

ABSTRACT

Misty Eyes in the Secret Forest: *Ojos brumosos en el bosque secreto*

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This is the account of the brother and sister Damián and Leticia Martinez del Castillo, and their adventures in El Fuerte, Sinaloa, Mexico. Living out their lives as best they can amidst poverty and a changing society, with danger never too far off, the children must grow up quickly and learn to take matters into their own hands. They also learn that with a little wonder and imagination, reality is more magical than it may seem. “Misty Eyes in the Secret Forest” is an 8 chapter work of fiction that is meant to showcase a little of what life could be like for two children growing up in rural western Mexico, and to honor the Spanish language and Mexican culture. By combining realistic fiction with an occasional element of fantasy, this story also intends to pay homage to the Latin American tradition of magical realism.

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MISTY EYES IN THE SECRET FOREST
OJOS BRUMOSOS EN EL BOSQUE SECRETO

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PREFACE

As you read this work—and, hopefully, find some joy in it—there is something I must admit. I am not Mexican, nor Hispanic in any way. I have never been to Sinaloa. However, please do not let this mar your opinion of this work. In this day and age, cultural appropriation is a real and being recognized for the sad and unjust thing that it is. I took on the writing of this work in full knowledge of this; I am in no way trying to steal, abuse, or otherwise profit from someone else’s culture. On the contrary, my intention is to represent well a culture which is very dear to me, and to honor all those within it.

Not all of the Spanish in this work is ‘textbook’. In truth, probably the majority of it isn’t; rather, it is a sincere attempt to show how people, especially young people, speak in Mexico, particularly in Sinaloa. As I blended these two languages, the astute reader will notice that I have made some grammar mistakes in my English. These are not mistakes, but instances in which I used Spanish grammar, even when the sentence was in English. I like to think that even translated, the thoughts and descriptions of our two young heroes should have, more or less, the structure and feel that they would have in Spanish. The main place that I have abandoned this strategy is in using the passive voice; there are times when, in English, it just sounds much better, even though it is rarely used in Spanish. I hope that you, dear reader, will find something in these pages to carry with you.

Hayden Holman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would be pleasing indeed to tell you that I had crafted these pages solely from my own boundless creativity, amazing intelligence, and perfect knowledge of all the nuances of the Spanish language. Alas, none of those things are true. As such, there are many thanks to be said to the people that have devoted their time and energy into me, and into this work.

I would be remiss if I did not start by thanking my friends. They have encouraged me, critiqued me, and sustained my will to write. In particular, my friend and *hermano* Victor Rodriguez has been an extraordinary teacher, and has suffered my questions and mistakes for years and years. He has generously shared so much of his culture and language with me. To you I owe all my love of Spanish. Also, I thank my girlfriend and my roommates, for giving me inspiration as to what is true friendship, and who have stayed up with me as I write into many a late night.

I have also had the pleasure to work with and study under a group of exceptional professors. My thesis director, Professor Arna Hemenway, you have taught me much of what I know about writing. When I first walked into your class all those semesters ago, little did I know that I was at the beginning of some of the most entertaining and insightful classes I would experience here at Baylor. I would also like to thank my many Spanish professors, all of which encouraged me and inspired in me even more love of this language and culture. Dr. Scott Spinks, it was your class that introduced me to what learning a language could be like. I learned more in the first three weeks of your class

than had in all my classes throughout high school. Thank you for remaining a close friend and mentor ever since. To Dr. Rosario Colchero-Dorado, Dr. Moisés Park, and Dr. Karol Hardin, thank you for being wonderful professors and helping me to love Spanish more every semester.

Lastly, I must give a massive thanks to my family. To my parents, who whether it was reading to me, reading with me, or reading what I had written, have always fostered and encouraged a love of imagination and wonder in me. Not to mention raising me, guiding me in my faith, loving me, and always being there for me. My sister also, for reading books and talking excitedly about them with me, spoiling an ending only when I pleaded for her to do so, which I did. I have been very blessed with them and will remember it always. Without their help I would never have remembered to see the magic in the ordinary things, to see that God is always busy even in the raps and taps of the smallest woodpecker.

Finally, I must thank some of the inspirations for things that appear in this work. Many books have influenced me and my ideas: most notably, *The Lord of the Rings*, *News of the World*, *Rules for a Knight*, *The Gentleman in Moscow*, *Cien años de soledad*, *Un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes*, *La siesta del martes*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Buried Giant*, *Bless Me Ultima*, *Back to the Future*, Carlo Carretto, and Jesus “Mr.Chuy” Garcia.

CHAPTER ONE

Just the one.

Dear Padre,

I hate Sundays. Many days are bad days, but Sunday is always a bad day. I feel guilty for hating Sunday because it is God's day, but today God seems far away. Almost every week God is farthest away on Sundays.

Today, Mamá and her friends found Arturo, son of Señora Rosa Guadalupe down the street. I can hear her crying in the other room changing clothes. Mamá said the funeral would be on Thursday. I hope she has to work so I won't have to go with her.

Damián skipped mass this morning to go fishing. Mamá was frustrated but she didn't say anything. I hope he'll keep a few for dinner tonight, Mamá still hasn't –

“¡Leticita!”

Quickly closing the little leather book and tucking it and the pencil under the pink and blue fringes of her blanket, Leticia looked up.

¿Mandé?¹

“Can you take the laundry before dinner? I'm going to the market first.”

¹ What?

Leticia crinkled her nose and sighed. She knew that one reason she wanted to go by the *plaza* was to look for Damián. The door gave a little creak as her mother opened it and peeked her head around. It only took one look at her mother's red-rimmed and glistening eyes to make Leticia's own begin to well up.

Okay, *Mamá*, she said as she rose from the bed and lightly stepped across the room, wrapping her arms around her mother's waist. She smelled like dirt and blood and the shining sun at high noon. But she did not smell like cactus or pine and did not have fresh scrapes, so at least *Las Buscadores*² had not had to hide today.

Leticia had learned to smell how her mother's Sunday had gone so that she needn't ask her how it went. Every Sunday she went out with a group of other mothers, in search of the dead bodies of those relatives who had disappeared. No one in Leticia's family had yet gone, but her mother went all the same, to help the others. Mostly it was fathers, sons, and husbands. They did not find bodies every week—no, they at most found one a month. The cartels did not like it, and occasionally they shot at the women. But the number of disappearances was building, and the bodies would probably start building, too. They called themselves *Las Buscadores*.

“Thank you *mi'jita*,”³ her mother said. “I know it is unpleasant. You are strong.”

Kissing Leticia on the forehead, she turned and walked to the door. At five foot three, with long jet-black hair and a round, kind face with a dark complexion, Alma

² The Searchers

³ My daughter

María Martínez del Castillo displayed an only slightly less striking figure at 43 than she did at 22. The crows' feet around her eyes had only begun to sprout the previous year.

After her mother had gone, Leticia slid on her sneakers and walked down the hall to her mother's room. Reaching down for the clothes her mother had just changed from, she suddenly recoiled. The sickly-sweet smell of blood mingled with the smell of rot and mold, of worms wriggling and beetles crawling. She hesitated, biting her lip. Was there nothing else she could use to pick them up? She stepped around the clothes and glanced about the room. With the soft light of the evening sun, the rusty red bricks of the wall shone warmly. A thick layer of dust lay on the windowsill, contrasting with the neatly made bed. The walls were empty except for a red and yellow sash draped above a small picture, showing a young version of her mother and father smiling together. Her father's fishing rod leaned against the brick in the corner. With the hook secured to the handle and the line taut, the tip bent in such a way that the rod seemed to be leaning with one foot against the wall, arms crossed and head down, its eyebrows drawn in impatiently as it waited for its master's return.

Nothing. Damián must have used the canvas sack, which usually sat in the corner opposite the fishing rod, for his lunch. Pressing her lips together, she set her face and turned to face the clothes once more. You are strong, she thought. *Mamá* just said so. Her bottom lip began to quiver. Be strong. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed the clothes and dashed outside, hoping a nice spring breeze would be kind enough to help her. But as she dashed into the open air, she realized she had dropped one of the socks. Sighing, she set

the rest of the clothes down in the dust and retrieved the mischievous escapee, telling it not to try that sort of thing in the river, if it knew what was good for it.

The 200-meter walk to the river had always been one of her favorites. Leticia thoroughly enjoyed walking, whether along the shore of *El Sabino* or *El Mahone*, fishing with her father and Damián, or perhaps through the *Sierra Madres* with her mother, picking wildflowers and looking for a meadow that would be just right for the family picnic the following weekend. Or amongst the mingled oaks and palms heading towards and stretching beside the river, on her way to school or to do the occasional load of laundry. The cool touch of the wind under the intermittent shade of the oaks cooled and calmed her, while the radiant sunlight between the mingled trees soaked life and power through her skin and into her bones. And then the river; against the warm yellow tint of the world was thrown a wondrous strip of blue, and against the still, stalwart, and stationary was thrown life, movement, and laughter, delighting the eyes and quickening the step. Even the terrifying smell of the clothes she carried could not triumph against the smell of fresh water, green leaves, and colorful spring flowers. Smiling at the thought of it, she crossed herself twice, thanked the wind and the One who willed it, and hurried to the water finish her errand.

He readjusted the canvas sack under his arm as he walked towards town. Gravel scattered underfoot as he dragged along, the fish brushing his leg as he held the stringer. His face was blank, and he tried to keep his mind the same way. Reaching the road, his

shoulders drooped as he looked to his left. No one would buy just one fish. He looked to his right. It wasn't enough for him and Leticia to share, let alone all three of them. He could eat two fish this size by himself.

Speaking of which, he had never eaten his lunch. His stomach acknowledged this thought with considerable force. Carefully setting the fish on a bare rock, he tossed his pole behind him out of the way, pulled out the sack and began to open it. At least lunch would delay the decision of which direction to bear.

Just as he was swallowing the first orange slice, he heard a truck coming around the corner. It was playing loud music. He stiffened and listened hard. For a second he could make out nothing, but then he heard it: *Pásame la hookah, ¡eh!* Phew. He relaxed, smiling, and began mouthing the words. *Y yo me quedo contigo, Hasta que se acabe la nocheeee.* But as the truck came around the corner, his heart jumped. His eyes widened but after a moment he had them under control and narrowed his gaze, eyebrows slightly furrowed. Then he set his jaw for good measure.

“¡*Me quedo contigoooooo!* ¡Eh! *Mira mira, ¡it's Damián!*”⁴

In an eruption of squealing brakes and shrieking laughter, the truck swerved to the side of the road in front of Damián. A pile of young men tumbled out of the truck, the leader staggering toward him.

“¡*Qué pedo compa!* What have you been up to this morning?”⁵

⁴ I'll stay with you! Hey, look, look!

⁵ What's up bro?

Damián gave a *saludo* to the leader, but kept his eyes narrowed.⁶

Nothing much, Julio. Just eating lunch.

“Eh, not a bad spot. The boys and I are just com—”

“*¡Mira! What’s that?*”⁷ A short guy with a tattoo of a snake curled around his left eye was pointing. When a big guy, a shadow of an attempted mustache shining on his upper lip, turned around and looked, Tattoo promptly picked up the fish and hurled it at him.

“*¡Que chingados! Hit me with a fucking fish what the fuck man!*”⁸ Turning around in a flash of anger, Mustache grabbed the fish and went to slap Tattoo across the face.

Damián froze; Julio reached out and grabbed Mustache’s arm.

“*Órale cabrón, ¡cálmate cálmate!*”⁹

Mustache, seeing that Tattoo had already fled to the back of the group, spat, shrugged and handed the fish to Julio. Taking the fish, Julio finished chuckling and turned back to Damián.

⁶ Gave a handshake

⁷ Look!

⁸ What the fuck was that!

⁹ Woah motherfucker, calm down!

“How long you fish this morning *carnal*?”¹⁰

An hour or two.

“Aha.” Julio regarded the fish in his hand and spoke in a softer tone as the boys carried on behind him, teasing Mustache. “*Sabes que* you don’t have to keep going like this. Bringing home dinner would be much easier if you made the right choices. *Venga, carnal...* to live like this is nonsense.”¹¹

You know my answer. *Anda a cagar, cabrón*.¹²

Two of the nearest boys heard and raised their eyebrows as they turned to look at their leader. Julio’s jaw set and his eyes went cold.

“Well, I have to tell you man, this is the saddest fucking fish I ever saw. No wonder your dad couldn’t make it guiding the river. What a fucking waste.”

What the hell you know about it, Julio, he retorted. Don’t act like you’re not scared to death to go near that river.

Julio’s cheeks flushed. All the boys had heard that one.

“¿You calling me a *pinche maricón*?” He took a step forward. “*Te voy a dar una paliza cabrón*, watch how you’re fucking talking to me.”¹³

¹⁰ Bro?

¹¹ You know you don’t have to... Come on, bro

¹² Go to Hell / Fuck off

¹³ Fucking pussy? I’m going to whip your ass motherfucker

Give me back the fish.

“*Que chido*, I better give the great fisherman back his mighty catch. The mighty Damián bringing dinner home to the family—Oh wait, this couldn’t feed your fucking sister.”¹⁴

Looking at the ground, he grinned. “You better be feeding her good, too, she’s gonna be a fucking *mamacita* like her *madre*.”¹⁵

Anger had begun to seep through Damián as water soaks through wood. Starting on his surface, its long, spindly fingers had crept and crawled through his veins until its red hot touch had reached his heart. Yet he remained still. Julio finally looked up to meet his eye, then looked quickly back down.

The wind cut the dust across their feet. The other boys kept their eyes on their leader, tense; some of them had grown up with Damián, and most held him no grudge. Tattoo, however, had a look of wild delight in his eyes.

“Take the fucking fish back to *la Galera*. *Voy a disfrutar viéndote mendigar, cabrón. Vales verga*.”¹⁶

¹⁴ How cute

¹⁵ Sexy like her mother

¹⁶ I am going to enjoy watching you beg, you bastard. You’re worthless

The fish hit the dirt between Damián's feet. Few of the boys met Damián's gaze as they shuffled back into the truck. Tattoo glared at him. One or two, including Mustache, nodded to him.

“D.”

“Damián.”

Damián watched as the truck roared down the road towards town. He sighed. He didn't know what, but he was sure he should've done something different. His father would have done something different.

“¡Mariana!”

Leticia trailed behind her mother as they navigated the market, weaving in and out of the vegetable stands. After finishing the laundry, she had decided to come find her mother, surprised that she had not yet returned home. The bargaining, the arguing, the cars beeping, the music emanating from the occasional stand; it all served to fill the place full, full to the brink. It occurred to her that if even a cat slipped in, and let out a soft meow, the sky would pop like a balloon and the walls would all fall down.

“*Hola, comadre. ¿Cómo estás?*”¹⁷ *Señora* Mariana was sitting in a plastic chair behind her booth, sewing a patch on a shirt. She didn’t look up, but her tone was pleasant.

“*Bien bien, gracias. ¿Y usted?*”¹⁸

“*Igual. ¡Hola Leticita! You look cute as ever,*” Mariana said, glancing up for a moment, smiling. “How can I help you today, *¿comadre?*”¹⁹

“I came to ask where *Damián* might be.”

Leticia nodded. They were not just asking any person about her brother’s whereabouts, you see. *Señora* Mariana’s dark, wrinkled face and mouth did not hide her penetrating eyes, clear, grey penetrating eyes that saw much and did not reveal what they saw, tinted by humor and wisdom. Her silver white hair, tucked behind her ears, only added to her aura of ancient secrets and kind understanding. And she had the distinct ability to know where, at any moment, one might happen to be.

“I do believe he’s headed back to the river,” she said.

“Headed back to it? Have you seen him?”

“No. He has not come to the market. He will not come this morning, I think.”

¹⁷ Hello, friend (who is a woman). How are you?

¹⁸ I’m good, thanks. And you? (Replies in a formal tone, as she is speaking to an elder)

¹⁹ I am also doing well. Hello! ... Friend (who is a woman)?

Alma bit her lip. *Señora* Mariana merely shrugged and kept studying the shirt as her fingers flew in delicate patterns. She did not know what to say. Surely, she thought, surely he should be back by now? He was usually good to come home by lunchtime.

“Ehh—thank you, Mariana, *o sea*, we’ll keep looking.”²⁰

“*Buena suerte*, Alma. It was good to see you, Leticita,” She nodded as they walked off.²¹

Her mother was halfway to *Señora* Maricela’s fruit stand before Leticia decided to tug on the sleeve of her dress.

“*Órale mi’ja*.”²²

Leticia tugged again. Her mother stopped and whipped around.

“*¿Qué pasó mi’ja?*”²³ she said, trying not to show her impatience.

Why are we going this way, *mamá*? The river is that way. She pointed behind them and a little to the left, to the small road that led back to their home, and to the river.

Her mother raised her eyebrows. “We are going to ask Maricela. Maybe she has seen *Damián*. He should be here by now.”

²⁰ Similar to “um” or “well”

²¹ Good luck

²² Let’s go, daughter

²³ What’s up, daughter? / What do you need?

Leticia cocked her head to the side inquisitively, but did not argue. She could not remember a time that *Señora* Mariana had been wrong. *Señora* Maricela, of course, had not seen him either.

The door hit the frame hard, a little harder than Leticia had meant, when they walked back into the house. Her mother had repeatedly refused to go to the river to look for Damián, insisting that he wouldn't stay out that long and that he must have gone to over to Victor's or somewhere. Her voice and demeanor were calm and still, but her eyes... her eyes danced, quick and jumpy, like her cousin Raul dancing to *trival*.²⁴ Except, there was something else there too, something that reminded her of the young man in the old American movie, who danced because the bad men were shooting at his feet. She could not remember the name of it; something about *el futuro*, she thought.²⁵ Damián and her watched it with Joselina last summer. Damián had thought the scene so funny. All through the winter, he would ask Leticia to pretend to shoot at him in front of Victor so he could reenact the dance, throwing all three into a fit of laughter.

But the dancing of her mother's eyes were not funny. Leticia had never worried too much about Damián, but her mother's eyes blew a cool draft of fear through her stomach and up her spine.

²⁴ Genre of Latin American music that is fast paced.

²⁵ The future, meaning Back to the Future III

“¡Ave María purísima! He is not here yet? *Dios mio*, it is 4:30!” Alma exclaimed, looking at her phone. “I am going to go to Marietta’s and see if Damián is with Victor, ¿bueno? Mi’ja, escuchame— quédate aquí. Do not leave, ¿estamos?”²⁶

Victor did not live far, his house was only across the street a little ways. But Leticia knew that if her brother was not there, her mother would try Joselina’s, the Mendes’s, and every house in *la Galera*. If Damián did not come within the hour, their mother would have a whole posse looking for him. If he did not come within two, it would be dark. The spring sun did not yet have the stamina it would gain in the summertime months ahead.

*Sí estamos mamá. Buena suerte.*²⁷

The soft muttering of the river soothed Damián as he grew nearer to it. *Bueno*, it soothed him insofar as it was good at drowning out all his other thoughts. He had taken the bridge into the *bosque secreto* and then cut off on the east road to get around the park, where the few tourists liked to look at the birds kept there.²⁸ He nearly always fished in the *bosque secreto*; it was green and thick, and allowed him to get away from town without walking all the way to the lake, *El Sabino*.

²⁶ Two exclamations, both meaning OMG ... okay? Listen to me—stay here. Do not leave, are we clear?

²⁷ We’re clear / I understand. Good luck.

²⁸ The secret forest

He knew it had been past noon when he had started back for, well, either the market or the house. That must have been an hour ago at least. He had agreed with his mother never to stay out past 4pm. That gave him plenty of time, he thought. He did not want to go home now, to hear his mother congratulate him on his fish... one fish. Is it really even better than no fish? If he had caught none, he could've said the sun was too strong or the fish were not hungry. But with one, the fish were biting—he just did not know how to catch them.

He snapped off a twig of a low-hanging oak tree as he emerged from the brush out onto a small grassy meadow that ran down to the bank of the river, intersecting with a small stream that ran into the river as well. He set his pole and his fish and his sack, one by one, gently on the ground. Twirling the oak twig between his thumb and forefinger, he strode down to the river and squatted down on his haunches. Here, a small line of stones came up to the surface just enough to cause a slight run of rapids, so slight that the hurried or unobservant would hardly deign to notice it. He watched as the water bounced through the stones, smoothly, quickly, twirling and sliding in an ever-changing consistency that made him smile. Leticia, he was sure, would have some grand poetic exclamation at the sight of it. She had a way of describing things that captured not only their physical appearance, but also their, how do you say, *espiritualidad*.²⁹ She could describe it, not how you would find it in a dictionary or textbook, but in a way that highlighted its connection to your very soul, when you encountered it in real life. He

²⁹ Spirituality, a connection with things unseen

wished she could channel him some of her power now, for he would like to think of a description to take to her worthy of the scene before him.

Alas, he did not have her power. He loved to hear her though; at least, when they were not with Victor or any of his other friends. They would think him soft if they saw him staring into the sky with a soft smile and glassy eyes, ruminating on his sister's poetry. Nevertheless, he made a mental note to bring her back here, to show her the *rápiditos* and ask her to capture them for him, so he could come back, when he needed a moment of calm, without having to walk all the way through the *bosque secreto*.³⁰

A drop of water hit his cheek just before he stood up. Very carefully, Damián reached up with his right hand, and swiped the drop onto his finger. Bringing back to eyelevel, he studied it a moment, before tenderly reaching down his hand and returning it to its brethren, breathing a silent prayer to St. Francis that it make it home to the ocean.

*“Muy amable, muchacho. You did a very kind thing.”*³¹

Damián whirled around, jumping to his feet. An old man, his dark brown face highlighted by deep wrinkles around his eyes and a neatly trimmed salt and pepper mustache, was sitting on a stump on the edge of the meadow.

“Skip mass again this morning, Damián? Yes,” he chuckled as Damián's eyes narrowed, “I know the son of Gabriel Martinez del Castillo.”

³⁰ The little rapids ... the secret forest

³¹ That is very sweet, kid.

CHAPTER TWO

A Missed Appointment

Victor looked up as Damián sat down next to him on the park bench with a sigh.

“¿*Qué onda güey?* Why you look so tired?”¹

Damián rubbed his nose. *Hombre*, my mom had me up early this morning helping her make *tortillas*.²

“¿*Qué madre es eso?*” Victor began to laugh. “What you do this time.”³

I stayed out too late in the secret forest yesterday fishing.

“Do any good?”

Damián gave him a rueful look and rubbed his nose again. Only one: you tell me if that’s good.

He considered telling Victor about the old man, but something kept his mouth closed. He had no reason not to, and yet, he did not want to. Which was a strange feeling to feel towards his best friend.

¹ What’s up fool?

² Dude

³ What the heck?

Victor pursed his lips. “I gotta say, that’s *pinche basura*.”⁴ Damián looked at him and grinned.

“You ready to go?”

Órale. Let's go.⁵

Damián and Victor had taken to walking home together when they were in *la primaria*, both living in *la Galera*.⁶ This was significant because the people of *la Galera* were distinct from the people of *El Fuerte*. *Técnicamente*, *la Galera* was the name of the small water park just north of town, bordering the river.⁷ But it was also directly beside the walk-bridge that led across the river to the small agricultural community that participated in the life of *El Fuerte*, but whose homes were separated by the rolling river. Agricultural; that used to mean wheat and sugarcane. Now, it meant that scattered amongst the wheat and sugarcane, in pockets secluded from the road, grew *mota*.⁸ Enforcers from *San Blas* made the growth of this crop non-negotiable.

Thus, this community became known as *la Galera*; there was no confusion with the park, as it was just called *el parque acuatico*.⁹ There was another poor farming

⁴ That’s fucking trash

⁵ Alright

⁶ Primary school

⁷ Technically,

⁸ Marijuana

⁹ The water park

community to the south, called *Los Ayon*, but it was *la Galera que no cae bien con los lugareños de El Fuerte*.¹⁰

And it just so happens, that while Victor was as quick-witted with insults as he was jokes, Damián was quick to leap to the defense of an outnumbered *compadre*, no matter how deserving.¹¹ So it was that early on in the first semester they found themselves helping each other up, wiping the blood from their lips— and after such an introduction, it is only natural that they be together ever since.

“So how was school today?”

It was alright. You?

“*Primo*, it was *pinche bien padre*. Some rich *fresa* brought in a Mastretta!”¹²

Damián’s eyes grew wide. ¡*No la chingues!* I’ve never even seen a Mastretta! Did you get to work on it?¹³

“*Claro que no*, it’s only my first year. The rich guy brought it in and popped the hood for us to look, that’s all. We didn’t get to ride in it or nothing.” Victor raised his eyebrows. “*Pero...* it was still *chingón, primo*.”¹⁴

¹⁰ *La Galera* that didn’t fall well with the locals of *El Fuerte* / that the locals didn’t like

¹¹ Companion

¹² Bro, it was really cool ... Rich snob ... Mastretta is the Mexican sportscar.

¹³ No way!

¹⁴ Of course not ... but, it was fucking cool, bro

Damián grinned and nodded his head in appreciation. If it weren't for his mother, he'd have gone to the *bachillerato* with Victor to become a mechanic, too.¹⁵ He didn't need schooling to guide the river, and he enjoyed the idea of guiding a few days a week and working on cars the other days. But instead he was in *pinche preparatoria*.¹⁶ His mother wanted him to go to college, to get a job with a suit. In a year or two he'd have to pick something to specialize in. A real Mastretta. Damn.

They came to the bridge and crossed it, each heading towards their own homes. Damián quickened his pace; he was eager to get home to tell his little sister about the previous day. Like with Victor, he had felt a strange desire to keep the story of the old man from his mother; thus, his punishment had been all the more severe, with his only other excuse being the lonely fish he had brought back. But he was eager to tell Leticia, to take her back there. Maybe Thursday if his mother would come around.

He pushed open the door and walked through the living room, setting his backpack on the ancient brown couch as he went. A cloud of dust poofed out from under it, slowly twinkling in the afternoon sun pouring through the window. He could hear his mother in the kitchen; she hadn't called out to him when he came in. She must be still angry. He sighed; he couldn't blame her, when *Las Buscadores* had found Arturo that very morning. He had known Arturo; not well, but had spoken to him a time or two. He had only been a grade above Damián before he had dropped out to work in his father's

¹⁵ High school / Vocational school

¹⁶ Damn high school / high school aimed at further study at higher education

store. Damián shook his head. He knew what pain his mother must have felt and was sorry that he had given it to her.

Mamá, I'm home, he called out. Can I help you with anything?

Alma did not reply at first. Then, in a soft voice she said, "Yes, *mi'jo*. Do your homework and then you can help me."¹⁷

Leticia came out of their room and smiled at him. She wore what had surely been a bright red dress, but now had a dim, pinkish hue.

What are you dressed so nice for? Damián asked.

I wanted to look my best today, she replied with a twirl. Mercedes said it was her favorite thing she'd ever seen me wear.

Damián squinted at her. You wore that to school? Why you need to look so good at school?

Leticia stopped twirling and turned around with her hands on her hips. Well, I want to look nice. Is that a crime?

Yea, but you never look nice. I can't remember the—

¹⁷ My son

Oh really? Leticia's eyes flared. And you should talk. *La neta es que* you go around smelling like *pinches pescados* even when you can't catch any. How do you do it, *¿hermano?*¹⁸

Damián was stunned by the ferocity of her response, but only for a moment.

Ohh, I get it. Now you're a *pinche adulta que puede chingar con los pendejos*, *no?* You go to school and draw in that little book and cuss a few times and boom, you're an adult. And yes, *hermanita*, I can cuss too.¹⁹

What do you mean *imbécil*, I don't draw.²⁰

Yes you do all the time in that *pinche cuaderno!* You know, maybe I should draw instead of fish. Yeah, that would be way more useful. You know I could just draw dinner. I could draw a fish, a glass of milk, *bueno* I could draw some money too for good measure. Yeah that would really take the stress off *Papá*. He might even come home if I draw enough.²¹

Leticia gave him a scathing look. What are you talking about? I don't draw!

Seguro, you've *shown* me your drawings before in that little leather book. ²²

¹⁸ The truth is that ... fucking fish ... brother?

¹⁹ A damn adult that can fuck around with all the other assholes, huh? ... little sister

²⁰ Imbecile, but a much stronger insult in Spanish.

²¹ Fucking notebook! ... shoot (*bueno* means more than good)

²² Yea right

She rolled her eyes. I *barely* draw in it. I write in it, I don't *draw*.

“¡Oye!”²³ yelled their mother from the kitchen, “Stop. Arguing. Now.”

With a glare at her brother, Leticia turned to storm out of the room— but Damián caught her arm before she could take a step.

Let go of me!

*Tranquilo.*²⁴ His voice was lowered. Just give me a sec. I was just saying you don't usually seem to like dresses very much, sorry.

Leticia didn't reply, but she stopped trying to pull away.

Mira, there's a good reason I was out late last night, but I didn't want to tell *mamá*.²⁵

Leticia glanced towards the kitchen, her anger vanished. What? What did you not want to tell *mamá*?

I met an old man in the secret forest.

What? Who? Why was he out there?

Bueno, I'm not sure, exactly.²⁶

²³ Hey!

²⁴ Calm down.

²⁵ Look

²⁶ Well

What do you mean?

Damián scratched his head, looking at the floor. I don't know, but we talked for a long time. He knew who I was, and he knew *papá*.

What was his name?

He paused, then shrugged his shoulders; the old man hadn't said his name.

Why didn't you tell *mamá* about him? You might not have gotten in so much trouble.

Again Damián paused. I don't really know that, either, he confessed. He was *raro*. But in a good way.²⁷

Leticia poked out her bottom lip as she considered this.

“Leticia, can you come help me? Damián, hurry and finish your homework so you can help as well.”

Damián wasn't able to show Leticia the spot until Thursday. After school, on the pretense of helping Victor carry groceries in from town, the two miscreants slipped across the bridge, looked right toward *El Fuerte*, and with a nod turned left on the small path that would take them to the secret forest.

²⁷ Strange / different

They had not taken three steps when they heard it. They heard heavy tires rolling through mud, a deep, throaty motor growling its way towards them, and loud, indistinguishable music.

In a flash Leticia was off the road and behind a tree. Damián, on the other hand, had frozen in the street. He was listening, trying to discern the music. Concentrating hard, all the sudden he could make out the sound of an accordion. That was enough for him. With a few careful steps he slipped down to hide by his sister, crouching behind a bush that allowed him to still see a little bit of the road.

En un pueblo, me tire a matar pal cerro... defenderme, así se los dijo Mencho...²⁸

As they made out pieces of the song, their blood ran cold. *¡No puede ser!*²⁹ *El Mencho* led the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*, also known as *los Matazetas*. All Damián knew was that they were bad, bad news. And that they shouldn't be here; they should be far to the south. His mouth ran dry as the song grew louder. A few seconds later the truck rumbled past, far slower than normal. Damián squinted. That was Julio's truck! There were three or four men sitting on the side of the bed. Not the boys from the other day; these were men. One had a rifle slung over his shoulder. He could not see Julio, but he did see Mustache sitting in the passenger seat. Either he was much lighter skinned than Damián remembered, or all the blood had drained from his face.

²⁸ In a town, I shot to kill the hill, defend me, *Mencho* told them so

²⁹ It can't be / no way

Hidden by trees but only about 250 meters away from the main bridge was another, an old, wooden walk bridge that creaked in the wind. This was the only entrance into the secret forest, for the secret forest was actually an island, the river making a deep moat all around it. A few minutes after the truck had passed, the *hermanos* made their way towards this bridge.³⁰ Leticia would not cross it without first making the sign of the cross, as here the river ran dark, bubbling, and moody. This section of the river seemed to resent the ease with which we cross it, she thought. Then she continued to follow Damián, muttering a little prayer for that part of the river, that it know how powerful it still was.

They skirted to the right, to the east of the park; here the world never slept as the birds sang their songs without end. This was her favorite place to people watch. The tourism in *El Fuerte* had never been huge, and this spot was known to very few of those who did come. What kind of person travels miles and miles to come to their little *pueblo*, to see the birds sing?³¹ One might call them crazy; or, one might call them the few sane people left. Do not the *garza*, the grey ghost of the eddies with its long legs and slow head, or the *colibríes*, flitting here and there spilling joy as they zoom, deserve this kind of veneration? Are they not worth the trip?³²

³⁰ The siblings / brother and sister

³¹ Town or village, usually small; Leticia exaggerates, as *El Fuerte* is a large town of ~12,500 residents.

³² The heron ... the hummingbirds

Órale, Damián said quietly, pulling her arm to drag her away from the park.³³ She turned and followed him once more.

If you looked from above, you might not have known they were *hermanos*.³⁴ Damián's clean, black fade framed a square jaw reminiscent of his mother's, with a shadow of a mustache on his upper lip. His head stayed down as he made his way through the secret forest, picking each spot to put his feet as he walked. Leticia's skin was a shade darker, and she had a pointed chin reminiscent of no one. Her wide eyes roamed the forest with never ceasing vigilance as she stepped on whatever happened to be in her path.

After a minute Damián found it; they came to the small meadow by the small stream, with its small line of stones.

It was here, he said. I was down by the river and he was sitting there, on the stump.

What did he do?

He just sat there and talked to me. We talked about fishing, and he asked me about *papá*.

Where did he come from?

I told you, I don't know.

³³ Come on

³⁴ Brother and sister

They were quiet for a few moments. Damián sighed.

Do you think he'll come back?

Well, I guess so. It's the only place I know to find him.

Leticia's eyes fell on the small line of stones peeking out of the water. This place is beautiful, Damián. How have we never been here before? We go all over this island.

Last time, I thought I had been here before. But those, he gestured towards the stones, made me realize I hadn't. He looked at her hopefully as he said this. She noticed, but pretended not to. She studied the stones a moment.

They speak to you, don't they? She asked.

*Ay.*³⁵

They were silent for a few more moments, both staring at the little rapids.

Mira, Leticia said softly. Damián glanced at his sister. Her eyes were intent upon the rocks, and her mouth was moving as if she was speaking, but no words came. Finally she spoke again.

Mira,

mira cómo lucha y corre,

aún grita desde lo alto de la torre.

Gritos de alegría

relajantes palabras de cortesía.

³⁵ Yep / that's right

*En una gran oleada de energía,
todavía lleva la llave
para brillar el mundo suave.
Por pequeñas que sean estas piedras,
se mantienen firmes mientras buscan la meta.
Hasta que suene la última trompeta.³⁶*

Damián felt the hair on his head tingle and a surge crawled up his spine. A surge of pleasure mixed with a powerful sense of resolve and determination, but against what forces he was not sure. He knew that in that moment he almost wished Julio would come and give him some excuse, any excuse. *No voy a rajar*, he thought.³⁷ Like the stones, he would stand firm, both strong and gentle. Fierce and calm. Till the last trumpet sounds.

They did not stir for another ten minutes. Naturally, Damián's sentiments wore off bit by bit, until he felt like his normal self again. Normal Damián. The trinkle of the little rapids had faded into the background of his mind and had lost much of its magic. His shoulders drooped ever so slightly.

He must not be coming. *Vamos*, let's go home.³⁸

³⁶ See Appendix A, page 148

³⁷ I will not crack / I won't take any crap / I'll let him know what's up.

³⁸ Let's go

CHAPTER THREE

Pirates in the Mist

Their father called at 7:30pm, as he had every Friday for 2 years. Well, actually, he now FaceTimed; he had saved up and gotten Alma an iPhone that Christmas for just that purpose. Now she had set it up against a vase in the middle of the table and pulled three chairs around in front of it.

Leticia heard the ringing from the kitchen and raced to the table.

It's *Papá!* It's *Papá!* Damián, come here!

Damián walked in after her.

Well what are you waiting on? Answer it!

Leticia giggled and tried to slide the little green bubble across the screen, promptly pushing too hard and toppling the phone and the vase.

¡*Híjole!*¹ Damián dived for the phone, grabbing it before the water spilling from the vase rolled over it. He quickly answered.

¿*Cómo estás Papá?*²

¹ Woah! / Careful!

² How are you dad?

Gabriel Martinez’s face beamed on the screen. Before he could answer, Leticia had bounced up beside Damián.

¡Papá papá!

“¡Bien!” Gabriel began to laugh. “How are my *caribeños*?”³

Acicalaera, como siempre, Damián replied with a wink.⁴

Sigue andamos con nuestra tumbao, Leticia said, brushing off her left shoulder as she did so.⁵

When they were still almost *niñitos*, and their father still worked as a hunting and fishing guide, they hosted a certain client, called Ismael, who was *puertorriqueño*.⁶ He had come down in the late fall to hunt deer with Gabriel, up north near *Álamos*. As was his custom, Gabriel hosted Ismael in his home; he had a big, white safari-style tent lodge set up behind the house for his guests to sleep in, but meals and general business occurred inside. Ismael was a very unusual client; not for his mannerisms, which were neatly polite, nor for his personality, which was quite pleasant— but rather, for his nationality. Spanish-speaking clients were less common than *gringos*, non-Mexicans even less, but a *puertorriqueño*— or any *caribeño* for that matter— had never stayed with them before.⁷

³ Good! ... person from the Caribbean

⁴ Looking fresh, like always

⁵ We’re still walking with our ‘swagger’ (Primarily used in Caribbean Spanish)

⁶ Little older than toddlers ... from Puerto Rico.

⁷ Gringo = non-Hispanic, commonly Americans

He had a certain class and grace to him that was not due to money, as the Martinez family had known many *ricos*.⁸ His dark skin and curly black hair were objects of much curiosity to the two *niñitos*. One day, young Leticia could stand it no longer.

Señor Ismael, do you like *Puerto Rico*?

Ismael, sitting at the kitchen table, was in the middle of scanning a map for places to glass for the hunt the next day. He turned towards her in surprise.

“¿*Qué señorita?*”⁹

Do you like *Puerto Rico*? Leticia repeated.

Ismael blinked a time or two before replying. “Why yes, I love my country. For me it will always be home.” He offered her a small smile, and waited for her to say more.

Leticia furrowed her eyebrows. Why is *Puerto Rico* so much better than *México*?

Ismael’s smile faded. “Why, *señorita*, why would you say that? I did not mean to say that my country was better than yours. *México* is special in many ways. You certainly cannot hunt deer in the mountains in *Puerto Rico*.”

Why not? Leticia asked.

“Well, for one thing, in *Puerto Rico* the deer are fewer and the mountains are smaller.”

⁸ Rich people

⁹ What did you say ma’am?

Leticia considered this.

“*Señorita*, if I may,” Ismael continued, scooting back his chair to face Leticia, “I must remind you, there are good and bad in all places.”

Yes, she replied, but wherever you come from must have lots of good. All we have here is dirt and danger, she said bitterly. I bet in *Puerto Rico* you can go outside at night, and don’t have to hide if a truck comes by playing loud music.

“You have to hide from loud music?”

Mamá says that we have to hide if a truck comes by playing *banda* too loud, just in case they are playing *narcocorridos*.¹⁰ *Mamá* says only bad men listen to those.

“Ay, *bendito*.”¹¹ Ismael understood that. He knew what was grown in the fields just west of them.

Leticia gestured with her hands towards him. And you, you have something... There’s just something different about you. I don’t know.

“*Bueno*, that’s just a little *tumbao*,” he replied with a gleam in his eye.

No—

¹⁰ A traditionally Mexican music genre ... songs that glorify drug smugglers with violent lyrics

¹¹ You poor thing / that stinks

Damián had come walking through the kitchen and stopped. *¿Qué madre es ‘tumbao’?* he interrupted.¹²

“Ayy, *tumbao*. It is an indescribable word, but I will try.” Ismael looked up at the ceiling.

“*Tumbao* is a way of being. It’s a way of walking— that’s usually how I say it, to walk with *tumbao*. Eh... It’s kind of like how you say here in México, something is *padre*. *¡Que padre!* But it is something that someone possesses.”¹³

He bit his lip. “Well, no... *Tal vez* the closest thing here would be a *mezcla* of *buena onda y suave*. Yes, that’s better. It is a quality that a person has, it almost shines from them. *Él es buena onda, es muy suave. Anda con un cierto tumbao. Eso es.*”¹⁴

Leticia’s eyes were wide, but Damián was grinning. *Tumbado*, Leticia said slowly, letting the word roll off her tongue.

“No no no, *señorita!* Not ‘*tumbado*’, there’s not a ‘d’. *Tumbao*. You have to let it roll smoothly.”

Tumbao, she corrected. Damián laughed and hit her softly on the arm. Now you are saying it with some *tumbao*, *¡hermana!*¹⁵

¹² What the heck is *tumbao*?

¹³ *Padre* = cool, ‘dope’ – How cool!

¹⁴ Maybe ... a mix of ‘a good vibe’ and ‘smooth’ / ‘slick’ ... He has a good vibe, he’s smooth. He walks with a certain swagger. That’s right

¹⁵ Some swag, sister!

“And that, *nenes*, is not something you get from Puerto Rico,”¹⁶ he said, looking them each in the eye. “It comes from joy. It comes from hope. And that is something that is found here,” he pointed a finger towards each of their chests, “and here,” he pointed at their heads.

So began their Puerto Rican education. The two *niñitos* took every opportunity to say *tumbao* and constantly begged Ismael to teach them more words.¹⁷ It just sounded so foreign, so different, and yet felt at home in conversation; put simply, the word had a magical quality to it.

Towards the end of Ismael’s stay, Leticia became downtrodden once more. Having shot a fine buck in the middle of his second week, Ismael had elected to stay for the remainder of his allotted time and fish the river, to the delight of the whole family. But now it was the end of the third week, and Ismael had only a few days left.

“Why do you seem so sad, *¿señorita?*” Ismael asked softly as Leticia came in from playing outside and plopped down on the floor.

In a few days you get to go back to *Puerto Rico*, she said, and we have to stay here.

“That is true,” Ismael agreed. “You must stay here with your family and friends.”

What I wouldn’t give to be in *Puerto Rico*, Leticia said dreamily.

¹⁶ *Nenes* is a Puerto Rican way of saying *niños*, or children

¹⁷ Toddlers ... swagger

Ismael stood up from the couch. He was tall and, honestly, was still quite young, Leticia realized. He couldn't have had more than 35 years. His clothes were simple, a white collared shirt tucked into light khaki pants, belted at the waist. Leticia also realized, with an inward smile, that he might be trying to copy her father, as that was what he wore most days when he wasn't hunting. His skin was a darker brown than Leticia's and his dark curly hair was close cropped and faded. He had facial hair in the form of a short mustache and a patch of short beard on his chin. His eyes were a kind, light grey, the color of waves on a cloudy day in the receding tide. Leticia froze as Ismael took a few steps forward and then kneeled down to look her in the eye.

“Leticia, you are a smart, creative, beautiful young girl.” He tousled her hair. “*Sabes que*, this reminds me of something I read in an old American book. A wise man said, it is not for us to wish to be born in a different time; but rather we must choose what to do with the time we are given. Or something of that sort. So it is with place,”¹⁸ He reached out and squeezed her hand.

“We must do what we can wherever we find ourselves. It is not with whim nor passing fancy that the Lord sets us loose upon the world.”

Leticia sighed.

“And one other thing. You may think, ‘why do I need to stay here? There is nothing for me in *El Fuerte*. And I'm not telling you to never move,” Ismael raised his hands as Leticia gave him a skeptical look, “there are many good reasons to move. But, I

¹⁸ You know

am telling you to consider that while you may not need *El Fuerte*, *El Fuerte* may need you.”

I can't do anything here, she said softly. Why would I want to?

Ismael remained silent. Then he stood up.

“Damián, are you here? Come, I have a story for you,” he called. “A story of my home.”

Damián wobbled into the living room, coming from his bedroom. His hair was tousled, and his eyes squinted.

Ismael laughed and picked up Leticia and put her on the couch. “Fall asleep? *Escúchame*, I think you will like this one.”¹⁹

Still wobbling, Damián came over and sat beside his sister.

“You have heard of the famous *pirata*, Cofresí, no?”²⁰

Both of them shook their heads.

“I suspected as much.” He shook his finger at them.

“*Pues*, Roberto Cofresí was a ferocious pirate that sailed along the coasts of Puerto Rico a long time ago, attacking merchant ships and giving much of his treasure to

¹⁹ Listen to me

²⁰ Pirate

the poor. He was in many ways like your Zorro, or the English Robin Hood. He grew up in Puerto Rico, and he grew to know the sea better than any man in the Caribbean.”²¹

Both children perked up at this.

“There was much turmoil back then. There were many wars and fights over who would control the island. Most of the citizens were very poor, and *no había esperanza por ninguna parte*.²² Then came Cofresí. He attacked any ship that was not Spanish, took its treasures and spread them throughout the island. Many countries sent men to kill him, but he was ruthless and cunning and would not be caught. It is said that he visited a sorceress that lived alone on a misty island, who was a servant of the Sea. He found this sorceress, and made a deal with her that allowed him and his ship to disappear into mist if ever a battle became too much for him.

“One evening, after a small skirmish with a French vessel, Cofresí stumbled upon something strange in its hull. Inside with the treasure, there were two small children, a boy and a girl.

“This stunned the pirates. The children appeared to be *caribeños*, some of the crew had appeared to be as well, but the pirates did not know where from.²³ The children would not speak. At first, Cofresí took this for fear, and so to calm them he took them to his quarters and made them dinner. *Pero*, strangely enough, they continued in their

²¹ Well

²² And there was no hope anywhere

²³ From the Caribbean

silence, neither revealing their names nor where they were from.²⁴ But Cofresí realized that they were not afraid. The girl, who looked the younger of the two, had huge eyes that seemed to peer into Cofresí's soul. The boy had a set jaw and defiant eyes, his eyebrows angled in ever so slightly. For this Cofresí rechristened them; the girl he called *Cárabo*, for her huge eyes. The boy he called *Tiburón*.²⁵

“Cába and Tibo, as they came to be called, were soon a cause of dissention amongst the crew: they must sail with us till the next port, some argued, and then we will let them make their own way. Others reasoned that the ship could not make port until they had dropped off their treasure— for they had taken three ships over the past two weeks— at their secret base of operations, off the island of *Mona*.”

Both children's eyes filled with wonder, as if Ismael's next words would translate the whisper of the west winds and show the secrets of the depths of the river. Leticia's feet were tapping as fast as they could, *tan tan tan tan tan*, while Damián was so still as to be etched of stone.²⁶

“Naturally, these men did not trust the children with the knowledge of their base, so their vote was to have the children walk the plank.

“Eventually Cofresí, unable to look upon the children without pity, declared that the children would be blindfolded and kept in his cabin for the day and night that they

²⁴ But

²⁵ The girl he named Owl, the boy he named Shark.

²⁶ *Tan* = tap

spent at their base. Then they would take the children to port, give them some money, and send them on their way. The pirates agreed to this, and began to sail towards *Mona*.

“The children remained silent, but as the days went by they began to seem more and more comfortable on the ship. Both Tibo and Cába were good at making themselves useful without being asked, and both accepted thanks with a nod. It was also clear to the pirates that they did not need to communicate by talking; they understood each other and came at each other’s call without a word being spoken. Tibo was fiercely protective of his sister; it was a common superstition among sailors that having a woman aboard was bad luck, and occasionally when something went wrong, Cába was blamed. One could not have counted to five before Tibo would appear, his face calm but his eyes burning with malice. Even though he could not have had more than 11 years, this sight was enough to make the pirates falter. An awkward silence would ensue, with a mumbled apology to follow. And by the time they arrived at *Mona*, the crew had, despite their best intentions, begun to take a liking to the two children.

“*Piratitas*,”²⁷ Cofresí called to the children, as he had become fond of calling them, “*vamos*, it is time.”²⁸ And he took them to his cabin, blindfolded them, and told them with all seriousness to stay put. They would be brought food during the night.

“The wind was fierce that evening and the hideout was through a dangerous cove on the western shore. As the boat heaved to and fro, Tibo scooted toward his sister and rested his hand on her arm. They could hear the men shouting, feel the ship twisting and

²⁷ Little pirates

²⁸ Let’s go

turning through the maze. They heard the scrape of the anchor and the splash of men going ashore. After about 20 minutes, Tibo squeezed his sister's arm. She tilted her head for a second, and then nodded."

Ismael paused for dramatic effect, savoring the looks in the two children's faces.

"Tibo slipped off his blindfold and then Cába's. They jimmied the door easily and slipped out under the rapidly darkening sky, following the sounds of the men. As they drew near they did not try to hide or sneak. They strode in amongst the pirates with their heads held high. There was an outcry and the two children were quickly scooped up and hauled to the front to face Cofresí.

"What have you done?" he asked them. "Now, I cannot let you go." Cába answered him, and although her small voice was at first lost amongst the noise of the men, they quieted quickly, realizing that she had spoken for the first time.

"We understand," she said again. "We do not wish to go." An uproar started again amongst the pirates, but neither child spoke anymore.

"And so the two children remained with the pirates who had killed their parents, and grew up on the sea. Cofresí himself took responsibility for their *educación y instrucción*.²⁹ They never talked much, Tibo in particular. In battle he lived up to his name. Cába became known across the sea as *la armita de pantalones*, known both for her accuracy with a pistol and for the fact that she wore the same pants as the pirates; she was

²⁹ *Educación* = home training / manners, *instrucción* = education / schooling

not one for dresses and flowers.³⁰ Although, no one should ever forget to mention that legend has it *que siempre estaban asicalao*.³¹

*Asica— que?*³²

“I mean they always looked nice. Better than nice. Maybe because of the generous villagers, maybe because of the many treasures, but they always were said to look flawless, in clean, stylish clothes. As you might imagine, *very* few pirates were known for such a thing.

“Anyways, in but a few short years they learned the terror of the sea, the thrill of the battle cry, and the warmth of the welcoming islanders to the *banditos generosos*.³³

“*Pero, supongo*, as these things go, as the years went by Cofresí became corrupted.³⁴ Time and success corrupted his generosity, his kindness, and his good sense. He began keeping more and more of the treasure on *Mona* instead of giving it away. He began to attack ships without regard to flag or crew, Spanish and American and French and the rest. The crew, so well known for their *modales buenos*, began to fight more and talk less.³⁵ And, worst of all, they began to lose.

³⁰ The weapon (with *ita* meaning little and feminine) in pants.

³¹ That they always looked ‘fresh’ (Puerto Rican slang word)

³² *Asica*, what?

³³ Generous bandits

³⁴ But, I suppose

³⁵ Good manners

“They did not win every fight handily as it had once seemed they did. It seemed they found themselves sailing rapidly into a mist more and more often. It became clear to Cába their fate should they continue: a shove against a wall, in front of a firing squad. She realized her brother and her must leave Cofresí. This was not an easy thing to swallow. Although he had killed their *padres*, he had become their *padre*, their only *madre* the sea.³⁶

“Tibo listened to his sister without complaint or comment, as he always had. And so together they confronted Cofresí; they told him what he had become, what would happen, and why they must leave.

“He saw the truth in their words about who he had become, and he sank to his knees and threw his sword into the sea in repentance. But he did not want his two *piratitas* to go.³⁷ At first the pirate tried to reason with them. How could they end up against a wall, with the power of the sorceress and the strength of the men? But the children, now in *adolescencia*, were not to be dissuaded.³⁸ After a time, Cofresí realized this. True to his old nature, Cofresí bowed at the waist and wished them well. He told them he was proud of them. And he told them what they must do.

“You see, if the crew found out about the children leaving, they would mutiny and try to kill them, to protect the knowledge and secrets that they would take with them. A

³⁶ He had killed their parents, he had become their father, their only mother

³⁷ Little pirates

³⁸ Teenagers

plan was hatched and executed, leaving Tibo and Cába rowing west in the dead of night, towards *Mona*. The next morning, Cofresí pretended to discover their absence, and ‘pursued’ them to the mainland. It was, as the Americans say, a *caza de ganso*.³⁹

This made Leticia and Damián laugh. *No manches, ¿neta?*⁴⁰

“¡Sí! *Eso es lo que dice en el norte*. Well, more or less, I think. *Pero bueno*, the children made it to *Mona*.⁴¹ They were not greedy. They took their share of the treasure and sailed out once more. The plan, you see, had been for them to sail from there to *Santo Domingo*; that was what they called *la República Dominicana* back then. But the two children felt the salt spray of the sea and listened to the eastern wind and knew they needed to go back to their homeland, back to *Puerto Rico*.

“They were excellent sailors. They made it within sight of *Cabo Rojo*, a fishing village where they were well received, by morning. But then all went wrong.

“An American Navy ship spotted them. I like to think their intentions were pure in the beginning; seeing two children alone in a skiff, they decided to offer their services. Tibo, upon seeing the Americans bearing down in their direction, began to pray in earnest for the mist that had so long helped his mentor. A slight haze grew in the air, but it was not enough. The Americans were coming.

³⁹ A goose hunt— he is trying to say a wild goose chase

⁴⁰ No way, really?

⁴¹ Yes! That is what they say in the north (America) ... But anyways

“At first they were kind enough; they offered the children the chance to climb aboard, and when Cába shook her head and refused, they insisted. Before Tibo had gotten out of the boat behind his sister, one of the crew had noticed the glinting gold in the bottom of the skiff. The skiff was hauled up and the children were questioned, but they revealed nothing.

“When the captain saw the mixed American, French, and Spanish treasure, he knew. He did not ask any more questions. Rather, he eyed the children; took in their dark skin and black hair. There was not a sweat-stain or a bit of dirt on either of them, and their clothes were fresh and new. *Estuvieron asicalao*, like I said; unnaturally so.⁴² And Cába was wearing pants.

“At this realization, the crew grabbed the children. They snarled at Tibo how lightly he’d hang from the noose, and eyed Cába with the hungry eyes of sailors who had been too long at sea. The children were outnumbered 10 to 1.

Once again, Ismael paused.

“But, was this to stop *la Cáрабо* whose eyes had seen more than most men? *El Tiburón* who had tasted the blood of many, standing up against empires vast and ancient? ¡*Claro que no!*⁴³ Cába drew the sword of the man holding her arm and ran it across his throat, then threw the sword to Tibo. And the fight was on. Slashing and diving and ducking and jabbing,” here Ismael jumped to his feet to act out the fight, “the *hermanos*

⁴² They were looking fresh

⁴³ The owl ... the shark ... of course not!

found themselves on the plank, 18 gleaming blades in front of them, the vast ocean behind.⁴⁴ One last time they looked at each other. Cába nodded.

“Long live Cofresí!” roared Tibo, and Cába raised her sword and cried “¡*Para Puerto Rico!*”⁴⁵ Tibo reached out and cut the ropes that held the skiff, sending it and the treasure crashing into the sea. Even before it hit the water, the mist blew in faster than smoke up the mountainside. The crew dived for the gold but heard it splash into the water, gone. After a while, when they could finally see once more, so were *la Cárabo* and *El Tiburón*.

Ismael sat back down, a contented look on his face.

Leticia furrowed her brow. That’s it? They were just gone?

“*Se fueron.*”⁴⁶

I would have kept fighting, Damián said whilst drawing an invisible sword. I’d never surrender!

But, what good did that do? Leticia asked.

“What good! *Señorita*, they did much good. They saved a man and brought him back to his true nature. They gave hope and strength to the island and their people. And that’s just with their final words.”

⁴⁴ Brother and sister / siblings

⁴⁵ This is for Puerto Rico

⁴⁶ They left

Ismael put his left hand on Leticia's head, and his right on Damián's.

“*Nenes*, we live in a large world full of large men and large problems. But never let that make you think that you have to be large to do any good. *Poco a poco se anda lejos, ¿no?*”⁴⁷

And so, after Ismael had said his *bendición* to the children, they had always remembered his story and those funny sounding words they loved so much.⁴⁸ They repeated them with such frequency that Gabriel had begun to call them his little *caribeños*.

After chatting a little of this and a little of that, Damián, having checked that his mother had left the room, could stand it no longer.

¿*Papá?*

“*Dime*, what is it?”⁴⁹

Papá, when you worked the river, did you know an old man that lived somewhere over there?

“Hmm...” Gabriel's image shook as he put something behind the phone to prop it up, freeing his hands to scratch his chin as he gave his son's question due consideration.

⁴⁷ Children ... little by little we go far, right?

⁴⁸ Goodbye and blessing

⁴⁹ Dad? ... Tell me

“I don’t think so, *m’ijo*. What for?”⁵⁰

Glancing back one more time— admittedly, he still wasn’t sure why he wanted to keep it a secret from his mother— he told his father all about the old man and his mysterious appearance. His father waited patiently for him to finish, but Leticia noticed a gleam in his eye as *Damián* finished talking.

“*Vaya, vaya, vaya*... I do think I know this man.”⁵¹

Who is he *papá*?

“A long time ago, I also met an aging man on the edge of the secret forest. He, too, did not reveal his name, and in the same way, the only place I ever saw him was on the banks of the river. He was never around town, never in the fields. But I saw him a good number of times and, in the end, he grew to mean a great deal to me.”

The two children met each other’s eyes. You never asked him his name?

“I did not.” He paused. “Somehow, I never felt like I needed it.”

I know what you mean, *Damián* agreed. I didn’t even think to ask him till he was gone.

Gabriel noticed *Damián* glance back yet again. “*Damián*, have you told your mother about this?”

⁵⁰ My son

⁵¹ Well well well

No, he admitted.

Gabriel grunted. “Perhaps that is for the best. She was *this* close to banning you from the river entirely, *dios mio* she was angry.”⁵² He shook his head. “She wouldn’t like it, she’d probably be suspicious. My time with the old man was before I met her.”

Papá, why did—

Damián stopped abruptly as Alma walked in, but she didn’t notice as her attention was immediately drawn by her husband.

“*Hola hermosa*,” Gabriel’s little face gave a pixel-smudged smile at her presence.⁵³

“*Hola cariño*,” She smiled back at him.⁵⁴

⁵² Good gracious

⁵³ Hello, beautiful

⁵⁴ Hello, dear

CHAPTER FOUR

A Bit Too Far Right

Julio also attended the *preparatoria*, but they didn't have any classes together.¹ Not anymore, at least. To Leticia, it did not feel very long since she had walked in to see her brother and Julio sitting on the couch together, trying to make sure their schedules were the same. Victor had been sitting on the ground, slouched lazily against the coffee table, cursing them for going to a different school. Victor had forgotten to check if their mother was in hearing, she remembered with a smile, because she *had* been in hearing. She had deftly stepped around the corner and smacked Victor in the back of the head with her *chancla*.²

You know, she could swear she'd never seen her mother bend down to take off her sandal, nor put it back on. Was it some sort of mothers-only witchcraft that let her get her hands on her shoe so quickly? Leticia also realized that she had never noticed if her mother actually had only one shoe on while she was getting after them with her *chancla*. Maybe she just carried around an extra, *como un bate para golpear*?³

¹ The high school

² Sandal / flip-flop

³ Like a bat to hit with

Okay, *nos vemos, hermana*.⁴ Leticia looked up at her brother, but he was looking towards his school. So he had seen him, too.

Cuidado, she said softly. ⁵

He gave her a sideways glance before walking away.

Julio had walked into the school. He was later than normal; he only lived a few blocks away to the east. Damián could've walked there with his eyes closed. Usually he was already at school when Damián walked in, and they never saw more than flashes of each other. And that was just fine with him.

Well, usually it was. But today his thoughts strayed back to a truck rumbling down an old path, and a thin mustache covering a pale, scared face. *Mencho*. He knew he had heard it. Not only was it a name no one wanted to hear, it was a name no one would expect to hear, in northern Sinaloa. How often had his mother thanked the Lord they did not live in Michoacán. If Julio was listening to *los corridos del Mencho*, it was a bad deal, indeed.

He waited until lunch to approach Julio. He thought he might have some lingering anger over the week before, so Damián approached with caution. He didn't really let himself think about it, but he, too, felt a spark of lingering anger as he came closer. But he pushed that aside, his curiosity getting the better of it.

⁴ Variant of we'll see each other / be seeing you / see you later

⁵ Careful

Julio!

Julio had been making his way towards a table, but stopped and turned around when he heard his name. Damián saw his unassuming expression harden as he realized who had called after him.

Julio, *¿qué tal?*⁶

Julio hesitated a moment, then shrugged halfheartedly. “*Bien, compa. ¿Qué hubo?*”⁷

Damián looked off to his right, at nothing in particular. *Mira*. You still got that stupid rule about nobody driving your truck but you?⁸

It had been Julio’s brother’s truck before it had been Julio’s. His brother Felix, 5 years older, had dropped out of school after *secundaria*.⁹ But instead of working in their father’s seafood restaurant, like everyone had hoped he would, he had dropped off the map. According to rumor, he had gone to *San Blas* and hooked up with the local cartel as a dealer, who had sent him to *Culiacán*. All Damián knew for sure is that one day when, *pues*, Damián thought they had 12 years, Felix had shown up in a slightly rusty 1975 Cadillac Deville and had tossed the keys to his truck to his younger brother.¹⁰

⁶ How are you? (Slightly more formal than typical teenager greeting, sounds cold)

⁷ Doing good, bro. What’s up? (Less formal, more familiar)

⁸ Look

⁹ Elementary school

¹⁰ *Pues* is a filler, like ‘let’s see’

This was a surprise to everyone, as the two brothers had never gotten along. *Tal vez por eso*, because he didn't want to ruin one of the very few nice things Felix had ever done for Julio, their father let him keep the truck.¹¹ And Julio only had 12 years. *Uff, no pudo con él* and his ego for a few days.¹² Wise or not, he learned to drive, and as he did he became obsessed with the truck. A beat up, old, single cab Silverado, no one had been overly jealous. But it got to the point where you weren't allowed to ride if you had muddy shoes, or dusty jeans, or hadn't washed your hair or any other little thing Julio might notice. You weren't allowed to eat within ten meters of the *pinche troca*.¹³

Damián had always teased him the most about the truck, but had also been the only one to really follow Julio's 'rules'. Julio had noticed, and had solemnly declared that if ever he needed to go to the hospital, Damián was the only one allowed to drive him there. Victor, naturally, had threatened to drive the truck into the river if he brought it up one more time.

Julio was surprised by the question. "Eh, yea," he hesitated, before asking "Why do you ask?"

I saw your truck the other day. You had men in the back and were listening to a *corrida* about *el Mencho*.¹⁴

¹¹ Maybe for that reason

¹² Ugh, Damián just couldn't with him / couldn't stand him

¹³ Damn truck (slang word for truck)

¹⁴ *Corrida* is a type of song

Julio shrank back at the name. “*Hombre*, speak a little softer. Let’s go over here.”¹⁵

He led them off to the side, a little further out from the rest of the students. “Yes, that was me. It wasn’t my choice, believe me. But don’t go spreading that around, okay?”

Damián shook his head. Julio, listen to me. *Sabes que* you don’t have to keep going like this. You do have a choice. *Venga, hombre*, to live like this is nonsense. Is it worth it?¹⁶

Julio’s jaw twitched. “*Bueno*, that’s easy for you to say. *Te crees muy chingón*, but you don’t understand. You don’t understand how fast things can go from bad to worse, from just messing around to fucking serious, cut your fucking balls off life and death.” He glowered at Damián. “What did you say to me again? Oh yea. *Anda a cagar, cabrón*. That’s right.” Julio spat the last few words out with force.¹⁷

Anger swelled inside Damián. Memories began to pound through his head, each one hitting him like a migraine. Did I convince *you* to break your father’s trust and sneak out to a party? Did I call *you* a fucking coward, and slip drugs in *your* drink to try to ‘loosen you up’? No. But I damn sure did give you a black eye and I’ll do it again! Maybe this time I’ll break your nose!

¹⁵ Man

¹⁶ You know ... Come one, man

¹⁷ You think you’re all righteous ... Go to hell

But Damián said none of this. He just sat there, brooding, feeling his right arm and fist begging for the chance to try and break Julio's nose.

Shaking his head, he walked away. He did not look back as Julio's shoulders drooped.

He was still brooding when he met up with Victor after school at the park bench.

“¿Quiúbole güey?”¹⁸

*Nada, ¿tú? ¿Qué hubo compa?*¹⁹

“*Bien*. Regular, boring day like usual. Same?”

Ay.

“¿*Qué es tu pedo güey?*”²⁰

Nothing, what you mean?

“*Cabrón*, it's all over your face. What you mad about?”²¹

Damián sighed. I talked to Julio today.

¹⁸ What's up fool?

¹⁹ Nothing, you? What's up bro?

²⁰ *Bien* = good ... *Ay* = yes ... What's wrong with you, bro?

²¹ Dude (carries tone of disbelief and is slightly stronger)

A look of understanding dawned on Victor's face. "Say no more," he replied, raising a hand.

He was still mad about the other day. I can't believe him, *güey*. I can't believe he's got the audacity to be mad at *me*.

Victor looked at him, looked back at the ground, and looked up again.

"*Mira*, I know he's way out of bounds. I know he can be a jackass. But *primo*, I gotta say, you were pretty quick to give it to him the other day."²²

Victor raised both hands as Damián looked up sharply.

"I'm not trying to defend what he did, believe me. I cut him off too, he went way too far down a dark path." He hesitated a moment. "*Pero* Damián, you gotta forgive him for all that. It's been over a year."²³

Damián did not reply.

"I mean, *mira güey*, it's only bringing you down. You don't need that extra weight, that extra anger. Ever since then, you've been angrier all the time. And for good reason, and it's okay. I just mean, you gotta let it go, *primo*."

Damián took a big sigh, and nodded, looking down between his feet. Yea, you're right, he replied softly.

²² Look ... bro

²³ But

“*No te preocupes no pasa nada*. It takes time. *Venga*,” Victor snapped his fingers, “let’s go.”²⁴

And so they took off for home. Soon the conversation turned into their normal everyday routine. But when they came to *Matamoros* street, Victor stopped.

“Hey, I gotta go swing by *el Chonchis* house, if you wanna come with me.”

Damián raised his eyebrows at him. *Órale, vamos*.²⁵

“My mom asked me to go. You know Araceli was a friend of Arturo Guadalupe, and so she’s been kinda down since they found him. So *mamá* is making a big dinner tonight to try and cheer her up.”

Ey, estamos. I had forgotten that your sister was the same age as Arturo. You bring cash?²⁶

Victor nodded. “*Claro que sí*. Gotta have it. Here,” Victor reached in his back pocket, “you hold it for now.”²⁷

They made their way through the neighborhood for a few blocks. As they came around a corner, they could see *el Chonchis* house. It was clearly distinguishable, as it had two large— well, maybe not large, but at least large for their age— *chavos*, each

²⁴ No worried, it’s nothing ... Come on

²⁵ Sounds good / alright, let’s go

²⁶ Ah, I got you / I understand

²⁷ Of course

having around 10 years, standing on either side of the porch.²⁸ Their hands were behind their backs and they did not move. They were wearing baggy jeans, hoodies, and durags underneath flat-bill baseball hats.

As Victor and Damián approached the house, the *chavo* on the right kicked the porch three times with the back of his foot. Two boys around the same age opened the door and walked out. The bigger one stayed in front of the door. The smaller of the two, in a tee shirt and mirrored sunglasses, came out to greet them.

“¿*Qué pasotes cabrones?* What can I do for you?”²⁹

Damián bit his lip to suppress a grin. These kids take it too damn serious, he thought to himself with an inward chuckle.

Victor stepped up close to the porch, looked left and then right.

“You got the product?”

Sunglasses looked him up and down. “¿*Traes la feria?*”³⁰

Victor smacked his lips. “You think we’d be here if we didn’t have the money?”

Damián bit his lip again. Victor put a ton of sass into his words; he liked playing it serious, too.

²⁸ Boy, similar to *chico*

²⁹ What’s up bitches? (Very slangy)

³⁰ You bring the money?

“Last time you came *hombre* you tried to pay with monopoly money.” Sunglasses retorted.³¹

Damián snorted audibly.

Victor stuttered, blustering. “Pss, well, eh, I mean... man where’s the product!”

Sunglasses shrugged. “I got it inside, I just gotta see the cash first.”

Victor and Damián looked at each other and both nodded. Damián leaned back and looked both ways, then drew the unmarked envelope out of his back pocket and handed it to Victor. Victor handed it to Sunglasses.

“There’s 50 *pesos* in there, *hombre*.”³²

Yea we got it all this time, Damián added.

Sunglasses took the envelope and weighed it in his hand. Then he raised it and shook it next to his ear.

“They’re clear.”

The boy by the door knocked twice without turning around. The door opened slightly and a hand appeared, handing out something wrapped in paper towels. The boy by the door took the package and took a few steps forward to hand it to Sunglasses. Sunglasses took it and unwrapped it slowly.

³¹ Man

³² 50 *pesos* = \$2.05 USD ... man

“*No mames güey, ¿qué madre es eso?!*” Victor exclaimed. The *coricos*, ring shaped cookies, looked old and stale. And yellowish. They weren’t supposed to be yellowish.³³

“What?” Sunglasses asked.

Victor smacked his lips again. “*Venga pinche mocoso, necesitamos el producto mejor.*” He snapped his fingers. “Lemme see *el Chonchis.*”³⁴

Sunglasses raised his eyebrows. After a moment, he turned his head slightly and said to the boy at the door, “Bring *el jefe.*”³⁵

The boy at the door slipped inside. After a minute, he reappeared, carrying a high back chair that had clearly been taken from the dinner table. He set the chair on the front of the porch, and went back and opened the door once more.

Out swaggered *el Chonchis*. Damián knew he had 12 years, because he was the same age as Leticia. He wore jean joggers, Jordan 1s, and a polo shirt. He was a heavysset boy, as indicated by his nickname. The chair squeaked as he sat down in front of Damián and Victor.

“*¿Qué pasó amigos?* What is the problem?”³⁶

³³ Shut up bro, what the heck are those? ... *coricos*, corn flower cookies, are a Sinaloan dessert; in El Fuerte they are made with a white corn flower that is only grown around that area of northern Sinaloa, and so are white.

³⁴ Come on you fucking brat, we need the best product. (Less strong in Spanish)

³⁵ The boss

³⁶ What’s up fellas?

“*Buenas tardes Chonchis,*” Victor replied. “*Mira,* I need *el producto mejor.* You know, *la harinilla,* the local stuff. I need it fresh too, nothing bought.”³⁷

Victor looked around again and leaned closer to the boy. “*Los que hace tu mamá.*”³⁸

Chonchis poked out his bottom lip in consideration.

“My mom asked me to come get it. It’s in memory of Arturo. *Venga, hombre, porfa.*”³⁹

“Okay, okay,” *Chochis* replied. “Fine, say no more. I’ll have them get you the good stuff.”

With a nod to *Sunglasses*, *Chonchis* headed inside. The chair was whisked in behind him, and soon enough a new paper-towel wrapped package was handed out the door. *Sunglasses* unwrapped this one for Victor’s inspection. This time, the ring shaped *coricos* were shaped to perfection, nearly white with just a hint of golden brown.

“*Perfecto,*” Victor said gratefully.⁴⁰

³⁷ Good afternoon ... look, I need the best product ... *la harinilla* is the name for the white corn flower unique to that region.

³⁸ The ones your mother makes / your mother’s homemade ones.

³⁹ Come on, man, please

⁴⁰ Perfect

As they rounded the corner to head back to *la Galera*, Victor muttered, “You know, I love dealing with *el Chonchis*. It’s always fun.”

Neta? I didn’t know, *Damián* grinned. I think he has too many brothers. Did you really try to pay with monopoly money?⁴¹

Victor winked at him. “I couldn’t help but try, *primo*.”⁴²

Later that evening, after the dishes were done and both *hermanos* had gotten tucked into bed, *Damián* whispered into the darkness.

Hermana, you awake?⁴³

Leticia twisted on her pillow to free both her ears, but did not reply.

Mira, let’s wake up early tomorrow and go to the river before school. *Mamá* usually lets you come in the mornings, no?⁴⁴

I bet he hasn’t asked her yet, Leticia thought. We might wake up for nothing.

⁴¹ Really?

⁴² Bro

⁴³ *Hermanos* = siblings ... *hermana* = sister

⁴⁴ Look, but in this instance is closer to ‘listen’

No I didn't ask her yet, Damián whispered knowingly. But she's always in a better mood in the mornings, she's always less worried. It's like *abuela* says, there's no time safer than 6 in the morning. *Todo lo malo finalmente duerme.*⁴⁵

I know, I know, Leticia replied.

And I know you don't love waking up early but come on, you love the river and *mamá* hardly ever lets you go.

Yes, yes. Fine. Wake me up whenever you get up.

Early the next morning found Leticia and Damián trudging their way in the half light of pre-dawn, a little bleary eyed on the part of Leticia, towards the river. Leticia mouthed a little prayer of thanks to the morning star for her grandmother's conveniently convincing wisdom. Venus replied with a knowing wink.

Where do you want to go fishing today?

Damián considered for a second. *Sabes que*, I want to go to the meadow of the small stones.⁴⁶

You think we'll see the old man?

Bueno, vamos a ver. But I've been there twice already and haven't yet got a chance to fish that section.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Grandmother ... All the bad finally sleeps

⁴⁶ You know what

⁴⁷ Well, I guess we'll see

Leticia nodded. *Órale*.⁴⁸

So when they reached the park, they cut east off the road in the same manner as the last time. Leticia didn't stop at the park like usual; there weren't any people this early, and she didn't let herself stare at the birds. But she could hear them. She wondered how long the birds lived. There was no way it could be very long; she couldn't imagine anything that never slept could go on living awake for terribly long. And from what she could tell, the birds never slept.

It took 20 minutes for Damián to catch the first fish. Leticia had started skipping stones after 5, and Damián had blown up on her about scaring away the fish. He had been a little harsh, he reflected with a tinge of regret. She was now sitting with her back against a tree with her little leather book.

Hey, Cába, Damián called softly.

She didn't look up at first. She knew he was using that tone to make her feel better, but she wasn't going to let it just fix everything right away.

Hermanita, why don't you come sit over here? The wind off the river feels good and the rock is smooth and good to sit on.⁴⁹

She could hear the apology in his voice. I guess that's good enough, she thought. She slowly got up and sauntered over to the rock her brother had pointed out.

⁴⁸ Alright / sounds good

⁴⁹ Little sister

He was still looking back at her when it struck. ¡*CHOF!*⁵⁰ Out of pure instinct, Damián set the hook almost immediately. The reel went crazy; either the drag was too low or the fish was *gigante!*⁵¹ Damián whipped around, let out a yell, and began playing the fish. It only took a minute to tighten the drag and reel it back up within reaching distance of Leticia.

¡*A huevo!* Damián shouted with a smile.⁵²

¡*Órale!* Leticia grabbed the fish and held it up.⁵³ *La perca* wasn't giant, but it wasn't small either; *sabes que* it had bent the tip of the little spinning reel right and proper. Leticia tossed it on the rocks. Damián dropped the pole and drew his *navaja*, to stab it behind the eye.⁵⁴

Good job brother!

Just then, the fish gave a great heave, and with a bumble, a tumble, and a rumble, flip-flopped himself back into the water.

Both *hermanos* were frozen, open mouthed. Damián's shoulders slowly drooped. It's not your fault, he said quietly. Just bad luck. Leticia bent and picked the pole up for

⁵⁰ Spanish onomatopoeia equivalent to 'splash'

⁵¹ Giant!

⁵² Heck yea!

⁵³ There you go!

⁵⁴ The perch ... You know ... pocketknife

him as he drew a worm from the little Altoids can in his pocket. Not knowing what else to do, she set the pole beside him, settled back onto her rock and picked up her book.

*“Hola, muchachos.”*⁵⁵

¡Dios mio! Cried Leticia, and both children spun around.⁵⁶ An old man, his dark brown face highlighted by deep wrinkles around his eyes and a neatly trimmed salt and pepper mustache, was sitting on a stump on the edge of the meadow.

Buenos días señor, Damián said after a few moments of trying to find his words.⁵⁷

“Buenos días, Damián. This lovely young lady must be your sister, Leticia. Mucho gusto, señorita.” The old man made no move to get up, *bueno*, or to do anything at all. He just sat there calmly watching them.⁵⁸

Encantada, señor, Leticia replied with a small bow of her head.⁵⁹

They sat there in a somewhat awkward silence for another moment, but the old man seemed to be at ease.

“I am surprised to see you both this early in the morning,” the old man said eventually. “Surprised, and impressed.”

⁵⁵ Hello children

⁵⁶ OMG!

⁵⁷ Good morning, sir

⁵⁸ Nice to meet you, young lady ... well

⁵⁹ Enchanted / good to meet you too, sir

Bueno, it wasn't the easiest thing in the world, Leticia admitted with a grin.⁶⁰ It never feels worth it till you finally get out here and splash some cold water on your face.

"*No te preocupes*, when you get old, waking up is the easy part. It's sleeping that's hard."⁶¹

Well right now, Damián chimed in ruefully, *siempre estoy dompeado*. It's too easy. I can hardly make it through class without it sneaking up on me and hitting me in the back of the head."⁶²

The old man chuckled, and Leticia rolled her eyes.

La neta es que se dompea anytime he's sitting still, Leticia said matter-of-factly.⁶³

Hey now, Damián retorted—in his defense, he was still sore about the fish— at least I can sit still. *Nunca te paras estar chingando*.⁶⁴

Leticia's eyes flashed with anger. Damián realized what he had said in front of the old man and his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Leticia opened her mouth to say something in kind, but the old man spoke before she could.

⁶⁰ Well

⁶¹ Don't worry

⁶² I'm always falling asleep

⁶³ The truth is that he is falling asleep

⁶⁴ You never stop being annoying

“*Venga chavos, tranquilo,*” the old man called, his voice still calm.⁶⁵ “I’m not here to sit around and listen to you fight. Leticia, please don’t feel the need to say whatever it is you were going to. And Damián...”

The old man lowered his head slightly as his gaze fell upon Damián. Damián’s eyes fell, unable to meet it.

I’m sorry, Leticia. You’re not always annoying. Damián looked at his sister. I know I can be too quick to get defensive sometimes. Leticia sighed and nodded back, now with a look of humored exasperation.

“*Bueno,*” said the old man.⁶⁶ “Now, *amigos,* haven’t you any fish?”

No, Leticia replied. But Damián almost got one.

But we’re going to catch some more, Damián assured him. As if in response, he picked up the rod, reeled it in, and cast it back out once more.

The old man studied him as he bounced the worm as it sank to the bottom, reeled it to a new spot, and began bouncing again.

“Throw your line farther on the right side of the river, and you will find some.”

Do you fish, *¿señor?* Leticia asked, settling back down in a position where she could face both her brother and the old man.

⁶⁵ Come on kids, calm down

⁶⁶ Good

“For many years I’ve fished this river,” he replied. “But I don’t much anymore.”

Why not?

“I’m not sure. No particular reason, really. I mainly just watch, now.”

Leticia considered this, and was about to ask what the old man spent his time watching when he called out to Damián.

“*Muchacho*, you’re thinking too much. You have to be patient with the fish, give him time. Don’t rush it. Try farther to the right.”⁶⁷

Damián frowned slightly but did not reply. He did, however, cast his next line ever so slightly farther to the right, and slow down considerably on his bouncing and reeling. All three of them watched as the spot where the line disappeared into the water crawled closer and closer. Suddenly, the rod tip bounced! Damián jerked hard to set the hook— and the line went slack again.

Pinch— eh, Damián glanced at the old man, ¡*caramba!* I had a bite!⁶⁸

The old man winked. “Don’t overthink it, *muchacho*. Leticia, would you like to try it?”

Both Leticia and Damián looked around in surprise. *Ehh, bueno pues*, I don’t know how to fish, Leticia admitted. ⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Kid

⁶⁸ Stops himself from saying ‘fuck’ ... instead says, Dang!

⁶⁹ Uhh, well, you see

The old man looked surprised. Damián felt a little defensive; it wasn't that he didn't want his sister to fish... he just hadn't really thought to ask. He didn't even have to say it out loud to hear how that sounded. Damn. His defensiveness began to fade into shame.

He said he was going to teach me, Leticia interjected, my father, I mean. But I didn't have enough years yet when he left.

“Ay, *claro*. Here.” The old man slowly got to his feet and walked down to them, and held out his hand for the rod. Damián handed it to him.⁷⁰

“Your brother can teach you,” the old man continued, examining the rod, “and I can give you both tips. Damián, *fíjate*.”⁷¹

He squatted down beside the stone Leticia was sitting on. “*Venga*, put your hands right above mine.” He had positioned his hands on the rod and held it out for her.⁷²

She did as he asked, her right hand by the reel and her left near the bottom of the rod. He showed her how to hook her finger around the line as he flipped the little ring of the spinning reel to let the line loose.

“When one is overly worried about getting it all just perfect,” the old man murmured between them, “the one's mind becomes full and hurried. A hurried mind is a

⁷⁰ Ah, I understand

⁷¹ Pay attention

⁷² Come on

rattled mind; it cannot see what lies ahead nor hear what happens near. It sees imaginations instead, or hears what it fears, and misses much.”

Together they raised it up above their heads. Then the old man let go and sat back.

“The best way I know to combat this,” he continued softly, “is an awareness of breath. *La respiración* is the connection between oneself and the air around him. It is the constant and daily blessing from the Father.”⁷³

Leticia looked at him, then at Damián. Damián nodded encouragement, and so she faced the river, took a breath, flicked her wrist and cast the line out into the river. It landed all the way to the right, up against the far bank.

Good job ¡*hermanita!* Damián cheered. It was a decent cast, after all, although maybe a bit too far right, he thought. Leticia beamed.

Now the old man smiled at her and leaned forward, and began coaxing her through the slow rhythm of bouncing and reeling. His voice was deep and slow, and she fell into its rhythm more than she listened to any advice. Tap. Tap. Reel reel reel. Tap. Tap.

The rod jerked violently and Leticia almost dropped it into the water! It was all she could do to hold on; the invisible arm yanking her line pulled to and fro, here and there, diving and resurfacing.

Reel it in! Reel it in! Damián called. Leticia looked at him in a bit of a panic.

⁷³ *Respiración* = breath

Turn the handle thingy!

¡Ay! She yelped, and started cranking on the reel with all her might.⁷⁴

And it worked! The fish came up next to the shore and Damián scampered down to the water's edge to grab it. Leticia felt a tinge of regret that she had caught one so quickly, knowing her brother's self-consciousness towards his fishing prowess. But as he turned around with the upheld fish, quite a large one, she saw that he was grinning ear-to-ear.

¡*Eso!* There we go!⁷⁵

The old man patted her softly on the shoulder with a smile. “*Eso es.*”⁷⁶

Leticia turned to her brother. Here, it's your turn. Thank you.

Damián tossed the fish up on the bank and shook his head. You have a lot of turns to catch up on, *hermana*.⁷⁷

As she went to cast again, the old man leaned back on the rock.

“*La respiración* does not just help with fishing,” the old man continued to both of them. “*En cuanto al estrés*, it brings *la paz*. *La ira*, *la paciencia*. *El miedo*, *el valor.*”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Exclamation, like ‘oh my!’

⁷⁵ That's it!

⁷⁶ That's it / that's how it's done

⁷⁷ Sister

⁷⁸ Breathing ... with stress, it brings peace. With anger, patience. With fear, courage.

With this, he stood up and walked back up towards the stump. Reaching it, he remained standing but he turned around.

“Remember this, *muchachos*. You will need it before the end.”

Neither of the children knew what to say. The old man gestured to Leticia.

“*Órale*, catch some more fish. Stay to the right and the both of you will catch your fill.”⁷⁹

The old man did not wait for a response. With that, he melted into the secret forest.

As they watched him, it never even crossed their minds to call out a goodbye.

⁷⁹ Go ahead

CHAPTER FIVE

Fetch the VapoRub

Leticia picked her way along the street towards the hotel. The reds, blues and oranges of the buildings she passed, usually so vivid and bright, seemed dull instead and blurred with the greys and browns of the street and the trees. She didn't even look up at the *Plaza de Armas*, nor did she deign to glance at the flag fluttering red, green, and white above the *Palacio Municipal*. She trudged on, her eyes ahead of her. Her mind paid no attention to what she saw; she was moving mechanically, without thinking of it. This was because her mind was thoroughly occupied already, and anger, indignation and hurt washed over her in waves, periodically crashing over her in the same rhythmic manner as the waves lapping up on the beach. What finally brought her back to the present was the little red and white building of the hotel, looming low to the northwest as she walked through the particularly narrow corner at the end of the *Palacio*.

She had at first headed towards home. It was Tuesday, and Tuesday's were her mother's morning off, so she had been perfectly right to do so. But as it so happens, as she passed the *frutería*, she heard her name called out behind her.¹

“¡Leticita!”

¹ Fruit store, grocery store mainly selling fruit

She stopped and turned around, trying to control the expression on her face. It took her a second to realize who had called out to her... Why, it was *señora* Mariana. The old woman had on an old shawl and carried a sack of food in her left hand.

“*Chiquita,*” she called, her tone carrying an air of authority.² She motioned with her hand for Leticia to come over to her.

Leticia did not feel like talking, but she did as she was asked. *Buenos días, señora,* she said politely.

“*Buenos días,*” the old woman replied. Then she looked at Leticia with such a saddened and pitying look that Leticia was taken aback.

“*Mira, chiquita,*” she repeated, “I know you need to hurry to tell your mother what has happened. But she is not there. She is at the hotel.”

Leticia’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion, but she said nothing.

“*Ándale, hija.* She will want to know.”³

So she had changed direction, if only slightly— home was north, and the hotel northwest, and she had not reached the road that cut north to *la Galera*— and, having made it through the *Plaza* and through the narrow alley, she stopped. She stared at the entrance of the hotel, its red walls and white trim, and the row of the 5 flags situated above the door. This was not a particularly odd thing for Leticia to do, as she often stared

² Little girl, often used name to call a child to come here

³ Hurry / go, daughter (common to call familiar child)

at things as she let her imagination run wild about them; for example, she often pondered the deep significance of the 5 flags. Whoever had designed the place had decided to put, from left to right, the Canadian, the American, the Mexican, and the Balderrama Hotel Collection flags, and a solid blue flag with a circle of stars, which *mamá* had told her was the flag for Europe. The whole continent, apparently. These five sentinels flew in a neat orderly row above the door. Why, she often wondered, had someone bothered with the one for the hotel collection? Was there a North American flag that could take the place of the American and Canadian? Why was there not a single flag from a Central or South American country? One that spoke their language, played their sports, and was more or less a kindred spirit? Did they really get more visitors from Canada than from anywhere in Latin America? She usually admitted to herself that this was possible. Why did people come all the way from Canada, just to come here?

But today she did not look at the flags. In fact, she did not notice the door at all. She stopped and stared because she was afraid to go in, and unsure of what to say when she did. After a minute or so, she decided to just tell the truth. Her mother would find out anyway.

The *Hotel Posada del Hidalgo* was a magnificent old colonial mansion. While only being two stories, the mansion sprawled out with five sizable courtyards and yellow and orange adobe walls into which were crafted many arches and pillars. In the center of one courtyard was a fountain, in another a pool, and in a third, a life-size statue of *Zorro* waved his sword, his cape flapping in the eternal east wind captured in the stone. It was a nice statue, one that Leticia liked to look at, but she never imagined too much about it,

seeing as it was merely a tourist attraction. Many of the locals thought it ridiculous that a statue and a made-up story on an inscription could draw so many visitors. *Bueno...* it worked.⁴

It was in this courtyard that Leticia found her mother, who was talking with a pair of ladies. They were American guests, Leticia presumed, as they were asking about arrangements for breakfast.

“It will stay open until 10:30, so you will have plenty of time to go for a walk first if you wish,” Alma answered in English. The taller of the two women smiled and thanked her, and they turned to take their walk.

Once they had left, Leticia ran up to her mother and hugged her hard, taking Alma by surprise.

“*M’ija*, what are you doing here? Why are you not in school?”

Damián, she said, her voice muffled by her mother’s dress. Tears were beginning to well up in her eyes. It’s Damián.

“What happened?” Her mother asked again. Then she softly unwrapped Leticia’s arms and squatted down to face her, holding her hands.

“*Te calmas, m’ija*,” she said quietly but firmly. “You must not cry.”⁵

⁴ Well

⁵ Calm yourself

Leticia took a breath and wiped her eyes. Damián got into a fight with Julio, so they sent me home.

That morning, as Damián and Leticia were walking to school, Julio had arrived later than usual once again. This time, however, instead of being ahead of them, he had come in behind them. Just before Leticia split off to make her way to *la Primaria*, Julio had called out to them.⁶ They turned around, and at once Damián's face had turned to stone.

Buenos días, Julio, Damián said in a low voice.

“¿*Qué hubo?*” Julio had a bit of a pep in his step as he approached them. “¿*Y tú Leticia? It's been too long.*”⁷

Hola, Julio, she replied.

Around them, kids were slowly migrating into the school to start the day. Two boys, however, did not go in. They hung back at the door with glances at Julio.

“*Dios mío*,” Julio said, still talking to Leticia, “you have grown up so much. It doesn't feel like it's been very long since I played with you in your backyard, and yet here you are and I can hardly believe I ever called you *Leticita*. *Sabes que*,” he winked at her, “before too long, we'll be calling you *pinche mamacita* instead.”⁸

⁶ Primary school

⁷ What's up? ... and you

⁸ Good gracious ... you know what ... fucking sexy momma

Leticia raised her eyebrows, but before she had the chance to retort, Damián had shoved Julio away from her.

Leave my sister alone, he growled.

“Woah, woah I was just paying her a fucking compliment, fuck.” But a whisper of a wicked grin showed on Julio’s face.

Go in, Damián said, pointing at the school. His hand shook slightly. He took a deep breath. His hands quit shaking.

Go in and don’t say another *pinche palabra sobre mi hermana*. *¿Estamos?*⁹

It’s okay Damián, Leticia said, but in truth her cheeks were flushed with anger. She turned towards Julio. Only reason he’s saying anything is because he’s a *pinche pendejo* that’s scared of girls his own age—¹⁰

She had said this last part in a high, mocking voice. Julio’s eyes flashed dangerously as she spoke and he yelled at her before she could finish.

“*Pinche puta que—*”¹¹

But Julio didn’t finish either. *¡Catapum!* Damián’s fist crashed into his nose. Julio reeled back, eyes instantly filling with tears. *¡Órale!* Leticia shouted, and the two boys at

⁹ Fucking word about my sister. Understand?

¹⁰ Fucking coward / jackass

¹¹ Fucking bitch that

the door sprinted forward, one of them catching Julio by the shoulders. Then they both glared at Damián.¹²

Damián took another breath, feeling it go in and out. He did not think.

Qué pues, vatos, Damián said, raising his eyebrows at them.¹³ One was short and stout, the other tall and stout. *Bueno*, both were plenty stout. Then they rushed him.

Damián hit the taller one with a right cross to the chin but the shorter one crashed into him and sent him stumbling backwards. But he recovered and kicked the short one in *los huevos* and shoved him into Julio who had recovered by then. ¡*Dale un palizón hermano!* Leticia shouted angrily,¹⁴ running up and kicking the legs out from under the shorter one. Then she ran for the door as Julio whipped around to grab her. Students had, of course, already come running to watch, but no teachers had come, so Leticia started yelling and running for help. By the time she got back, Damián was cornered up against the school by Julio and the shorter one, the taller one on the ground a few meters off. Damián's nose was broken, his lip bleeding, and his eye already swelling— but standing he was, and still furious. For their part, the other boys were bleeding, too, and Julio's nose looked completely squashed. Then the teachers came and busted them apart, yelling at the surrounding students and escorting all four into the school to await punishment.

¹² Spanish onomatopoeia for 'bam' ... Get 'em!

¹³ What's up, dudes

¹⁴ In the balls ... Whip their ass, brother!

One of the teachers noticed Leticia standing there, fists still clenched. He walked over, asked her which *Primaria* she went to, and kindly told her that she should go home. He would call and let them know she'd be absent.

Leticia told all this to her mother, periodically hesitating to breathe. Alma did not interrupt. After Leticia was done, her mother pulled her into a big embrace, hiding the worried expression on her face. Then she composed herself and let go.

“Leticia—”

Oh *mamá* please don't be mad at Damián, Leticia blurted out. It wasn't his fault, Julio deserved it. Can you believe he called me that *mamá*? *Que pinche cobarde*, I wish Damián— 15

“Oye,” her mother interrupted sternly. “Do not use that language.”¹⁶

But *mamá*, Leticia groaned, what other language is there to describe him? He's stupid and scared and mean and I hope he gets what's coming to him!

“*Te calmas o te calmo*,” Alma threatened. “Quit shouting. I'm not angry with Damián. *La neta es que* Julio Pérez Jiménez has had a hard path to walk. He should not have said that to you,” she added quickly, as Leticia had opened her mouth, “but still. He may be an *imbécil*, but he is not evil. Do not judge too quickly, *m'ija*. Now,” Alma stood

¹⁵ What a fucking coward

¹⁶ Hey

up and took Leticia's hand once more, "*vamos*. I'll tell the manager what happened and we can go home."¹⁷

The walk home was long and silent, and Leticia was still angry. Her mother had always gone easy on Julio; while Victor had received a *chancla* many, *many* times at their house, Julio had hardly ever.¹⁸ He had deserved just as many, or just about. But instead, most of the time Alma would just voice her rebuke and move on.

When they had finally crossed the bridge, walked the long path up to the house, and shut the door behind them, Alma spoke.

"I know you are still angry. Do not think that I am not also."

Leticia said nothing.

"*M'ija*, do you remember when Julio went to live with his grandmother for a year?"

Yes, I think. It was right after his mother died.

Alma nodded and sat down on the couch, motioning for Leticia to sit down next to her.

"And do you remember how she died?"

No, Leticia admitted.

¹⁷ Calm yourself or I will calm you down ... the truth is that ... an imbecile / idiot ... my daughter ... let's go

¹⁸ Sandal or flip-flop, a weapon common to Latin American mothers

“Well,” she sighed, “That’s as well, because no one knew. Julio’s mother, Isabela, was a kind woman. His father, Carlos, isn’t a kind man. Your father was out late one night; he had had a bad day of fishing with a client, and was trying to decide where to fish the next morning. So, naturally, he had ended up in his favorite thinking place: down by the river. He didn’t go all the way to the secret forest, because he just wanted to think. So he went straight down to the bank and walked south, to where the river fords.”

Alma stopped for a moment. Then she seemed to make up her mind about something, and continued.

“Without thinking much about it, he had ended up a field over from where the sugarcane starts. Then he heard something.”

Alma wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. “At first, he thought it was *La Llorona*, and he said he almost jumped out of his skin.¹⁹ But then he listened hard; it was a female voice, crying out for her children, but it was not asking where they were. He couldn’t understand what else she was saying between her sobs.

“It seemed to be coming from over by the sugarcane, so your father crept over to the edge of the hedgerow to look. It was by the shop on the corner, the one that’s still there.”

Leticia nodded.

¹⁹ Latin American legend, mainly in Mexico and Central America, of a ghost-woman who cries out for her children near sources of water and is dangerous.

“The porch light was on. At first he could only make out two figures, but after a minute he realized there was a whole party of people. A group of men stood facing towards him, and what looked to be a family with a young child had their backs to him.

“Then he realized that one of the men was holding another child, and had a gun pointed to his head. He recognized Felix; then he recognized the whole family. Your father couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he could hear that Carlos and the man with the gun were having a discussion, with the occasional outburst from Isabela.

“After a few minutes, the man with the gun shoved Felix away from him, causing Felix to trip. When he fell, Isabela ran forward to him...”

Alma stopped for a second. Leticia looked down at the ground.

“And the man shot her. Before anyone could blink, he shot her. There was nothing your father could do; he slipped away and ran home, tears in his eyes.”

Alma sighed again and they were both silent for a while. Then she continued, in a soft voice, “And I’ve never seen either of those boys around that river, ever again.”

Leticia sighed. Her anger had slowly sapped away with each word of the story her mother had told. Now it had left her, and a terrible tiredness had replaced it.

“We never told anyone,” Alma said. “You are the first. Do not tell anyone, Leticia. Not even your brother.”

Leticia just nodded. She wanted to sleep, or to go read and escape into some fantasy. She remembered Ismael and *Puerto Rico*. What she would give, she thought wearily, to just fly away, to wake up on a beach in the Caribbean.

She began to get up, but her mother stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Also, *m’ija*— how did you know I was at work? I am very glad that you found me, but surprised all the same.”

Leticia tilted her head; it took her a moment to remember her momentary run-in with *señora* Mariana. A great many other thoughts had nearly crowded it out of her memory.

It was *señora* Mariana, *mamá*. *Es que* I saw her at the *frutería* and she told me you were there.²⁰

Alma raised her eyebrows. “Mariana told you?” She slowly nodded her head. “*Bueno*.”²¹

Oh *mamá*, how can you be surprised, Leticia said, exasperated. She *always* knows. Can you think of a time she’s ever been wrong?

Now her mother’s eyebrows furrowed. She thought for a long while. Then she shrugged.

²⁰ It’s that (filler words, unnecessary but commonly spoken) ... fruit store

²¹ Okay

“You may be right,” she conceded.

It had already seemed a long day. Leticia sauntered into her room, fell face-first onto her bed, groaned into her pillow and fell asleep for a few hours. Even after sleeping, the day would feel still longer.

As she lay on her bed, her mother stepped into the kitchen and rummaged around the cabinets for a minute or two. Then she found what she was looking for; a bottle of *mezcal Montelobos*, pushed back behind some of the spices. They usually only kept a few bottles of *Dos Equis* in the fridge— they tried not to spend much money on alcohol, especially not recently— but this bottle was an older one, from now distant days. She rummaged around some more and pulled out a *jicarita* and poured herself a glass.²² Leaning against the counter, she sipped and tasted the smoke roll down her throat. Felix would not take kindly to his brother coming home beaten, bruised and suspended. She realized that she did not know how the fight had gone; but she could tell by Leticia’s reactions that Damián had fared well. And, to tell the truth, she didn’t think there was much chance of Julio’s heart being in the fight. But would that matter? That might make it worse. She polished off the *mezcal* and poured one more.

When Damián finally got home, the mood of the old house became yet more somber. The boys had all known exactly what would happen to them, and yet the administration had seen fit to make them sit in silence for hours. Damián guessed this was because many people thought of suspension as the perfect punishment: it was not expulsion, and it didn’t put you too far behind in your classes, and at the same time you

²² A small, wide clay drinking cup made for *mezcal*, the alcohol

did not have to go to school for 4 whole days. Some students treated quite enjoyed having a few days to just get up and go to work with their father or mother. *Así que* the administration tried to rob them of at least a little of that time, by making the perpetrators sit in the office for hours, sometimes the rest of the entire school day.²³

He walked in with heavy footsteps. His mother came to the door and took his face in her hands without saying a word. She examined him, his eye now black and his nose slightly crooked. His lip wasn't very swollen anymore, and he'd already wiped the blood away with his sleeve.

"*Sabes que*, it's not too bad," Alma said matter-of-factly, gesturing towards his nose. "It'll make you look a little more *arriesgado*. I'll fetch the *vaporub*."²⁴ She said this last bit without smiling but knew it would produce a smile on her son.

And so it did. For the first time that day, a shadow of a grin flashed across his face. Leticia came in from their room and looked him up and down.

Maybe it'll give you a little extra *tumbao*, she said, raising an eyebrow.²⁵ He winked back at her.

Then the phone rang, and Leticia picked it up. It was Joselina, calling to check one her and ask why she hadn't been at school, and if she was okay. Damián and his mother went into the kitchen, where he recounted the story, adding in what Leticia had

²³ So

²⁴ You know ... daring / dashing / rash ... Vick's VapoRub, commonly used by Mexican mothers to heal most anything

²⁵ Swagger

forgotten or not seen. He also told his mother about Leticia jumping in and kicking the shorter one.

I wouldn't have been able to deal with the taller one if Leticia hadn't distracted the other two, Damián admitted. And I'd look much worse if all three of them had been on me in the end.

Alma sighed. She seemed to have done a lot of sighing that day, she reflected.

Dinner was quiet that night, all three of them lost in their own thoughts. Alma was battling feelings of pride, worry and sadness. She was proud of her children for standing up for themselves; glad Damián had not let anyone call her daughter that word. She was worried about encouraging too much of a fighting spirit in them, the kind that can get someone killed. She was sad that they ever had to go through such an ordeal.

Damián's thoughts dwelled on Julio. How was his dinner going? In all likelihood, he thought, much worse than his own. Damián did not yet know the story of Julio's mother, but he did know enough about his father. And his brother. That damn family, he thought. And for a moment he felt bad for Julio.

Leticia did not think of any of this. Her thoughts were on the old man, and *señora* Mariana. She wondered if the old man knew what had happened. One might think that unlikely, but *señora* Mariana had known; so Leticia thought there was a good chance the old man knew too. There was something strange and different about the two of them. They shared something, something she did not understand but felt in her gut when she

interacted with them. She'd always noticed it with *señora* Mariana, she realized, but now the old man made her realize it even more...

Their thoughts were interrupted by a sharp knock on the door. It was followed by more knocks, hard and impatient. Damián stood up to go and get it.

¡*Cálmate por dios!* Damián shouted as whomever it was began knocking again.²⁶ The knocking stopped and Damián opened the door. Victor stood expectantly, arms crossed over his hoodie. He must have just gotten done with dinner as well.

“¡*Qué chingados te pasó?!*” Victor cried when he saw Damián’s eye.²⁷

Before anyone could blink, a *chancla* went flying past Damián and hit Victor in the stomach.²⁸

“*Ufff,*” Victor gasped, and then he grinned at Damián who was laughing at him. He looked around Damián. “*Buenas noches, señora Alma.*”²⁹

Alma shook her head, but smiled. Damián invited him in and took him to their bedroom before he could curse anymore in front of their mother.

Alma chuckled to herself as they scurried into the room. Everything was silent for a few moments, until Leticia’s fork scraped against the plate as she began eating again.

²⁶ Calm down good gracious!

²⁷ What the fuck happened to you?

²⁸ Sandal

²⁹ Good evening, Mrs. Alma

“Hey,” Alma said softly. “You forgot to tell me something today.”

Leticia looked up quizzically.

“Damián told me about how you jumped in and helped,” Alma continued. “I’m proud of you, *m’ija*. You are strong.” She reached over and squeezed her daughter’s arm.

Leticia tried unsuccessfully to hide the pride on her face. Anyone would have done something, she said. Three on one against my brother? *Que mala idea*.

Alm shook her head. “No, not anyone. But my daughter,” she winked, “*Que mala idea fue*.”³⁰

Thanks, *mamá*, Leticia replied softly.

“So, what did Joselina have to say? Did you miss much at school today?”

In that manner they whiled away the night, and for the moment the whole matter of the fight was dropped. Eventually Victor joined them at the table, laughing and talking and filling them in on his dreams of becoming a mechanic and opening his own shop. After a few hours, he slipped back across the street to his own house, and both Damián and Leticia fell asleep quickly. It ended up not a bad ending for such a long day.

³⁰ What a bad idea ... what a bad idea that was

CHAPTER SIX

Warmth Never-Fading

The river exploded as the fish surfaced, jumping with all its might to rid itself of the insistently pulling pain in its lower lip. Damián did not panic; feeling the breath slide into his lungs he held consistent pressure on the fish and slowly fought it to the shore. Leticia caught it with nimble fingers.

¡*Siete!* He cried, feeling his chest swell with pride.¹ Leticia tossed it up by the other ones, and Damián stabbed it behind the eye with his *navaja*.² Then he handed the pole to his sister.

“*Bueno, ¿puedo ser un poco metiche?*” The old man asked as the two settled back down onto the rocks.³

Órale, Leticia replied, for it was to her the old man had been talking before they had been interrupted by the seventh fish.⁴

¹ Seven

² Pocketknife

³ Now, can I be a little nosy?

⁴ Sure

“*Pues, es que...* aren’t you supposed to be in school today?” he asked, one eye slightly squinted.⁵

Leticia raised her eyebrows. What would give you that idea?

It was the second day of Damián’s suspension. Leticia had gone to school as usual the day before, but that evening, upon hearing Damián’s plan to go fishing, she had thought of the old man and decided she would go along. They did not tell their mother this, of course; Damián and her walked out that morning on the pretext that he was walking her to school, before heading to the *bosque secreto*.⁶ But as soon as they had crossed the main bridge, they slipped onto the north road.

Thankfully, he had shown up. He had not seemed surprised at the fight, the suspension, or Leticia’s unexplained presence. He just sat on his stump, nodding and listening and occasionally asking questions, frequently interrupted as Damián and Leticia caught fish *patapín-patapum* on the far right side of the river.⁷ It was in this manner that he laughed at Leticia’s reply, and asked her no more.

How old is the river? Damián asked. The old man seemed to have an answer for everything, so now the two *hermanos* let their imaginations run wild.⁸

⁵ Well, it’s just that

⁶ Secret forest

⁷ Bing-bang-boom / one after another

⁸ Siblings

“*Bueno*, do you mean the water, or the path it takes?” the old man replied thoughtfully. “The path is neither old nor new. It has grown familiar with the water and its way, and yet the water has not carved it into *vejez*. As for the water,”⁹ the old man gazed out onto the river, taking in the shimmering blue-grey reflecting the sky. “The water is older than the land itself.”

Leticia looked at him with wide eyes. *¿Neta?*¹⁰

Damián smiled but squinted with skepticism. *No manches, señor.*¹¹

“The water has watched from the beginning. It is the same water that was at some time drunk by an ancient chief, or some prehistoric beast.”

The *hermanos* thought about this for a few minutes. They considered the rain, the snow in the mountains, the vast ocean. They had both learned about the water cycle *en las clases ciencias*, but they had never thought of it quite like that.¹²

¡Ay! Leticia cried as a fish yanked on her line.¹³ This one was a little smaller, and did not take her long to pull up to shore.

⁹ Well ... old age

¹⁰ Really?

¹¹ No way / quit playing, sir

¹² In their science classes

¹³ Woah!

¡*Ocho!* Damián exclaimed merrily.¹⁴ He slipped the hook from the fish's mouth and tossed it up in the usual routine.

Leticia looked at the pile of fish, and watched as Damián wiped clean his *navaja* before putting it back in his pocket.¹⁵

Sometimes I feel bad for the fish, she mused. She handed the rod back to Damián, but he set it down. They had enough for one day.

What for? Damián asked as he found a more comfortable place to sit, a little further up the bank.

Oh, *no tengo ni idea*, she replied. *Es que*, thinking about the river and the water and how old they are, I think about how old the fish are. How far up and down this river they've gone, what all they've seen, what wisdom they must have gained amidst the rapids.¹⁶

Damián nodded.

And then we're the ones to end it, she continued. In a moment we finish their story for them. And I don't know if I should feel guilty about that or not.

The old man had been sitting quietly as she speculated. "*Bueno*, there is something to what you say. But I have something else for you to consider," he finally

¹⁴ Eight!

¹⁵ Pocketknife

¹⁶ I have no idea ... It's just that

replied. “What is it, really? Death, I mean?” He looked to the two children, who looked at each other.

“Death,” he proceeded, “is, in its simplest form, an end. *Un punto final* that allows the next to begin. Nothing more.”¹⁷

Both the *hermanos* looked at him quizzically.

“Let me tell you a story,” he continued softly. “*Entonces*, long ago, the Father made the Heavens—”¹⁸

And the earth, Leticia cried out. We know *this* story; we’ve heard it a hundred times in church. What does that have to do with anything?

“*Bueno*,” the old man conceded, “it is an oft told tale. But there is another part to it, which I can assure you that you do not yet know.”

Leticia shrugged. The old man waited a moment before continuing.

“Long ago, the Father began to make the Heavens. Firstly He created Light, which He named *Sol*; water, who He named *Mar*; and wind, who He named *Aire*. He was pleased with these things, as manifestations of Himself. But He was not finished; He wanted beings with whom He could keep company.

¹⁷ A final point / a finality

¹⁸ Well

“*Pues*, Firstly He made a strong being, who He named *Fuerza*. Then He made a wise being, who He named *Juicio*. Then he made a kind being, who He named *Gracia*. The Father continued to make such beings, naming them *Risa* and *Confianza* and *Orgullo*, along with many others.¹⁹

“One of these beings was change itself, who He named *Muerte*.”

La Santa Muerte? Leticia asked quickly. Father Miguel said everyone that worships her are *narcos* and *criminales*.²⁰

“Not *Santa Muerte* in the sense that many have made her out to be,” the old man reassured her, “but yes, Lady Death.”

“Having created and named the many beings, the Father called together His *creados* and announced to them *El Plan*. The beings filled with joy at hearing *El Plan*, for the Father gave them each a job and they were eager to serve their Creator. They did not mind when the Father declared that He could not reveal it to them in its entirety, explaining that only He could comprehend it. All were joyful... all except one. *Fuerza* filled with rage at the idea that he, the first of the *creados*, was denied the knowledge of *El Plan*.²¹

“The *creados* were both delighted and puzzled at the creation of the earth. They saw no need for it, especially in such a low, physical fashion. *Fuerza* grew even more

¹⁹ Well ... Strength ... Wisdom ... Grace / Charm ... Laughter ... Trust ... Pride

²⁰ Death ... Saint Death ... drug traffickers and criminals

²¹ Creations ... The Plan ... Strength

angry with the creation of the two halflings, half spiritual, half physical— although, *Fuerza* noticed with contempt, they had been the last to be created. But he became positively infuriated upon hearing the Father declare these halflings ‘made after His own image’. How the Father could put this distinction on these most lowly of the *creados*, *Fuerza* could not understand.

“*Entonces*, *Fuerza* began to complain quietly to the others. The first ones he came to, *Risa y Perspicacia*, ignored him, but *Fuerza* was cunning and persuasive. *Orgullo* and others began to be swayed by his arguments.²² Eventually *Fuerza* united a band of *creados* with his complaints. They decided to approach the Father and demand to know *El Plan*, *en total*. They demanded, they cursed, they fought, and they were cast down.”²³

The old man was silent for a few seconds, his eyes transfixed on a line of ants crawling beside his boot down towards the river.

“As he fell, *Fuerza* became *Fuerza Negra*. His once bright complexion paled and darkened into eternal shadow.”

La fuerza negra, Leticia repeated gravely.²⁴

“Had it saddened the Father to do so? *Claro que sí*. But unbeknownst to *Fuerza*, this was part of *El Plan*.”²⁵

²² Well / then, Strength ... Laughter and Insight / Clear-headedness ... Pride

²³ In total / completely

²⁴ The black force / another way (somewhat uncommon way) to name the devil

²⁵ Of course ... Strength ... The Plan

“The Father continued in His way. He walked among the trees; He fondled with the wolves; He laughed with the halflings, whom He had named *Hombre* and *Mujer*. His fingertips tickled the tips of the grass... maybe even the very grass we are sitting upon.”²⁶

Wide-eyed, Leticia stroked her hand along the grass beside her.

“But the Father knew what was coming. He knew it could not last forever. Ever since *Fuerza* had *metido la pata*, He had been counting down the days.”²⁷

As he spoke, the old man’s rumbling voice rose and fell with the rhythm of the story. Neither Leticia nor Damián moved a muscle.

“One morning, even as the pale morning light shone its softest and purest, the Father felt it. He saw the limb bend, heard the tear of teeth, felt the juice dripping. He heard the hiss of satisfaction.”

The old man paused, watching the comprehension dawn on their faces. *La serpiente*, Leticia whispered, while Damián looked down at his feet.²⁸

“Was the Father again heartbroken? *Sin falta*. Was He surprised, or even slightly taken off guard? Of course not.”²⁹

²⁶ Man and Woman

²⁷ Strength had screwed up

²⁸ The serpent / snake

²⁹ Without a doubt

“He had seen it coming since before He had begun. He had even warned the halflings about what was to come. He told them, told them that to eat of the tree meant death.”

Wouldn't that mean death is the worst thing, then? Damián interrupted. *O sea*, why would He threaten them with it, if it wasn't bad?³⁰

At this the old man, not looking at Damián, walked down to sit beside him. He took the fish in his hands and dipped it in the water, making it shimmer in the sunlight. Then he lifted it back into the air and set it carefully on a clean stone.

“Meanwhile, *Muerte* had been given the task of transitioning the day to night and the fall to spring. All endings were by her controlled, and she used them to begin the beginnings.³¹

“When the juice dripped, the Firstlings who had remained faithful were thrown into confusion and sadness. It was all they could do to keep their faith in *El Plan*. As the Fall still reverberated throughout the Kingdom, the Father came to *Muerte*. He told her that He had another job for her... a much more difficult one.

“She was to be in charge of another ending; the end of the close relationship between the Father and the halflings. *Muerte* was frightened at this, and asked what she would begin in its place, for all her endings led to beginnings.

³⁰ Or rather

³¹ Death

“The Father smiled down at her and reassured her that He would take care of that. Then He grew serious once more. Her other job, He explained, was to be in charge of the end of life. *Muerte* did not know life could end. She nearly fainted upon hearing it. But once more, the Father assured her that there would be a beginning. He would begin another life, a new life. It was all part of *El Plan*.

“*Algunos días después, Muerte* had to face her new station. *La serpiente*, making his way out of the Garden, caught and ate a mouse. *Muerte* came to the mouse, a tear dripping down her cheek, and ended its life. Then she took the soul of the mouse—”³²

Father Miguel told us that animals don’t go to heaven, Leticia interrupted, frowning. Joselina asked if she would see her dog in heaven and Father Miguel said no because they don’t have souls.

The old man leaned back and looked at Leticia. “*Neta*,” he said after a moment,³³ “It is one of the great mysteries of the Kingdom, the differences between man and animal. What do you think?”

Me? Leticia asked incredulously. Ehh... she looked up at the blue sky, streaked at the moment with wispy clouds. I don’t know.

“*Bueno*, it is just a question. What about you, *Damián*?”³⁴

³² A few days after / later

³³ True

³⁴ That’s okay

Damián did not look up, but rather looked at the fish on the rock. He studied it for a while. I don't think, he began haltingly, that God could make the fish that beautifully without... you know? There has to be something.

The old man nodded. After a moment, he continued on.

“*Muerte* took the soul of the mouse and hid it away, for the Father had not told her what to do after the end. He had not told her what to begin, only that He would do so.

“As animals began to die more and more, *Muerte* began to despair. What good would come of this? What good *could* come of this? She was still merely hiding the souls away.

“Years passed. Although she had not yet had to do it, she knew what must be coming. The halflings, half spirit like her, would die at some point. What would she do with *them*?

“The moment came, and *Muerte* despaired. The first death, you may remember, of Abel. By his own brother. So brutal was this, so evil, that *Muerte* could hardly reach out her hand to do her task. And so she ended Abel's life, the first of the halflings to meet *Muerte*, and took his soul and hid it with those of the animals.

“*Muerte* did not stop crying. She did not know how the Father could still love her if the endings were like this. Again, she was at a loss of what to do; she knew the halfling's soul should not stay with the animals. And so she cried, and she cried.

“It was not long before *Fuerza* appeared. Although he knew *Muerte* had not listened the first time, he also had not counted on the Father collecting the souls, having hoped He would destroy His halfings for their disobedience. He had carefully encouraged the brother’s evil in order to see what would happen; *Fuerza* did not understand it, nor did he like it.

“But *Fuerza* was cunning. He pretended to comfort *Muerte*, who despite her distrust of *Fuerza*, felt dark and lonely. Slowly, *Fuerza* began to try to convince her once more to abandon *El Plan*. Together, they could control the endings and the beginnings. In fact, he boasted, with him she would never have to end life again, if she did not want to.

“*Muerte* cried a long time. Finally, in a rush of emotion she cried out to the Father; *Fuerza* instantly disappeared. When He appeared, she did not stop crying but confessed that she had indeed wanted to join *Fuerte*. She missed the ease and comfort of the seasons, the day and the night. But she trusted the Father. So, knowing she could not know *El Plan*, she begged the Father for something, anything that might help her bear her task.

“The Father looked at her and took pity on her, for He knew the task He had set. First, He fashioned a place for *Muerte* to put the souls of the halfings, a place that would keep them as He prepared their new beginning. Then He took off His cloak and burned it with the flames of the sun, which were of His own Heat and Light. The cloak became black as ash. This He gave to *Muerte*, who, putting it on, felt the eternal warmth of the Father as if He Himself encased her. That warmth would never fade. And so to this day,

Santa Muerte continues in her task from the Father, attending to the days, the seasons, and death.

“And you know the rest,” the old man concluded, smiling at Leticia. “I’m assuming I don’t need to tell you the *Jesús* part.”³⁵

Leticia grinned.

“Anyways,” he started again, “*El punto es nomás que* one need not fear meeting *Santa Muerte*. She will only take you to a new beginning.”³⁶ The old man rubbed his nose and sniffed. “As a wise Italian once wrote, one day we shall discover that death was an invaluable and wise friend. Is it not so?”

And with that the old man stood up and bade them each goodbye. But before he had slipped away, Leticia, burning with curiosity, called out to him— and what happened to the others? The other Firstlings?

He stopped but did not turn around. Instead, he looked at a tree to his right, turning his head just enough for them to hear.

“*Algunos* are still around,” he called back. “It is said that on occasion *Perspicacia* will step in to steer one in the right direction, and I’ve heard that *Gracia* can still be heard amongst the woods and the water.”³⁷ And with that, he melted off into the secret forest.

³⁵ Jesus Christ

³⁶ The point is no more that / The point is

³⁷ Some ... Insight / Clear-headedness ... Grace / Charm

CHAPTER SEVEN

So What's the Plan?

After the old man left, they stayed there by the river a good while. They didn't fish anymore, but they enjoyed being in the sun by the water. They stuck their feet in the river, and skipped stones till they could make it to the other side. They lounged about, talking and laughing, mulling over what the old man had told them. Then they found smooth, round stones in the riverbed, and used sharp dry stones to drill holes in them like they used to do as *niños* by *El Sabino*.¹ It's an easy process; taking the smooth, wet stone in your left hand, and the sharp, dry one in your right, you push the point of the sharp stone into the middle of the wet one, and begin to twist. You must keep the point in the same spot. Eventually, it creates a smooth, even hole, a perfect circular window for an ant house or a spider's barricade.

Leticia went home a few hours later. She had to go back, in order to keep up *la fachada que* she had been at school all day.² Damián decided to stay in the *bosque secreto* awhile; for one, because he did not want to leave, but also because it might be suspicious if they came home at exactly the same time.³ After she had said goodbye and sunk into the western woods, Damián got to work cleaning the fish. He was slow and

¹ When they were kids by the lake El Sabino

² The façade

³ The secret forest

precise, using the *navaja* to slice away anything that didn't need to be there.⁴ It took him a good while to do all eight, and afterwards he strung them on the stringer and hung them on a nearby limb. He walked down to the edge of the river and washed his hands and his *navaja*. The water ran cool and clean over his skin, feeling wonderful on the warm spring day.

He stood up and felt the sun shining on his face. It was warm and smooth and seemed to radiate energy down through his arms and torso all the way to his toes. He felt like *Supermán*, the sun the source of his powers.⁵ He tried to think about the old man's story; however, in all honesty, it was hard to think with much serious thought in that bright and sunny glade. He lay down on soft grass. Why didn't he get suspended more often?

The shadows were beginning to lengthen when he woke, having accidentally fallen asleep. It wasn't too late yet, nothing he'd get in trouble about, at least. He had, for the moment, completely forgotten *Santa Muerte* and the old man. He had forgotten about the fight, Julio, and he almost forgot the fish, he was in such a daze. But he did notice them as he walked towards the path. Upon seeing them, he grunted and went back down to the river and splashed water on his face. That felt better. Then he slipped the stringer of fish over his shoulder, took the rod in his hand, and slowly shambled back up the path, with a yawn.

⁴ Pocketknife

⁵ Slang for Superman

The trees grew thicker next to the path after he got across the little bridge back onto the mainland. The sunlight did not hit the path. The shadows were long, and a slight breeze ruffled the tips of the leaves. Perhaps it was the sound of the breeze, or perhaps he was just not paying much attention, but Damián never heard the rustling behind him. He hardly had time to take a breath when the hood snapped over his head and something heavy thumped him in the back on the head.

Leticia had found it unpleasant to walk home by herself. It wasn't very far, and she quite liked the route; but that dark, bubbly, moody section of the river frightened her. She had often wondered if there was anything Damián could do if she fell in behind him, but it was nice to have him there. She crossed herself twice, and tip-toed across the rickety little bridge. Once on the other side she turned and nodded to the river to pay her respects, then hurried onward.

After that it wasn't really all that bad. The sun fell bright on the path, and the green of the leaves stood out beautifully against the sky. The dirt was soft underneath her feet, and it wasn't too hot. She must have had some lingering *mala onda* from the bridge, because she still felt uneasy.⁶ She picked up her pace, and didn't slow back down into her regular walk until she had crossed the big bridge and reached *la Galera*.

She hadn't made it three more steps towards home when she heard a voice a little ways behind her.

⁶ Bad vibes

“No mames, ¿te fuiste de pinta, huerca?” 7

She whirled around. Victor was walking up behind her, shaking his head knowingly.

“I saw you coming from the north. Now what would your mother think of that?”

She raised a threatening finger. *Ni te atrevas, güey.* 8

Victor smiled briefly. Then he grew serious once more. This bothered Leticia; when was Victor ever serious?

“Were you with your brother?”

Sí, ¿por qué? 9

“Mira, Damián needs to watch out for Julio—” 10

Bueno, Leticia interrupted, Damián’s not worried about him, he can handle him like he did last—

“No, *escúchame por favor*,” Victor implored her. “Today I forgot Damián was suspended, and after school I went and sat at the bench— you know, *nuestra banca de reunión*,” he added as she looked questioningly at him. 11

7 No way, did you play hooky / skip school today, girl? (name for a friend who is a girl)

8 Don’t you dare, fool / bro

9 Yes, what for?

10 Look (translates closer to ‘listen’)

11 No, listen to me please ... our meeting bench

“I sat there for a minute, but then remembered and got up to leave. Then, out of nowhere, these two big *cholos* grabbed me and forced me to sit back down. They asked me where Damián was. I said *pues* I don’t know, *cualquier cabrón pueda ver que* I was waiting for him, and he didn’t show up, obviously. But they kept pressing. I said who needs to know, and they said Julio Perez Jiménez and that if I knew what was good for me, I’d tell him.”¹²

Victor gave Leticia a sideways look. “*Sabes que* I don’t like when people talk to me like that. I told him that being a *pinche elefante parado* didn’t make him the king so *chinga su madre.*”¹³

Leticia, who had been growing more worried by the minute, now erupted into laughter. *Estás loco, Victor!*¹⁴

“*Entonces*, I had to get away pretty quick,” he winked at her. “But anyways, that’s bad news for Damián.” His voice grew grave. “I don’t like the look of it. I didn’t think he was more than *un peón*, but it looks like some bad people could be really angry.”¹⁵

¹² *Cholo* = gangster looking dude ... well I don’t know, any motherfucker could tell

¹³ You know ... fucking standing elephant ... so fuck you

¹⁴ You’re crazy

¹⁵ Well then ... a pawn

Leticia also became serious once more. He's safe now, she reassured him. He's in *el bosque secreto*, and nobody but me knows exactly where. He should be okay for today. *Pero...* she looked left and right. *Te quedas tirarnos esquina, ¿estamos?*¹⁶

"*Estamos, huerca,*" he answered with a nod. "*Cuidado.*"¹⁷

Leticia nodded, turned around, and hurried home, her heart full of worry. The shadows of the trees turned dark and they leaned over to look down upon her, full of worry and fear. She didn't know trees could become frightened. She quickened her pace.

Damián's eyes opened slowly. Then he immediately closed them again, as the sun seemed bright on him, but his eyes quickly adjusted. He reopened them and sat up, looking around; it was later in the afternoon, nearly evening, and he was lying in a little meadow. But it had been late evening when he had started for home, he remembered. He must have only been out a few moments. *Qué madre...* he muttered, rubbing the back of his head.¹⁸

"Damián," called a soft voice behind him.

He turned around quickly— too quickly. His head pounded and he pressed his palms into his forehead. *Dios mío*, he groaned.¹⁹

¹⁶ The secret forest ... but, keep an eye out / have our backs, okay?

¹⁷ Sounds good, sis ... be careful

¹⁸ What the hell...

¹⁹ OMG

“Yea, eh, sorry about that,” the voice said.

Damián removed his hands and looked up.

Julio? *¿Qué chingados es eso?* He cried.²⁰ There was Julio, his eye still dark and his nose all bruised, although it looked like someone had tried to push it more or less back into place. But before he could really work up a fury, Julio had put his hands up in front of him and was talking fast.

“*Mira*, I didn’t have a choice, okay? You couldn’t go home and I needed to talk to you and I knew you’d be avoiding me so I couldn’t just walk up to you and—”

Why would I be avoiding you, *¿imbécil?* Look at your face!²¹

“Well, I mean, what the fuck does that have to do with anything,” Julio asked, his tone a little hurt.

¿Qué?! Damián exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air.

“*Tranquilo*, I’ll explain,” Julio answered. “Has no one told you what’s been going on?”²²

Explique por favor, pendejo, Damián sighed as he lay back down on the grass.²³

²⁰ What the fuck is this?

²¹ Imbecile / idiot

²² Huh?! ... Calm down

²³ Explain please, bastard

“*Pues*, since yesterday a couple of guys have been going around, asking everyone where you are. *Hombres malos, maléficos*, Damián. They said they were looking for you because I needed to know.”²⁴

Well, I’m assuming you of all people could figure that out pretty quick, Damián snapped. I was fishing, *por supuesto*. What the hell you need a bunch of guys out looking for me for.²⁵

“I didn’t,” Julio said, exasperated. “I didn’t ask them to do that.”

“*Mira*, Damián, after the fight I went home and complained to my father and Felix. Felix got mad, so he went and told some other people.” Julio looked down and shook his head. “Unfortunately, those other two guys you fought, Alberto and Vicente, they are in it too. Vicente’s brother was actually pretty involved in getting *la Nueva Generación* over here.” Julio sighed again.²⁶ “Anyways, word traveled quick. Some of the bosses got ticked off, thought you had disrespected them. Next thing I know...” Julio’s voice had suddenly become shaky, and trailed off.

Most of Damián’s shock and anger had seeped away by this point. He had sat back up by this point. He looked up at Julio. *¿Qué pasó?* ²⁷

²⁴ Well ... Bad men, evil men

²⁵ Duh / of course

²⁶ Jalisco New Generation Cartel

²⁷ What happened? / and what else?

Julio sat down next to him, not looking at him. His voice was weak as he spoke. “Felix took me out to the fields. Said there was someone that needed to see me. Said that maybe something good could come of this. That they were ready.”

Damián waited for a moment. Ready for what?

“They were ready for me to be part of the team.” Julio rubbed the back of his neck, then looked up at Damián. “It wasn’t supposed to be yet, you know. They were gonna let me get through *la Preparatoria* first.” He looked back down into the grass.²⁸

“Some big *cholo* was waiting for us. I didn’t know who he was, but I guess Felix did. Felix was extremely polite to him.”²⁹

Bueno, he must be scary, Damián said.³⁰ Felix wasn’t overly polite to anyone, in the best of moods.

“He told me that it was time for me to prove myself and join the family. He gave this big speech, but I didn’t hear half of it. *La neta es que* I was shitting myself.”³¹

Happens, Damián said.

²⁸ High school

²⁹ Gangster

³⁰ Well

³¹ The truth is that

“Then he said I had already dishonored the family, and gave another big spill about how only the strong survive. *Damián*,” his voice began to shake again, “he, he told me, I had to... that I had to kill you.”

Damián coughed. *No puede ser*, he breathed.³² His head spun and his mind raced from thought to thought. How had... why... *Leticia*? His mother?

Julio turned and looked at him. *Damián* looked back. He saw the fear in Julio’s eyes, saw his mind dancing in the same hectic manner as his own. *¿Entonces?* *Damián* asked quietly.³³

Julio shook his head. “*Para nada.*”³⁴

Damián pressed his lips together and scratched his eyebrow with his right hand. His stomach was queasy. For a moment he thought of the *rápiditos* and the river and the sun and the stones now with holes in them. Then he looked at Julio. *Chingada madre.*³⁵

Bueno, *Damián* said eventually. Then he looked at Julio. *Pues*, help me up, *compa.*³⁶

³² It cannot be / no way

³³ And?

³⁴ Not for nothing / no way

³⁵ The little rapids ... Fuck.

³⁶ Well ... brother

A hint of a grin passed over Julio's face. Then he stood up, grasped Damián's hand, and hauled him to his feet. Damián took a second to breath. He felt the air fill his lungs, stretch his chest, then slowly sink down again.

So what's the plan? he asked.

Leticia was in her room pretending to do her homework when someone knocked hard on the door. She had come home and done her best to act normal; she wanted a chance to think before she told her mother anything. But now, several hours later, she had thought plenty; still she had not found the words or the courage to tell her. What good would it do to worry her? Damián was safe for today.

The knocking had interrupted her reverie. For half a moment she assumed it was Damián, then she realized how ridiculous that was. Damián wouldn't have knocked, he would've just come in. She heard the knocking again: this time harder, sharper. She heard her mother call out to say she was coming, as she got the food that was cooking in such a state that it could be left for a moment.

Leticia opened her door and peaked out into the hallway as her mother went around and opened the front. She heard a small gasp of surprise, but could not see who it was. She crept out into the hallway so as to have a better view.

What she saw, she did not like. She did not like it at all. A tall, thick young man stood at the door. She could tell who it was, though she could not see his face; it was shadowed by the sun behind him and the inevitable darkness of years as living as a

bandit. As she peered at him, it seemed the darkness surrounding him was pulsating, actively trying to push as much light away as it could.

“Felix?” Alma’s voice was calm, but her body was tense. “¿*Qué estás haciendo aquí?*”³⁷

“*Hola, señora Alma,*” Felix replied. His voice was gravely and gruff. He, too, looked tense. He looked and sounded as he had the night her and her mother had gone to pick up Damián from their house, back before Leticia was in *la Primaria*. Her mother had never liked letting Damián stay long at Julio’s house, preferring Julio to come to *la Galera* instead. But on this occasion she had allowed it; Leticia could not remember why, if it was Julio’s birthday or some other reason.

It had been summertime; Leticia could remember because she had been angry with her mother, who had not let her get anything from the *paletero* as they passed the *plaza*.³⁸ She had pouted and tried to stomp the whole way to Julio’s house, but had gotten sweaty and tired from the effort, as her mother had warned her. When they drew near, they heard someone yelling. They hurried to the door, and Alma had knocked and called loudly. They heard a string of expletives and someone slamming their hand against the wall. A few seconds later, Felix opened the door.

“*Hola, señora Alma,*” he had said, the same tone of barely suppressed fright and frustration. Then he turned, barked at Damián to get out of the house, and slammed the

³⁷ What are you doing here?

³⁸ The ice cream man in the plaza

door as soon as he had done so. This frightened Leticia, but Damián had laughed about it all the way home. Apparently, Damián and Julio had pranked Felix, which was nothing out of the ordinary. Julio and Felix never got along; Felix was always a bully. Naturally, Damián always sided with Julio, and the two of them *cometían muchos chingados para vengarse*.³⁹

That day they had lured Felix into Julio's room while he was eating. He was carrying his plate and eating while spitting insults at his brother for not being able to find *la pelota*. As soon as he walked in, Damián popped out of the closet and hurled the ball at him, hitting him smack in the face. With a cry, he dropped the plate. It shattered on the hard floor. *Bueno*, Felix wasn't particularly happy *con este desmadre*.⁴⁰

As Damián and Leticia would soon find out, the reason Felix had been even angrier than usual about the prank was the plate. After her death, Felix and Julio's father had saved everything that used to be their mother's. These were full of emotional attachment and quickly became the most valuable in the house. That particular plate had been the last remaining of a set their mother had bought for the seafood restaurant. Felix, seeing that the other plates were dirty and being too lazy to wash one, had figured using it just that once wouldn't hurt. His father's belt that night had proved otherwise.

All this flashed through Leticia's mind as she heard Felix's voice. She slid out into the hall and walked a few steps closer. Felix's eyes left Alma's and looked behind

³⁹ Had done many annoying tricks in order to get revenge

⁴⁰ The soccer ball ... with this mess

her, scanning the house. He noted Leticia but did not linger on her, rather he kept scanning. You should have told *mamá, imbecil*, she thought.⁴¹

“*Bueno*, what do you want?” Alma said after a moment, a little tersely.

“Where is Damián and Julio,” Felix said flatly, still not looking at her.

Alma raised her eyebrows. “¿*Cómo?*”⁴²

Felix met her eye and in an instant, Alma could see it, could see the swirling, bubbling emotions, barely hidden underneath a cold surface. Her grip tightened on the door but she stood her ground.

“Where is my brother,” Felix repeated slowly. There was a bit of a growl in his voice now.

“*No tengo la mínima idea*, I have to get back to cooking and I think you should go home, Felix. *Adios.*” Alma said sternly.⁴³ She stepped back and tried to shut the door. Before she could shut it completely, Felix kicked it hard and it slipped and slammed into her chest! Leticia screamed and ran to her mother and pulled her back.

“Don’t try to hide them. ¡*Dónde carajos están!*” Felix roared, the cold veneer melting from his face, losing all pretense of calm.⁴⁴ He took a step inside. He was

⁴¹ Idiot / imbecile

⁴² What did you just say? / Say that one more time?

⁴³ I have absolutely no idea ... goodbye.

⁴⁴ Where the fuck are they!

shaking all over, and now Leticia could clearly see his eyes— *como una rata, atrapada por la serpiente pero aún no comida*. This frightened Leticia even more.⁴⁵

Alma had quickly recovered and pulled Leticia behind her. Leticia saw the fire blazing in her eyes as she turned back to Felix. “*Déjanos en paz, pendejo*. We don’t know. Damián is out for the day and I haven’t seen Julio in over a year.”⁴⁶

Felix grabbed the vase from the hallway stand and hurled it to the ground, shattering. The glass pieces shimmered blue and purple as they slid across the floor around Leticia’s feet.

“*¡Déjese de cuentos!*” Felix’s voice became higher pitched and he was sounding more and more desperate.⁴⁷

“*¡Oye! Tú quieres una bofetada, ¿eh? ¡Te calmas o te calmo, Felix!*” Alma yelled back.⁴⁸

Felix’s face flushed. Then he growled and advanced on Alma and as soon as he got in reach, ¡ZAS! Alma slapped him across the face so hard that he staggered back.

⁴⁵ Like a mouse, caught by the snake but not yet eaten.

⁴⁶ Leave us in peace / get out of here, jackass

⁴⁷ Don’t lie to me! / Cut the crap!

⁴⁸ Hey! You want me to slap you across the face? Calm down or I will calm you down!

“¡Vuelves a tocar algo más este día y te lo juro por dios que no te lo vas a acabar! NO TE LO VAS A ACABAR, ¿estamos?!”⁴⁹

Leticia was frozen. Her mother stood in front of her, defiant, angry. Felix was so shocked that it took him a few seconds to find his words. His face seemed twisted and stretched in a kind of angry grimace. Then everything seemed to happen at once.

“¡Hija de puta!” he snarled and Leticia saw his right hand reach behind him.⁵⁰ Alma shoved her back up the hallway, yelling for her to run. She saw the gleam of metal as he raised his hand, his thumb reaching up to pull back the hammer.

“¡Ya basta! Tell me!” he screamed at Alma. Then in an instant, a shadow flashed behind Felix and Leticia heard a sickening *tan*.⁵¹

“Cállate ya, cabrón,” Leticia heard someone mutter. Felix crumpled to the ground, revealing Victor, a long-handled shovel in his hands. ⁵²

⁴⁹ Touch anything else in this house and I swear to God you will not last the day! YOU WILL NOT LAST THE DAY / I WILL KILL YOU, understand?!

⁵⁰ Daughter of a bitch! (translates better to ‘Bitch!’)

⁵¹ Enough already! ... *tan* = clang

⁵² Shut up already, motherfucker

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mist on the River

Vamos a ver, ¿OK? We'll have to see what my mother thinks.¹

Julio shook his head. "There's no other option, *güey*. *El norte* is the safest place."²

In this manner they argued as they crossed the bridge into *la Galera*. Damián was in a hurry to get home; his mother would be getting worried, it wasn't long till dark. Not like she'll be too bothered by that, he thought to himself with a sigh, after everything else he'd have to tell her.

Instead of taking a left along the road, they cut over and across the hill that rose up behind Damián's house. They didn't want everyone to see them, especially not together. Before they got to the top, Damián stopped Julio and suggested they stick to some of the taller oak trees off to the right where they wouldn't be seen. Julio agreed, and they slipped into the shadow of the oaks.

As soon as they came in sight of the house, Damián realized that the front door was open. But nobody was out front. His stomach went queasy.

¹ We'll see, okay

² Bro ... The north, meaning USA

Julio, close enough, he said. *Órale*.³ They hurried out of the woods towards the house, Damián breaking almost into a run. He rounded the door and almost ran right over Victor.

“¡*Aguas!*” Victor cried as Damián slipped on the broken glass of the vase and tumbled to the floor.⁴ Julio was close behind, but not going as quickly, and stopped in the doorway. At the sight of Julio, Victor gave a shout and grabbed for the shovel.

¡*Tranquilo hombre!* Damián yelled from on the ground. He’s okay!⁵

It took a good few minutes to get everything sorted out. Leticia was still shaken up, and poor Alma still didn’t know anything that had happened since the fight. It took a lot of correcting, interrupting, stammering and saying “¿*En serio?*” before everybody finally understood the situation. *Bueno*, at least most of the situation.⁶

After the *madrazo* he had given Felix, Victor had picked up the revolver and handed it to Alma, who had taken it to the kitchen as she hurried to attend to the dinner now on the point of burning.⁷ Leticia had watched her open-mouthed. How does one remember to attend to dinner after having a gun pulled on them? Who cares about *mochomos* after that? ⁸ But Felix had quickly come back around, snapping her attention

³ Hurry up / lets go

⁴ Careful! / be careful

⁵ Calm down man

⁶ Seriously / really? ... well

⁷ The smack / blow

⁸ Mexican dinner typical of west coast, consisting of onions, peppers, and beef cooked over a stove

back to the hallway. He was in no hurry to get up. Victor hauled him up by the shoulder and pulled him out of the house onto the road, the both of them complaining loudly. Victor then pulled him along the road towards the bridge, Leticia trailing not too far behind. Felix seemed broken. The sunlight that glowed off of Victor's arms and her hands as the golden light of the evening covered them did not glow on Felix. Rather, his skin appeared matted and dulled, and his face— which was usually quite handsome— gaunt and hollow in the light of the evening star.

He had told them that Julio had to kill Damián.

“*N'ombre, no puede ser,*” Victor gasped.⁹

“*Mira, Victor,*” Felix pleaded, “if he doesn't, they'll kill *him*. They'll take him to the mountains and leave him for the coyotes.”¹⁰

“*Ay, dios mio,*” Victor muttered, closing his eyes.¹¹

After they got a ways down the road Victor had shoved him in the direction of the bridge and warned him not to come back. Having had enough for one night, Felix slinked off back to town, still in search of his little brother.

Victor was the last to relate his story, telling how he had been drinking on his porch keeping watch for when Damián came home when he had seen Felix and knew something was up. But he was careful not to tell the whole story. Nearing the end, he did

⁹ No, no way / shut up

¹⁰ Look / listen

¹¹ Good gracious

not say a word of the threats against Julio's life. He did not know if they were real or just Felix worried, but he kept his mouth shut. Leticia noticed this, and she, too, had sense enough to stay quiet. Neither trusted Julio if the choice came down to him versus Damián, in the end.

The house became silent as everyone processed what had been said. In all honesty, it didn't really sink into Leticia; the absurdity of it all made it seem surreal. Try as she might, Leticia could not make sense of the idea that anyone had to die because of a schoolyard fist-fight. *No puede ser*, she thought.¹² Damián too seemed as if he was merely resigning himself to a bad dream, and that surely later he would wake up. Julio, however, was not incredulous. He peeked his head out of the door, looked around, and then shut it, banishing the few remaining rays of sunlight.

"Ay, *chingados*," Alma muttered, and all four of the *chavos* stared at her in disbelief. She snorted and waved a hand. "*Tranquilo, hombres*. Dinner is ready; for now, let's eat. I think I've got enough for you two," she squinted at Victor and Julio.¹³

But Damián grabbed Victor by the arm as everyone else filed into the kitchen. *Mira güey*, you need to go home.¹⁴

¹² It can't be

¹³ Shit ... the four kids ... Calm down, people

¹⁴ Look, bro

Victor looked at him appalled. “*Crees que I’m going to go home and leave you here with todas las pinches Matazetas trying to kill you? Estás loco.*”¹⁵

Damián squeezed his arm harder. *Hombre*, if Felix tells them what happened, this house might not be their only stop. Victor met his eye. Go home, *compa*. If I made it out and they didn’t, it wouldn’t be worth it.¹⁶

Victor’s jaw clenched, and he looked down, frustrated.

Mira, I’m sure after a few days everything will calm down. I’m nobody to them. I’ll just lay low, he said with a half-hearted smile. *Órale, vete ya.*¹⁷

“*Está bien,*” Victor nodded reluctantly, looking back up at Damián. “*Cuidado con Julio.*” He turned around and took a few steps in order to poke his head into the kitchen. “*Bueno, parece que I have to go home.*”¹⁸

Alma nodded, unsurprised. Leticia’s face fell. Victor came around, and walked over to her. Then he gave her a hug and a kiss on the top of her head.

“*Cuidado huerca, ¿OK?*”¹⁹

¹⁵ You think ... with all the fucking *Matazeta* cartel guys ... you’re crazy

¹⁶ Dude ... bro

¹⁷ Look ... Hurry up, get outa here

¹⁸ Alright ... Keep an eye on Julio ... Well, it looks like

¹⁹ Stay safe sis, okay?

He smelled like rain on the west winds, or the new mud carried by the river as it swelled in the spring. His breath carried the dark hint of coffee. *Tú también*, she replied softly.²⁰ Then he released her and gave another hug to Alma, who kissed him on the cheek.

Then he turned, nodded to Julio, and walked back out to Damián.

Damián grasped his hand. *Nos vemos, compa*.

“*Conste, ¿eh?*”

*Ya tu sabes.*²¹

And with that, Victor opened the door, looked to his left and to his right, and hurried across the street to warn his family.

Abstract sounds of eating the *mochomo* filled the house. Leticia heard the static whisper of Damián’s *Coca-cola* as he took a swing and set it back down on the table with a thunk; her mother had brought out the *sodas* for dinner as Leticia was particularly partial to them. Alma swallowed and coughed quietly into her hand. There was a muffled thump as Julio took a big bite of his *mochomo* and all the beef fell out the other side of

²⁰ You too

²¹ See you later / be seeing you, bro ... I’m gonna hold you to that, okay? ... You already know bro.

the *tortilla*, back onto his plate. Leticia hid her smile with her napkin. Damián finally broke the silence.

*Me pasas otra tortilla, ¿por favor?*²²

Leticia nodded silently and reached over to give him one. The pans on the stove still steamed ever so slightly, filling the house with the smell of *cebollas*, *frijoles* and *limas*.²³ She had just taken a swig of her own *coca*, appreciating the smooth vibration on her tongue as it fizzed, when there was once again a knock at the door.

Everybody froze. Julio swallowed the bite he had just put in his mouth; in the silence, it sounded like an elephant swallowing a massive gulp of water. Everyone turned to look at him, and he blushed. Then whoever it was knocked again, but this time softer, and slower. This must have given Alma some confidence, as she slid her chair quietly back from the table, and went around the hall to the front door. Leticia trailed behind, silent as a ghost. Alma took a deep breath, and opened the door.

“Mariana? ¡*Buenas noches!* ¿*Cómo está usted?*”²⁴

Leticia could just see the outline of her silver white hair in front of her mother.

“*Bien.* May I come in?”²⁵

²² Can you pass me another tortilla, please?

²³ Onions, beans, and limes

²⁴ Good evening! How are you?

²⁵ Good

Alma quickly ushered her inside and brought her to the kitchen, where she greeted Damián, Leticia and Julio, seemingly unsurprised to see Julio. They offered her dinner, which she courteously refused. She did, however, gratefully accept a *coca*.

“*Escúchame bien, todos,*” Mariana said after taking a swig. “You do not have much time. You cannot stay the night here.”²⁶

Alma nearly choked on her drink and Julio went white as a sheet. Damián and Leticia looked at each other, neither surprised that *señora* Mariana understood the situation.

“Only a few minutes ago Felix arrived at the doorstep of one José Guadalupe Rodríguez. Do you know who he is?” Mariana asked, looking at no one in particular.

Julio’s eyes went wide. “¿*Don Lupe?*”²⁷

Mariana nodded. “So you do. Felix is convincing him to send men to help Julio kill Damián this very night.”

At this everyone jumped to their feet, all trying to talk at once.

Por qué—

“*No me digas—*”

²⁶ Listen closely, all of you

²⁷ Similar to ‘sir’ if a person is knighted

But Julio was the loudest and most persistent. “No he wouldn’t! He doesn’t want Damián to die! Why would he?”

Señora Mariana looked at him with her clear grey eyes, which were usually so hard to read. But now Leticia could see the sympathy and the sorrow deep within them.

“*Tienes razón*. Your brother does not want to kill Damián. But he’ll do what it takes to save you.”²⁹

Leticia cringed, putting her hand to her forehead. *Órale*.³⁰ Everyone was silent again. Mariana stepped forward and put a hand on Julio’s shoulder. Then, quite suddenly, she stepped back and looked towards the east.

“You must go. They are coming.”

Everyone sprang to life. Leticia and Damián ran into their room, then realized they didn’t know what they needed and ran back into the kitchen. Julio was pacing nervously and Alma was trying to put up the dishes.

“¡*Oye!*” called Mariana. She did not yell, but rather spoke loud and clear and brought everybody back to attention.³¹

²⁸ Why ... Shut up / now way ... it can’t

²⁹ You’re right

³⁰ Oh no

³¹ Hey!

“Don’t try to take anything with you. And, *por favor*, leave the dishes, *comadre*,” she said to Alma.³² “Leave at once. You’ll have a head start— they won’t come on foot, so they’ll have to cross at *Barotén* five miles to the south. But still you must hurry. Don’t follow the road, cut across the hill towards the north.” Now she was speaking to all of them, and speaking quickly. “Sneak past the bridge and follow the path upriver around the north edge of the *bosque secreto*. There will be a ford of small stones. Take this across and hide there wherever you may.”³³

Damián had fished around the secret forest his whole life, and to his knowledge, he had never seen a ford on the north shore. But, nodding to Leticia, he knew better than to question *señora* Mariana.

Then he noticed a glint of light as Julio picked up something from the counter. He looked closer, and then gave a start; a small revolver shined in the light from Julio’s hand.

*Primo, dame esa madre.*³⁴

Julio’s eyes flashed up at him, and then back down at the pistol. The hand holding the pistol moved ever so slightly— back towards himself.

³² Please ... friend (who’s a girl)

³³ The secret forest

³⁴ Bro, give me that

Leticia, walking beside Julio and seeing what he was holding, snapped her finger in his face.

That pistol is the one Felix tried to shoot us with, *cabrón*. Give it to Damián, she said, her voice stern. Her mother heard but let it slide.³⁵

Slowly, his eyes on the pistol, he extended his hand to Damián. Damián took the pistol and turned it over in his hands. Ruger. He had never used a pistol, only hunting rifles. It felt good in his hand: heavy, solid, comfortable. It had an easy confidence about it. He fancied he knew enough about guns in general to shoot well with it. He could see the tips of *las balas* peeking out. Six less *cholos* running around killing and burning. Six less people that would threaten his family.³⁶

Leticia touched him on the arm. He shook his head and shuddered. Then he fiddled with it until he found the latch that broke open the action. He emptied the cartridges into his left hand, making a *tin-tín* sound as they rattled together. Then he walked to the back door.

“What are you doing,” Julio asked, following Damián.

He opened the back door and took a few steps out into the night. The stars were bright, and winked down at him; the moon was a gleaming oval low to the southwest, but it was mostly covered by clouds on the horizon. This left the ground dark, and the silhouettes of the tall, spindly oaks barely visible. He closed his right fist around the

³⁵ Idiot

³⁶ The bullets ... gangsters

pistol and hurled it to the black giants of the night, praying it be lost forever among the leaves.

“¡*Qué chingados!*” Julio slapped his hand to his forehead. “¿*Estás loco cabrón?*”³⁷

Damián turned steely eyes on Julio. That’s not our way.

“*Órale, muchachos, ¡salen!*” Mariana called as she walked past them. Then she gestured out into the night.³⁸

The ground was rocky underfoot as they stole their way over the hill. Only Leticia was able to walk in such a manner truly deserving to be called quiet; so light and nimble was she, she could slip around the *cactus* like a shadow. The others had more trouble, Julio in particular. Breaking through brush like a wildman— for that’s what it felt like to him, in the dark he was practically shoving straight through whatever lay before him— seemed to him nearly as unpleasant as facing *don* Lupe straight on.

They reached the end of the brush, where it opened up to the main bridge. Damián, having the best eyesight, could see where the dark earth gave way to the light grey of the skinny, stone-walled path leading off to the north. The brush became unbearably thick

³⁷ What the fuck ... are you crazy dumbass?

³⁸ Hurry, fellas, leave!

north of the bridge; this path was the only way through. The sound of the river had grown and now rushed past their ears quite loud. Damián felt Julio shudder beside him. Julio had learned to repress his disgust of the black water when he was crossing the bridge, but that was as near to it as he would be.

Me parece bien. Vamos, Damián whispered.³⁹

Julio gripped at his sleeve. “I don’t think I can,” he trembled. The sound of the rushing water, black as the darkness, angry and bubbling, had washed over him. It took him back to that night long ago.

Damián was about to turn around and berate Julio when Leticia put her arm on his other shoulder, quieting him. Alma sighed.

“I know,” Alma said softly. “I know that it’s hard for you. But right now, there's nowhere else to go. You have to be brave.”

Julio shrank back even more, his face white.

Alma leaned close to him and whispered in his ear, in the threatening tone only angry mothers have found access to. “*No vas llorando. No quieres decir otra palabra más.*”⁴⁰

Julio gulped, nodded, and offered no comment.

³⁹ Looks good to me. Let’s go

⁴⁰ Quit whining. Don’t say another word.

Bueno, vamos, Damián whispered again. They slipped out into the open and hurried over to the path, stepping over the little side-wall.⁴¹

The path was about two and a half feet wide, with little 6-inch high stone walls on either side. It wound its way under low trees that they had to duck under, and then led them over a startlingly white metal bridge that was even skinnier than the path. It took them up a set of stairs, and the left sidewall got taller as the path led them across the steeper slopes of the foothills to the north.

Then they heard it. The first notes of music emanated from the south; *bueno*, not music, really. It was more like noise, bashing, banging, mixing with the growl of the trucks on the gravel.

“¡Órale!” Alma whispered, urging them on.⁴²

They hurried forward. The trees grew thicker and the wall to the right turned into a rusty barbed wire fence about waist high for about 200 yards, then receded into nothing, with just the thick undergrowth between them and the running water. The sound of the river pulsated stronger and softer as it wound its way next to them, and their path wound its way along the foothills.

Finally, after ducking under an old oak tree that had actually burst through the left-side wall, the brush opened up to the right, a gentle slope leading to the flat riverbank. Damián did indeed recognize this spot, having seen it from the other side, on

⁴¹ Alright, let's go

⁴² Hurry!

the northwest corner of the secret forest. He also remembered the water stretching deep and blue in between. Nevertheless, that night two tall *cactus* formed an archway with their arms on the bank, and stretching across underneath them beneath the starlight were the silvery pale dots of small stones.

The band went across in single file. The ford was about five feet wide and was so shallow that their feet were still dry once they got across. Leticia was in front, and waited till everybody was across to start forward once more. She hadn't taken two steps into the secret forest when it happened.

A shot rang out, clear and piercing across the night air. Everyone froze for a second time. The noise of the trucks had faded, but the shot— it was just so loud. She couldn't tell. She was inclined to think both that someone had shot so close that it might even have been at her, and also that the shot had come from the fields to the south. She couldn't tell. Ice crept swiftly through Leticia's veins and spread to her very fingers and toes.

Then she became truly horrified as something glinted in the starlight. Nothing metallic; no, it was a tiny stream, flowing down towards the river at an angle from the south. It was about the width of a pencil. And it was thick and red as the early dawn.

Yes, sighed a voice. It is what you fear.

Leticia's eyes teared up. Is it who I think it is?

After a moment of silence... *Sí*.⁴³

She closed her eyes, and a tear rolled silently down her cheek.

“Leticia, *¿qué te pasa?*” Alma asked, noticing her daughter and putting her arm around her.⁴⁴

Mira, Leticia said softly, pointing to the trickle of red.⁴⁵ Her eyes misted over; It was all she could do to not sit down and cry.

Now they saw the stream of blood. Alma gasped. Damián and Julio both shuddered, and all three made the sign of the cross over their chests.

It is *señora* Mariana, Leticia said chokingly.

No one questioned her. Somehow, in their heart of hearts, they all understood it to be her. They stood motionless, watching the blood trickle down until it finally hit the river.

Leticia, *¡apúrate!*⁴⁶

Leticia jerked her head around. Damián met her eye, blinking, still trying to process what had just happened. She looked left and right. Her mother and Julio were

⁴³ Yes

⁴⁴ What’s wrong?

⁴⁵ Look

⁴⁶ Hurry!

both gazing to the south, towards the blood. The voice was deep and rumbled through her mind. It sounded familiar. But no one else seemed to hear it.

Respira, Leticia. Flee to the north, to the northern shore.⁴⁷

Her instincts told her to obey the voice. She took a second to breathe. She felt how it expanded her chest, stretching her muscles before slowly letting it sink back down.

Vamos, she called quietly to the others. Damián, can you get us to the northern point of the island? I think that is where we should go.⁴⁸

Nobody objected. Damián nodded, *sígueme*.⁴⁹

Off they went following Damián. Now the path turned into a skinny trail, and branches brushed their shoulders. Numerous times they had to turn sideways to squeeze between two trees. The moon had come out now, but Leticia could hardly tell except for the soft glow on the tops of the trees when she looked straight up. The *bosque secreto* was thick, dark and gloomy. As always, there was no silence. Birds sang softly, their whistles echoing off the breeze and through the branches, one after the other. When one ended another began; there was no sleep for those creatures. As they walked, dark shadows scuttled through the undergrowth, rustling and twitching the leaves around them.

⁴⁷ Breathe

⁴⁸ Let's go

⁴⁹ Follow me

At one point they crossed a little stream. They did not hear it ahead of them; with the sound of the river around them, and the birds and beasts of the wood, its little trickle went unnoticed. Leticia might have stepped in it before seeing it, if it had not been for the moon. Through the tangled spider's web of black branches, she saw they were walking towards a strip of moonlight breaking through. Damián muttered something about it connecting the two sides of the river. It was small enough to jump across, even for Leticia, whose legs were not so long. *Pero, tiene una mala onda.*⁵⁰ It bubbled ribbonly black underneath wisps of silver mist.

It wasn't a full half mile between the ford and the northernmost shore of the secret forest as the bird flies, but on the winding little path, it felt like hours until they could see the river on both their right and their left, and felt the island coming to a point.

Finally they emerged onto a long grassy slope, leading down to a thin beach that formed a sharp dividing point between the two routes of the river. This was not the same water they had crossed at the ford. It was not the water of Damián's *rápiditos*.⁵¹ Leticia felt a shiver run down her spine. This water was the water of the stream. It was the water which ran under the rickety wooden bridge, dark, bubbly and mean. In places the mist was thick enough to conceal the water. The water glared at them as they walked along its edge, glared with pure anger. She was almost grateful to the mist for covering parts of the brooding river— and the instant this fancy occurred to her, she realized she saw the mist

⁵⁰ It had a bad vibe to it

⁵¹ Little rapids

differently than the water. It did not sulk and fill the air with gloom. Rather it looked soft; it looked to be the only welcoming part of the forest.

She had been so far off in her own imagination that she did not hear them. She did not snap back into the present until her mother yelled at her.

“*¡Córrele m'ija!*” Damián’s hand grabbed hers and pulled hard. She turned and ran.⁵²

The island stretched out about fifty more yards before it ended. Leticia, Damián and Julio stopped when they reached the water’s edge. To swim would be suicide; the river had a better chance of killing them than the men, and the men had a good enough chance already. Alma was quick behind them. And there they stood, the dark angry river in front, the sounds of the men calling to each other behind. There was nothing to do but turn around and face them.

The men had lights. Big spotlights, that made eerie white swaths through the darkness and they made their way forward. Damián would have proposed trying to sneak around them, except it was clear from the lights that they had enough men to keep the entire span of the northern rim of the island under light. It was less than a minute before there was a shout.

“*¡Mira allá!*”⁵³

⁵² Run, daughter!

⁵³ Look, over there!

Flashlights waved in their direction, flashing blindingly over them and making it difficult to see anything. The band did not move. Within a minute, the men had encircled them, and twenty spotlights were shining in their faces.

“*Buenas noches,*” called out a deep, booming voice. Silence followed. After a few moments, the voice continued. “*Bueno,* I had supposed that I was on the trail of somebody with some *educación, pero...*”⁵⁴

“*Pues, nomás que* we were somewhat startled by the manner of your approach,” Alma answered, her tone defiant.⁵⁵ “I would have thought that a man who would dare talk of manners would not hide his face, nor blind us so.”

Leticia heard the man smack his lips. Or, at least, she assumed it was the same man. For a moment she almost succumbed to panic; her mind was racing, telling her to run, telling her to jump for the river, to jump at the man, to lay down and die, to do something. She realized she was barely breathing.

Respira, señorita, the rumbling voice said again.⁵⁶ She found her breath. She focused hard on it. Then she faced the lights, her hands shaking slightly.

“*Tienes razón—*” the voice started, only to be cut off by Alma.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Good evening ... well ... manners, but

⁵⁵ Well, it's just that

⁵⁶ Breathe, young lady

⁵⁷ You're right

“That’s *usted* to you, *señor*. I do not know you, and you most certainly do not know me.”⁵⁸

Now the voice chuckled. “*Perdóneme, señora. Me dé un momento.*” Then he muttered to some of the men, who passed the information along to some of the other men.⁵⁹

All of the sudden the lights moved away from Leticia’s face. The men split in two, some moving to the left and some to the right. They lined up perpendicular to the voice and shined their lights sideways, bathing the scene in pale white. It took Leticia a few seconds for her eyes to adjust.

Standing in the light, about thirty yards away, three figures stood tall. *Bueno*, two stood tall, and the one on the left stooped and stood behind the other two. In the middle stood a middle-aged man, slightly taller than average. He was a thick man, yet he looked neither fat nor particularly strong. His face was clean shaven, jet black hair close cropped, and his jaw wider than his forehead in a triangular fashion. Except, usually triangular faces meant upside-down triangles. *Dios mío*, it was a wide chin.⁶⁰

“*Mira*, it’s the whole family, *que chido*,” wined a high pitched, nasally, ugly voice.⁶¹ Standing to the right of the thick man was a woman, younger than the thick man,

⁵⁸ ‘*Usted*’ being the formal mode of address.

⁵⁹ Excuse me, ma’am. Give me a moment (said in the formal mode of address)

⁶⁰ Good gracious

⁶¹ Look, it’s the whole family, how great

who seemed made of limbs like the oak trees. Her legs were spindly and long, her arms the same. Her neck poked high up to her thin long face, and she was a few inches taller than the man.

“*Les presento a señora Rosalinda,*” said the thick man.⁶²

The third figure did not speak, but rather stayed hunched over a few steps behind the other two. Then Leticia realized, as the figure stole a glance in their direction— it was Felix.

“*¿Es mejor?*” called out the thick man.⁶³

Alma sighed. “*Parece bien,*” she answered.⁶⁴

Damián was scanning the faces of the men with the lights and, as they could now see but had safely assumed already, guns. He too had nearly run at the men for sheer panic. He, too, had found his breath. For Damián, it was more as if his breath found him. He all the sudden felt it fill his lungs, and it released him from the spell of panic. Now, he had supposed he might recognize some of the gunmen. He was not disappointed. He recognized Tattoo; Mustache, apparently, wasn't there. How long ago it had been, it seemed, since he had stood on the road with just his one fish, ashamed of himself. Tattoo, per usual, was glaring at him.

⁶² May I introduce Mrs. Rosalinda

⁶³ Better?

⁶⁴ That's fine

“Now, Julio,” the thick man said— all of them had assumed correctly that this was *don Lupe*— his tone now patronizing. “I must ask. *¿Qué chingados estás haciendo con ellos?* Was the assignment not simple enough?”⁶⁵

Both *hermanos* glanced at Julio. His face was white as a sheet, with his mouth opening and closing, but no words came forth. Leticia caught *Damián*’s eye. It is fortunate, she thought, that he cannot speak. *Creo que* he’d say he’s chasing you or something. *Damián* nodded. He understood, and agreed wholeheartedly.⁶⁶

This may have been a little harsh on Julio; nevertheless, it will never be known. After a few moments, *don Lupe* continued talking. He seemed to enjoy when his pauses resulted in silence.

“Ay, Julio. Anyways. *Mira*, you don’t have to look at me with such hatred, *señora*. I believe I have good news.”⁶⁷

The *hermanos* looked up at their mother, who was standing beside Leticia with her arm around her. Her face radiated pure fury. Leticia hoped she would find her breath, not for panic but rather for anger.

“*Seguro*,” Alma replied slowly, dragging the word out to layer on as much sarcasm as she possibly could.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ What the fuck are you doing with them?

⁶⁶ The siblings ... I think

⁶⁷ Oh, Julio ... Look / listen

⁶⁸ Oh I’m sure

“*Espera, espera,*” replied *don* Lupe, holding up his hands. “*Es que, pues,* we have decided that *Damián* does not have to die.”⁶⁹

All four of them drew their eyebrows in at this, unbelieving.

“No, *es la verdad,*” assured Lupe.⁷⁰

Now *Damián* spoke up for the first time. *Qué más,* he spat.⁷¹

“You better speak with a little more respect, *cabrón,*” squeaked Rosalinda, “or we might change our minds. *¿Quieres conocer a Santa Muerte? ¿No?*”⁷²

Damián raised his eyebrows at this. He glanced at his sister. She set her jaw. How could this woman know that she had just dispelled their fear more effectively than any consolation or comfort?

Lupe sniffed. Rosalinda glanced at him and stepped back with her head bowed.

“I see you have raised *un muchacho listo* like yourself, *señora.*” He began to nod.⁷³ “Yes, yes, there is something else.” He paused as if for dramatic effect, and then he took a few steps towards them.

⁶⁹ Hold on now ... the good news is, well

⁷⁰ It's true

⁷¹ What's the catch

⁷² Motherfucker ... You want to meet death? (similar to 'wanna meet your maker?')

⁷³ A smart / intelligent / perceptive boy

“Everything must be paid by blood. Grievances have been done. They must be accounted for.” Lupe’s voice was quiet and menacing. He gave Damián a wolfish grin.

“But not your blood, *m’ijo*.”⁷⁴

Everything was silent. Even the birds had gone silent, Leticia realized, shocked. Then Lupe turned his head.

“*Sino*, his blood.” He was looking at Julio.⁷⁵

No, Damián blurted out at once.

Lupe smiled with yet more evil. “*Bueno*, the beauty of it is... you don’t have a choice. Look at the river, Rosalinda,” Lupe turned towards the woman and pointed to the river, “look at *la bruma*.”⁷⁶

He said this quite jovially. The mist was indeed growing rapidly on the river. It rolled in layer by layer over the water, shifting and thickening.

“Anyways,” he turned back around to Damián. “You are going to kill Julio.”

All four of them were left stunned by this. Lupe turned around and strode back to where he had been standing, laughing.

⁷⁴ My son

⁷⁵ But rather

⁷⁶ Well ... the mist

“You see, we do not need his kind,” Lupe continued. “He is *débil, y poco hombre*.” Now Lupe actually spat in Julio’s direction. “The world has no need of such a man. You will kill him, and take his place.”⁷⁷

Felix, Damián called out. What have you to say to this? Why do you stay on that side?

Felix did not answer. He did not look up. His only response was to flinch when Damián called his name.

“*Pues*, he is not allowed to speak,” Lupe said with his eye on Felix. “The best he can do tonight is to stay alive.”⁷⁸

Damián set his jaw. He was scared again; Lupe inspired much more fear through his smiles. He thought of his sister. He may not be terribly scared to die, but he was certainly terrified for her to. And what of his mother? What would his father do? Should he fake agree, and try to get a gun? His father would fight his way out.

But Damián could not see any way to fight their way out of this one. There was far too many, and he was defenseless. Would his father be disappointed in him for throwing away the pistol?

⁷⁷ Weak, and unmanly / not man enough

⁷⁸ Well

But in the end, there was no question of his answer. He drew his eyebrows, pushed back his shoulders, and tried to look as mean as he could when he made himself look Lupe in the eye.

*Para nada. ¿Estamos?*⁷⁹

Don Lupe's face twitched as it began to transform into a snarl.

“*Mira, hombre,*” Rosalinda's shrill voice yammered, “we're either going to kill you both or you're going to kill the other *chavo*. We don't want you to go to waste. Your mother and sister don't want you to go to waste, or to have to die for you being a *pinche imbécil,*” She smacked her lips. “*Mira,* you're going to have to shoot someone here or there. *Sangre, violencia, guerras... hombre, es la hora de que te das cuenta que eso es México.*”⁸⁰

And with that, Leticia could do it no longer. She was so angry she could have cried of sheer fury. Her eyes misted over for the second time as she yelled in disgust.

No! *Pues sí, podría ser un día en que México sólo consista en sangre, violencia y guerras. Pero este día no lo sea. Váyase al diablo.* Leticia spat these last few words. Then she raised her voice for all the night to hear. Her eyes burned like firewood soaked

⁷⁹ Not for anything. Understand / we clear?

⁸⁰ Look, man ... boy ... fucking idiot ... blood, violence, wars, dude, it's time that you realize, that is Mexico.

in fuel, and she turned her gaze to burn into *don Lupe*. Family, loyalty and love. *Este, este es México.*⁸¹

Damián met her eye, then reached out to bump her fist with his own. Then he turned and roared, ¡*Para México!*⁸²

And faster than smoke up the mountainside, the mist of the river engulfed them and blew over the island, concealing all from view.

⁸¹ Well yes, there may be a day in which Mexico is only blood, violence, and wars. But today is not it. Go to hell ... This, this is Mexico.

⁸² For Mexico!

APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

Leticia's Poem of the *Rápiditos*: Translation

Look,
Look how it fights and runs,
Still shouting from the top of the tower.
Shouts of joy
Relaxing words courtesy.
In a great wave of energy,
Still it carries the key
To shine smooth the world.
However small these stones may be,
They stand firm as they seek the goal.
Until the last trumpet sounds.

APPENDIX B

Map of El Fuerte

