too much, you think?" I asked.

"The fuck you sayin?" she said.

"I'm just askin if you remember him."

"You writin' my goddammed life story or somethin'? You writin' this all down?"

"I'm just askin. Don't get mad. I just mean everybody remembers what happen's to em, right. I mean in their life."

She gave me a look, like it was the first time she looked at anything.

"Come on, everybody is supposed to remember the bad things that happens, right." I am not sure if I was really saying all this, but if I was, I think I was trying to

convince her of something—trying to find reasons for all of this, being out of the 7th Infantry and separated from my family. I remember that much but she knew what I was and she knew what she was. I don't know how she knew, but she knew. We couldn't help it.

"Never heard that," she said. "Shouldn't worry about everybody anyway. Should worry about you."

I couldn't make sense, make her understand.

"Don't see it like that. Whatever you talkin about," she said. "Just don't think about that. Don't ever think about that." She was laughing. "You don't make no sense, kid. No. No. None."

"I mean, look how I live. Look what I let happen," I admitted to her.

She had a look in her eye and no emotion on her face. She was higher than high, laughing and sort of crying. She didn't care what I said or did, and then, before I tried my damndest to kiss her, she said, "Sometimes we choose shit and it don't just happen to us, *manito*. I hate to tell you." The scars up her forearms branched quietly like small limbs of a tree. I never got the chance to ask her about them because I was the first one to fall asleep. My head went down and the static in my inner ear failed. The radio drowned out as my memory turned black and finally gave in to all the chemicals running through my body.

The sky that next morning was a brilliant light blue and gray, and warm sunlight filled the car like a policeman's flashlight, the ground covered white with a fresh snow. The car was freezing and smelled of old cigarettes and pine air freshener. We were out

in the parking lot—I could tell by the sound of the cars—but for a minute I wasn't sure where I was in time and space.

And then Dona screamed, and the words sort of carved into me, cleared my head. It came to me right through the open window. It was so beautiful and definite—like the emptiness inside of me. It was like I was waiting for it to happen since the day I was born. It was about six forty-five in the morning and my last feeling of Dona was out into a southern Colorado morning, searching for the little girl and the boy.

Highland

The first time I take Esaw up to the roof, my boss, Nurse Clementine—I have to keep that song out of my head when I think of her name—well, she has the word out on us but no one follows us. I bang on the electric wheelchair to drag it up and through the stairwell, cursing the broken elevator. Esaw steers the wheels of his chair steady as I lift, and I hear our echo run down the narrow hallway. Right then I have this feeling that someone, maybe even Nurse Clementine, or maybe some asshole orderly is watching us, waiting to jump out and fire me on the spot.

“I hope smoking is a good enough excuse,” I say to myself, lumbering up the stairwell. “This job is real bullshit.”

Esaw and his long, skinny face nod and give me a ‘you’re telling me’ kind of a look as if he understands me. He tamps his pipe a couple of times. I can tell his face is smiling and his lips smacking, thinking of the cherry flavored tobacco in his pocket I am about to light up. A couple of times he turns and looks at me struggling, his eyes squinting through dark Ray Charles sunglasses. I rest a final moment as we reach the roof, and I leave him there at the top of the stairs to head out the emergency exit and unlock it. I take a few steps to prop open the door with a loose brick. I walk out over to the ledge and the view that overlooks downtown Colorado Springs, Bijou Street and the trees of Acacia park—the beautiful view of Cheyenne Mountain and immense blue winter skies.

I nose Esaw’s chair over to the ledge and we both watch the view. I light his pipe and then I tamp my cigarette and light it. We like to stand up here while on my lunch break even though the wind cuts us down to the bone. I only wear a flannel shirt over my work clothes and Esaw wears a thin bathrobe over the unkempt, formal suit and tie. I like to watch the legitimate people driving downtown to work and getting their lunch or coffee

or whatever, and so does Esaw. Yuppie white kids on breaks from Colorado College walking and talking about more definite things with their girlfriends or boyfriends.

Mostly we watch a grouping of pigeons on the next door rooftop. Most of them look gray and don't know anyone down below—like us. There's one that wears black streaked feathers, and I like to imagine him as the leader. They spray out over power lines and the 7-11 and sometimes as a group they decide to fly into one window across the alley and the west side rails. I imagine they shoot into this one smashed out window for warmth or safety or I don't know. What I wonder is if anyone takes care of them—if there's someone in that smashed window that feeds them. The situations of how those birds might have gotten there go through my mind as horns blast and the lights change below from red to green and back again.

“Best part of the Highland,” I say, but Esaw can't hear.

At noon the other janitor Deion meets me in the break room to bullshit for a few minutes because by then I have gotten quite a bit of work done, so I have a long lunch planned out. The clipboard in Nurse Clementine's office tells me and Deion all about the work assignments we'll be dealing with for that day. If someone on three has shit on the floor of their bathroom, or if anybody on four needs urine mopped up from underneath a resident's bed—if somebody has puked or a hose from a catheter or a dialysis machine has busted. Those are your usual work assignments.

You should see some of the residents at the Highland. Dialysis residents, aged cancer residents, Alzheimer's residents, severely mentally challenged residents, amputee residents, aged drug addict and alcoholic residents—you name it the Highland has got them. Most of them are in pretty bad shape too and need constant care. People

a little less than human beings trying to get better, congenital bone diseases and some completely paralyzed patients that make you feel so bad all you can do is walk by them and ignore them.

Each floor has a nurse and two orderlies and most of the day is spent getting the residents up and out of their rooms. And the rest of the day finds us janitors cleaning up one disgrace or another. The best floors are five and six because the patients can pretty much walk for themselves or they run electric wheelchairs. Once they're gone to physical therapy or their doctor appointments—and they do have quite a few doctor appointments—we can get the work done. I can put down my mop, crack my knuckles and begin to explore, usually while Deion is busy changing the lining of the trash cans or cleaning the toilets and doesn't need any help. I find candy and cookies from their dressers. Sometimes I find a journal or letter or two to read. Most of the time, Deion warns me not to take any money—most of the time.

Sometimes Nurse Clementine or an orderly will come in while we are in the middle of a real nasty job on three—a double glove job. I'm sure you have everything under control, they say. They never sound like they want to get involved. Of course, I say. Just be careful where you step. Sometimes a nurse or an orderly will crack a joke and spend some time talking to us, and we'll agonize until they leave, trying to monitor us while we clean the patient's rooms and around their personal possessions as if they don't know where we work if someone complains.

Most of the time Deion and I work pretty well together, as long as he doesn't talk to me too much. He's the bullshit type, and I do most of the heavy lifting and just handing him things because of his back. I talk to the nurses. This afternoon we're working on this

really awful explosion that happens in the dialysis ward. A line comes out of a patient and a line of blood sprays a nurse on her chest and face, and she just loses it all over the place. The resident loses it and then the orderly loses it. No one wants to go near the machine, so it pumps out onto the floor for about twenty minutes—some of the worst vile shit you can imagine. And as we work, the last thing I want to do is talk about women, but Deion is telling me about this ‘girl’ he’s been running around with behind his wife’s back.

“I just have to fuck this girl, man,” he tells me loudly. “Maybe soon, she tells me. *Maybe*. Can you believe that shit? *Maybe*.”

“Deion, do you have to cuss so much around the orderlies?” I ask.

“What the fuck are you talkin about, man? I’m talkin about fuckin this girl.”

“*Adios*,” I say, giving him a look. “Didn’t you say the wife caught on to you?”

He’s a big fat looking guy with messed up teeth, and I can’t understand how he keeps finding these girls. He’s always trying to get me to go out with him and drink but Inez wouldn’t have it. He gets quiet. “I’d still just like to fuck this girl, man,” he says.

“And what will Martha do? If she finds out I mean? She’ll leave you for good.”

Three times in the past six months he’s cheated on his wife and tells me all about it, the meeting to the dating to the parking or whatever motel they can get into. One time his wife came home early from work while the girl takes a shower in his basement. The wife gets home and the girl and her have it out in the living room. The girl is naked and the wife pulls a straight razor and nearly cuts the girl all to hell while Deion watches. He has to explain to the cops over and over again what happened. Deion can be a real asshole, and this is one of those times; he talks and talks while we work and slouches and practically cries if I don’t high-five him after every one of his stories. I like him, but I need this job. I don’t need any trouble from any of the nurses overhearing an argument

on his exploits, so I try to forget that I feel bad for the wife and the girl. I ask him if the girl is at least in college.

He slows his mop down for a second and looks at me. "Man, I told you I have to fuck this girl," he says.

The ex-wife calls sometimes but not often. My daughter Belle in California is almost five—starting school already and I am waiting for pictures. The ex-wife is still living with this *gavacho* who owns an electrician outfit. *Stevie* she calls him and the way she says it, so painfully whitebread, makes me sick to my stomach. I'm sure they plan trips to the park when they get home from work or on the weekends. I'm sure they own a big SUV and a Labrador retriever like in those commercials for life insurance—she's in good hands with *Stevie*. They still live in the house we bought in Culver City though. I am glad for that. I am glad Belle has a regular house rather than an apartment or duplex. I am only glad for that.

On the days we have no special assignments I hide from Clementine and Deion and hang out with Esaw. His room is on the fourth floor but he spends most of the time on the third—more women down there. His room is a hospital bed, a closet, a dresser, pseudo brown wallpaper and that's it. An old record player thrown on the floor—no carpet or rugs to speak of. Four hangers worth of clothes in the closet along side his suit and only the top dresser is full. I find a box of Trojans under some of his clothes when I put his case of *cigarillos* away for him. I hold them up and look at him. He gives me a sly smile.

Esaw has pictures of his kids in his room and a few pictures of his younger self. I don't have any pictures of my daughter or ex-wife—just lost them along the way, I guess. But in Esaw's pictures he is standing up, and I imagine he has been to most states and coasts. Photos of him in Navy uniform, and shots of him on vacation, on lakeshores and beaches, standing beside a large salmon somebody has hooked. Pictures with a dead wife. Pictures of his daughter Dee and a man I've never seen before. He has pictures of children and very young babies, grand kids I imagine in various junior high school pictures. The kids look like Esaw, look smart.

I put my hand on the sad looking comforter draped on the bed because it all reminds me of about a thousand years ago when I lived with my *Abuelitos*. And then I tell him I will take him up on the roof tomorrow or any other day he wants. All he has to do is find me. I promise him.

The most recent time I bring Esaw to the roof, I talk with him, mostly about myself. "Would you like to know about the new girlfriend?" I ask in a weird longing tone to my voice that surprises me. "She works at that market up the street. You can just make out the top of the building. It's called *Miscelanio, Mexico*. These old *Mexicanos* own it and they gave her the work." I show him a picture in my wallet. I don't think I have ever done that before, but he gets a kick out of looking at Inez and her hair cut like a boy's. She is standing out near Martin Lake near Huerfano County on a make-shift fishing trip. She is smiling and wearing one of my old fatigue tops. "Inez," I say. "Her name's Inez."

He doesn't say a word. He just puts his lips together and makes a sound that comes close to a whistle. He is wearing those dark glasses, and I can't make out too much of an expression.

"They sell Mexican records and groceries," I say. I take a long drag and try nodding along with him. "She's a cashier. I used to go in there sometimes. That's where I met her. About six months ago. She's the cashier. Because she speaks pretty good Spanish," I say.

He smiles and smokes, almost laughs at the expression on my face.

"I was buying some Ruben Ramos cd's. You ever listen to Ruben Ramos? No. No, I didn't think so," I say.

More smiling and smoking.

"You listen to music? Deion doesn't listen to any music. Little Joe? You like Little Joe?" I say.

Nothing.

"Al Hurricane? You like Al Hurricane?"

Still nothing.

"You speak Spanish?" I ask. Esaw gives me a clear nonsensical kind of a look, but I keep on talking anyway. I stare out over downtown towards the Starbucks and the Mexican restaurant on the corner and their large sign that advertises Colorado's largest margarita. I take a long drag. "I suppose you don't," I say.

It takes me a few minutes before I say anything else. I don't want to interrupt his smoking—the steadying of his shaky hands to bring the wide blunt to his lips.

"I really hate this fuckin job," I continue. "But Inez is pregnant and, well, I have to think about the future, you know?"

To this he takes the last of his cigar and burns it out on the bottom of his worn Floresheim. He tosses the cigar end over the side of the building with a flick. He smacks his lips with delight. He is wearing a sweater and some sad looking pajama bottoms peak out from underneath a pair of old dress pants.

"Inez stopped taking her birth control," I say. "Says she wants to have the baby. I mean what can you do in a situation like this you know? You know?" I'm still holding the picture and I motion to it for emphasis. "She told me on the phone," I say. "You know the one out back in the alley where Nurse Clem tells us to make personal phone calls."

Again, he just smiles.

"I've got a kid in California—from an ex-wife. Another one would make two," I say, holding up two fingers. I slip the picture away and light another cigarette with the last cigarette. I get just a touch of comprehension from him, or I only imagine it.

"It's getting cold out here," I say. "Should I take you in, Esaw? In, Esaw? You want me to take you in, uh? Uh?" I repeat loudly. Of course he doesn't say a word, and I don't know what to do for a few minutes. I can't just get back to work and leave him out here. I can't remember his daughter's name—if I have ever known his daughter's name. I can't think of where in the building I could find her.

I think for a minute. I straighten his tie and look into his tired smiling face. I wonder what it must be like to be this old guy. To see what he's seen. I think of my dead *Abuelito* in an unmarked grave out in Espanola, New Mexico. I fish out a piece of receipt paper I find in the pocket of my Dickies. I take the pen I have come into the habit of carrying around and write on the back side of the paper. It has been a long while since I have really written anything important down other than checkmarks on inventories or my initials on the cleanliness logs. I write, 'I'm done with lunch, sir. You want I should take

you down or what?' I hand it to him, and he takes it in his large dark hands. I read it out loud to him over his shoulder as he reads.

He takes the piece of paper and reads it, grinning. He again grins and nods his head slowly but does not move. Instead, he motions to me to pass him my pen. The old man adjusts the pen and the cap, and then he takes the paper with great care and sinks into his chair for a long moment. Then the pen begins to move very unsteadily, but he writes slowly on his leg. He crosses a 'y' and returns both the note and the pen to me. He has written the single word 'lovely.' After reading I push up the sleeves of my shirt and begin to maneuver around him to push his chair when he suddenly stops me.

He grabs the hands and locks a pretty good grip on them so I can't move. He looks them over closely and then he wipes his ashy, coarse hands over mine—my bit and ruined fingernails. I don't think I've seen more aged hands in my life except for my *Abuelito's*. With a sad, long expression, he turns my hands over to see the barely visible marks up my forearms—the marks left from about half a dozen stitches.

I mistakenly told Inez about my talks with Esaw the *one* night I decided to have a drink. She couldn't believe it—she said it was pointless to talk to him, and how come I could talk with a deaf guy and not her. For some reason I found myself defending Esaw, taking his side even though there was none to take. Maybe I just found myself liking the old guy and his whole sad situation.

"Why the fuck would you help him?" she argued. "You shouldn't be helping a guy smoke anyway," she said. "Some *sordo sonso*—*cabrón*. You should be doing the work and then coming home and that's it. You don't need the trouble."

She had never said the word 'trouble' like that before and it surprised me. I'd come home drunk and smoked weed with her brother in the living room of her apartment. My car was repossessed and my brother had practically moved in last month and she had never once mentioned the word.

"He wants to be smoking," I said.

"That's not the point. That's got nothing to do with it, *cabrón*," she said. "I mean, he is in a home and is supposed to be getting 'care.' Should he be in there getting more sick, Relles?"

"I'm only helping," I told her.

"*Oy, lo muy chingon*, 'helping.'"

I shook my head.

"He could have asthma or some shit, *cabrón*. Hell, he could have all kinds of shit and you are killing him. You ever think of that?"

Again, I just shook my head. "I don't think he has asthma."

"Well, do you know for sure, *cabron*?"

"No."

"Are you a doctor, *cabrón*? Are you?"

I shook my head and threw her car keys across the apartment because she wouldn't let it go.

"That's what I thought. After all that to find some steady work and you gonna fuck it all up in a month? Don't you care?"

"About what, Inez?"

Inez got a sort of a silent sigh to her and then she got angry. She stomped around the apartment with that look in her eyes. "Well you better care. In a couple of

months you sure and hell are gonna have to start caring about something, *cabrón*.” She held her stomach tenderly.

“Well, I’m working?”

“Ay, *miralo*, ‘working.’ Working doesn’t show you care if you get fired and into more shit.”

“Jesus, Inez. He doesn’t even know what the fuck I tell him. It’s not like he knows what the fuck I tell him.”

But Inez didn’t think it was helping or even interesting that I would be trying to talk to this guy. She thought the whole thing was stupid and about to get me bounced from another good job. I thought she was fucking stupid and worrying too damn much, and I told her. And by the time we went to bed that night I guess we weren’t talking.

I’ve had my share of trouble in Colorado. Car accidents and DUI’s. Bar fights and stolen property. So much trouble that my Uncle Lolo and I made a joke out of it—back in the day. I asked him, “What’s going to happen next, Lolo? Who is gonna fuck up next?”

“As long as we come home, *manito*,” he said. “As long as we come home, who gives a fuck?”

Most recently I lived in a halfway house for about six months after losing the driver’s license, I guess, when I finally got released and found this job at the Highland. My head was pretty messed up then and everyone wanted me to be making money—Inez and the people I had met since leaving the Army.

The Highland was where I got the job, this state run home for adults across from Acacia Park out near the YMCA. The listing at the unemployment office never told me what I would be doing or why they might need someone like me. I only found out after I was hired and watched all the risk management videos and signed all the paperwork. But in the orientation, around two in the afternoon in a very warm, cramped office, Nurse Clementine gave a lecture on all the rules and regulations, leaving me numb in my seat and not wanting to talk. My shirt was half-heartedly tucked in.

“And the residents here are always our first priority,” Nurse Clementine said as she finished up. “Whatever your problems are, well theirs are worse and you know, well, you’ve just got to keep all that home.”

She was a middle-aged Anglo woman, the woman who gave us all our positions. She had stood with a thick blonde football helmet of a hairdo, and she always dressed in a thick, wool sweater and athletic shoes no matter the weather.

“I say this because most of our residents,” she continued, “are either severely mentally challenged or aged and unable to care for themselves, and they rely on us for all of their care. And my oh my I would be dreadfully sorry if we brought any of our own problems to work.”

Then she went over to the map of the building and the layout of the place, and she pointed around to where we were allowed to go and where we needed a key. She pointed out the break room and every cleaning closet and trash compactor and incinerator unit. “And you must never touch or handle any of the patient’s personal belongings,” Nurse Clementine said, lastly. She seemed to be looking right through me.

Sometimes I forgot what I looked like, what a fuck I was I mean, tattoos and a bald head and all that. But I guess I should have been used to it. At least that’s what my girl Inez said. I guess I should have always remembered, but times I was prone to

forgetting, to nodding off in the middle of something. Anyway, I did forget as I was listening to this lady. I didn't hear right away when she told some of us we'd be less than orderlies and when she told me I would be starting out as maintenance.

Soon, we had our induction hour and then we were led through the home to meet some of the residents and to see our positions. The place reminded me of the halfway house I had just lived in—a load of corridors with institutional paint and wheel chaired people much worse off than me wandering around. Patients sharing cramped hospital room styled spaces. That was when I first met Esaw, as I was crouching down and not really paying attention, while Nurse Clementine was talking about the residents on the third floor. His wheel chair slammed into my side and just about tossed me on my back. I looked up and found his small, balding head shaking and smiling.

A que cabrón— I thought as I fell back on my ass. My fist clenched. He looked at me, grinning. The tiny old man held an unlit cigar in his mouth as he looked at me.

“Esaw,” Nurse Clementine scolded. “Where’s Dee? Dee?” She gave the sound of a faint snort. “How many times have I warned you? You do not smoke in the building. You know you cannot smoke in the building. You have to be taken outside for that. We do not have designated areas for that.” She said this with seemingly no thought to me on the floor. “You know that.”

The old man was black and wore a tattered brown suit with a tie as wide as a tooth pick and he seemed to motion to me with increased passion. I had never seen a jazz musician, but I imagined that’s how a retired one would dress.

“What Esaw? What?” Nurse Clementine asked. “Oh, I know what he wants.” She looked at me. “Do you smoke, Mr. Ortiz?”

I nodded and pulled my lighter.

"I swear to goodness smokers can smell their own," she said, shaking her head sternly. "He wants to ask you for a light, but he can't. Bless him."

"Can't?" I asked.

"You see Esaw here is deaf and cannot speak. He's a mute. God love him. You know. Can't speak." She put two fingers to her mouth to imitate smoking a cigarette to which the old man wagged his head up and down. "He is one of the only deaf residents on the third floor," she explained. "His daughter Dee is a physician's assistant and works here upstairs a couple days a week. He should be in a home for the deaf but his daughter Dee, that's the daughter, well she keeps him here. Close to her. Isn't that right, Esaw? Dee doesn't like you off like this. We need to get you back to your room." The old man gave her a puzzled look before his attention returned to me and the lighter in my fingers. He nodded towards my hand encouragingly. His long graying hair was thin and combed over his small head and awkwardly fell in bangs down to his eyes. His goatee was peppered black and gray. As I got up and then made my way with the rest of the tour Esaw and his cigar toasted me as we made our way to the elevators. He never once stopped smiling.

Nowadays, I take the bus to work and count the paydays. I take out my calculator and the pen and figure how long it'd take to buy a car so I don't have to worry Inez when I borrow her truck. A tricked out new ride doesn't come cheap. You have to buy rims and at least a decent system. Two years if I can stay sober and volunteer for extra shifts at the Highland.

Money never sticks to me but at least the work is steady. And most people don't recognize how difficult working like this can be. The work isn't much different than what

we would do in the Army. We mop and take out trash—occasionally we move around boxes and help out and change out the fluorescent lights. One night a month I have to stay over night or work a grave shift is what they call it but it isn't too bad. I never speak to Nurse Clementine but I hear she mentions that I am doing a pretty good job.

These days at the Highland I bring in whatever contraband I can find: chewing tobacco for Esaw, cigarillos, and clove leaved cigarettes—these shooters of Jim Beam he likes to pour in the shit they call coffee. I even bring him salted chips and Twinkies, whatever Inez has in her cabinets. I can't help it.

It has gotten to the point where he gives me lists on little pieces of napkin or newspaper in almost illegible writing that reads: 'require black licorice', 'require salted peanuts' or 'require jerky.' I find them in the third floor maintenance closet tacked up to Nurse Clementine's assignment board: 'require red man chew.' I get them slid into my locker folded neatly to avoid detection and sometimes, somehow, he places them in the pocket of my coveralls I wear to work up on the roof to adjust the satellite dishes when the wind and rain would pick up: 'require rum.' Sometimes Esaw wraps them around twenty dollar bills or actually writes the note on Grant's bearded ugly face on these ancient looking fifty dollar bills: 'require adult film.' Sometimes he wraps them in a check made out to cash—I first learn his last name from those checks—and most of the time, when money is involved in the transaction, the note reads: 'change belongs to Relles.'

The last time I spoke to the ex-wife in person was in Espanola, New Mexico. She was marrying the boyfriend, *Stevie*, in a month and hadn't yet gotten a proper divorce from me and so she drove down from Culver City for a reunion. This was all before I met Inez.

She got a room at the Motel Six over on Northern Blvd to avoid my Uncle Lolo or any one else in my crew. I went to her room, just a person visiting another person to talk and sign copies of legal paperwork. I was strung out drinking again, but it was pretty much invisible.

My daughter Belle had these pink sneakers like her mother's, and I asked her how old she was and what grade she was in. I saw my daughter and asked her how she was getting along. "O.k.," she whispered.

"That's great," I said not really knowing what I should have said. "That's really great, *chica*."

The ex-wife asked me to help her with the bills, and while we were talking, she hugged me. Not much of a real one, but she hugged me. "Good to see you," she said. "Good to see you not fucked up."

Later, Belle went to bed after watching cartoons, and the ex-wife took me in to the bathroom. She stood with her short back to me, putting on her flannel pajamas. Suddenly I remembered mornings and showers—breakfasts and endless Saturday mornings just staying in bed—I remembered everything. There wasn't much space so I had to stand real close to her to talk. "If life was different, right," she told me in the reflection of the mirror as she washed her face. The cartoons were blaring. "I still think about you," was all she said, and I was embarrassed for the two of us—ashamed for the whole disgraceful relationship—like I was watching from the outside.

I take most of my lunches and breaks on the roof at the Highland with Esaw. We make a real strange pair, but we smoke and laugh at the traffic and people down below. I point out the pigeons to him and the window they have gotten into every time because

his eyes aren't too good. I think he is interested in them and who might take care for them.

"My Uncle Lolo is in jail," I admit to Esaw. "I haven't even told Inez. I haven't told her of my family at all." It is so much easier to tell her that I don't have anything, and she never pushes me on it. "Up in Arapahoe County. That's in Denver. Drinking and driving, you know." I clip the end of his cigar with the sticker I keep in my pocket and then pass the blunt to him. "It's not too far from here. My brother Romes called me up and told me. Told me he's in South Denver. And I don't go see him. I should go to see him. I don't know why I just don't drive out there and see him. Need a car first, I guess."

He wasn't looking at my lips. He was focused on that black streaked bird that led the group across the street, but I kept talking anyway.

"I mean I got my driver's license back now and Inez has this pickup. I could get up there real easy, you know. But you can't give him any money or anything for him so what's the point. I couldn't give him any food or cigarettes or at least that's what I hear. So what's the point?" I throw my *vacha* over the side of the building with a flick and watch it hit the gray sidewalk. I kind of zone out for a second—thinking. "I mean I could go while Inez was working and she wouldn't even know." I lit another cigarette. "They've got him listed as 'indigent.' That's what the county clerk told me when I called. Can you believe that shit?"

Esaw hands me another of his notes. This one is on a yellow post-it note folded in half so the ends stuck together. It looks like he had this one for a while because it looks slightly crumpled.

I read 'require ride' and then I look at him. "You need a 'ride', Esaw?" He nods but then again he always nods so I repeat the words again. "You need a 'ride', Esaw? Your daughter takes you to physical therapy and the bus takes you shopping. Where

else you gonna go?" Then I write on the back of the post-it until I run out of space. I write, 'where do you need a ride to sir and why don't you ask the daughter to take you somewhere.'

It takes him a while to read it. He gently takes an antiqued pair of eyeglasses from a thick brown case in his sweater pocket. He replaces the usual sunglasses he wears with the reading glasses. He reads the note and his smile drains from his cheeks. His bright eyes and broken teeth look sad for a moment. He hands me another folded post-it with an awful seriousness that stuns me for a second and scares me really. This one has an address: '4400 Northwest Van Buren Drive Apt 117.' The address is followed by a single phrase: '*por favor.*'

This afternoon I get back to work and Deion and I are back on the three, facing another explosion in the community shower. I keep Esaw's note in my pocket and when the curiosity finally gets to me I ask Deion about the girl. Deion and I talk about it, and I pick up a resident's robe and throw it out of the mess.

"Did you fuck the girl, Deion?" I ask when we're almost done.

He puts his thumb on a nostril and blows a stream of snot down into the mop water. "Sure did," he says and smiles.

I give him a pretty cross look and curse to myself.

"Don't be pissed," he says.

"I'm not mad at you, Deion," I say. "I'm just fuckin tired."

"Then let's take a break, yo."

"I mean I'm sick of this whole fuckin place. I'm just sick of doin this shit."

“Well, finally. That’s the way to be, man. That’s what I want to hear from you. Being tired is the best way to be.”

This night I get home and don’t mention any of this to Inez. I want to talk to her because I worry, but I don’t want to fight or anything. Just get some sleep.

When I get to work that next morning, Esaw is sitting just after breakfast in the lobby wearing his suit and that thin tie of his. He has a freshly laundered patterned shirt that I have never seen him wear before. It is my day off and I plan to just pick up my check, but his notes and the way he looks sitting there alone talks me into everything. But when I see him I can tell he has his pipe in his pocket and before he sees me he is tamping out the pipe nervously out onto the floor and replaces it with fresh tobacco, just waiting for a light.

I get him out the back through the loading dock, and I mouth the words ‘sonofabitch’ when he gets out of his wheelchair and helps me load it into the back of Inez’s truck. Then we drive out through downtown Colorado Springs in that old primer colored truck with the windows down because of the bad defroster. It all feels like we have taken this drive a thousand times before—feels good to be out of the Highland. And I want to ask him where we are going but we can’t talk because, well, Esaw’s deaf and I have to drive and can’t write a note as I fight through traffic. But halfway past Frank Waters Park he hands me a note that reads ‘Manitou Springs’, the section of Colorado Springs known as Old Colorado City. I don’t know where we are heading, but I figure it is nicer to be closer to the mountains.

We drive under overpasses and down morning streets that look so dark and deserted they seem only there for us to get lost on—so far from the hallways of the Highland. We must have driven for an hour but Esaw just sits and smiles, something I have come to rely on. I don't say a word. I mean Esaw is decades older than me, and I am the one supposed to be full of hope.

He is eating corn chips that I have in the glove compartment to bring to him, and he smokes that damn pipe of his. He looks full of life and smiling. His gray hair is combed and every time I look at him he is gazing out of the window with a kind of wonder that you only see in small kids as I fly by buildings and offices. And across the last city bridge, I turn and look at him. This should be the quickest way, I tell him, but he doesn't respond. I say it even though I have only the street names to go by and don't really know where the hell we are going.

But into the land of Manitou Springs, I start to miss the familiar streets of downtown, and then I turn a corner and follow the directions Esaw has written down for me until I find Colorado Boulevard and then Van Buren Drive. The traffic begins to get bad and the cars slow down. Esaw just stares at the traffic as I slow behind a utilities truck and look at the big rectangular brownstone type buildings. We drive slowly until he taps my leg and points to a building and stoop with his pinkie. He gets out of the truck and I help him with the wheelchair.

The street has recently been cleaned and only the driveway holds remains of sand from the last snowstorm. The gravel and rock roams this way and that way down the narrow street. The houses look like they've been recently put up. You can see inside the houses through their big picture windows, their new-looking paint jobs and fresh lumber on their front porches. Blue tarps protect patio furniture and the lawns look fresh.

I push Esaw up the stoop but a man with a hard face just like Esaw comes out the front door of the nearest building. I think for sure there is going to be some sort of shit—some sort of *chingazos* with this new guy—I'm half-way expecting it. The man looks about seven-foot tall and has his hair combed out in a fro. I imagine the man shouldn't be here—that this must be the place Esaw's girlfriend lives. This must be her old man, and Esaw came at the wrong time of day or the man was hanging around to catch who's fucking his old lady.

I think this until the man gets down on one knee and shakes Esaw's hand and then puts a hard grip on his shoulder that I don't like the look of. I feel for the pig-sticker Lolo gave me that I've got in my jeans. Then the man gives Esaw a spleen crushing hug that about lifts him from his chair. They stay in their embrace for what seems like ten minutes, and I don't think I've seen Esaw so loose or happy. I guess the men have not seen each other in years and are having a quiet and still reunion—a reunion for no other reason than that they love one another. The man keeps kissing Esaw on the forehead and cheeks, and the tears are falling. The man gives me a look.

"I drove," I say.

Inside, I stay in the man's kitchen sipping on a can of soda while the man talks to Esaw. I can hear them crying and laughing, and later humming along to the radio. I can see Esaw's shaking his finger at the man, his hand moving along to the intelligent sounding jazz on the stereo and coming through the walls, when I walk in.

I try to sound like I want to talk, but I am nervous as hell—counting the minutes away from the Highland. "The old guy likes jazz, uh?" I ask.

The man nods. He is wearing a gold chain, and he is darker skinned than Esaw, with light spots around his neck and hands.

"You the son?"

"You got it," the man says.

"You live *here*?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"I didn't know he had a son," I say. "I didn't know you had a son?" I walk over to Esaw. The man and I both stare at Esaw. "I thought maybe you lived out of state."

The man says, "The old guy's never been out here before. Didn't even know I lived here."

"Really?" I ask.

"Never write, never visited, nothing."

I just gave the man a look.

"I promised my wife I'd go see him," the man says suddenly a little angry—he's still half-crying. "My sister wrote me a letter."

I nod.

"She's a bitch. I tried to call her but she don't make it easy, you know."

"Hey, uh, is your old man really deaf?" I ask, not knowing what to say.

"Yeah," the man says and nods. "Yeah, he's deaf. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," I say. I don't know what else to do but walk back out to the truck and sit. I close my eyes so I don't have to look at the neighborhood and the kids playing down the street. I put my hands up on the steering wheel. I start planning routes in my head up north to Arapahoe County and to Lolo—the county jail up there—but nothing comes quickly.

The next morning I stop in to the Highland, and it isn't until I get through the lobby when I notice the daughter, Dee, sitting down with Nurse Clementine. They are both

talking with Esaw beside them. I start figuring where I can find other work as I make my way to the elevators. I am pretty sure I am going to be fired for driving Esaw out to hell-knows-where. I almost turn and go home to avoid that 'I am sorry but things don't seem to be working out' speech. Usually they ask you to go for a walk first, or they do it at the end of the week—usually on a Friday or on a payday. They've got it all figured out.

"Oh, hello Mr. Ortiz," Nurse Clementine says. "This is Esaw's friend. The man I've been telling you about, Dee. He looks after your father very closely. I've heard they've become rather bonded. Spending quite a bit of time together." Clementine gives me this precious look.

Dee is the same story—she looks like a fucking pro. Just looks different than me and Esaw and his son. I can't figure her out. She is about thirty and doesn't really look like I have imagined. She has a thin, attractive face but looks more like Esaw's mother than his daughter. "I'm Dee James, Mr. Ortiz. I don't think I've seen you around."

I take her smooth hand and I think at that moment I wish I could know her and Esaw much better. She seems nice and happy and interesting and nothing like her son. She is wearing a beautiful flower printed dress with her white lab coat over it. Her skin looks soft, and I can see she got her eyes from her father. I want to know her better right away—I mean I sort of have a crush on her right away. I mean suddenly I want a friend like her. I want a friend who doesn't drink or borrow your car for days and days without asking. A friend who isn't always going on about the fucking *gavachos* or the fucking *negroes* or what is wrong with this country. A friend that isn't drinking and arguing all the time. I thought if maybe I could have more friends like Dee, and even Nurse Clementine, maybe I wouldn't have ended up in the Army. Maybe I wouldn't look at everybody and how they could hurt me. But I don't say a word or ask anything at all. And nothing the two say to each other make me feel like I can say something to them.

And then before Dee and Clementine walk away with Esaw, Dee comes over to where I am standing and hugs me—a real tender one that you can remember. Then she kisses me on the cheek and says, “Thank you.”

And I’m embarrassed but I say, “Oh, that’s ok. I like spending time with the *viejo*.” And the woman just looks at me and gives me this great thin-lipped smile. It all makes me feel like I have something left.