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The days were indistinguishable from each other.

Somehow we'd always end up back at the field beyond the graveyard on the south side of town. We'd ride our bikes through the city, past buildings that were always covered in scaffolding, over roads that were always under construction, patched and pot-holed. Weaving in and out of each other, we choreographed our own chaos coalition.

Once there, we'd abandon our bikes and lay down on the ground, pressing our bodies against the earth, grafting skin onto grass and dirt. Hours would pass. The sun inched its way down into the west. Both the past and future were concealed; all that was visible was the fuzzy, nondescript present. We were still and indifferent, like fossils waiting for excavation.

On this night the air was brisk and rolled soft but irregular over the field and across our faces. The air smelled like yeast. We could hear the familiar buzz of the commercial drones hovering over the nearby low-income workers' village. "...NEW SKINS... FIRST 50,000... SUPREME..." We'd gotten used to mostly tuning them out.

I turned my head to look at the others, their bodies merging into a topographic mess of denim, leather, and cotton, then turned to look back up at the sky. Deep blue cumulus clouds bubbled into the distance, past the city of a thousand horizons, slicing the stratosphere into a million shades of fiery pink before melting into puddles of violet. The most badass gradient; no cover charge. Those were my favorite moments, time spent in limbo.

Normally these kinds of details would fade over time or ebb into the memories of previous days, but this time was different. Not because of anything that happened while we were there, but because of what happened after, alone in the cold dark hours of the early morning. It was the night before the ghost of my ex-boyfriend came to haunt me.

BEEP. Parsley. BEEP. A bag of rice. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. Six cans of beans. I'm fixated on the cashier's hands as she scans each item, the moment of contact after selection, before purchase. Her maraschino-red nails sparkle with flecks of gold glitter and falsetto in ecstasy as they pass across her kelly green apron. I love her nails.

"I love your nails."

"Thank you!" She smiles. She has something in her teeth.

My grandma, behind me, looks up and then continues pulling items from the cart and placing them on the conveyor belt. She must have noticed too because she's sucking her front teeth. It's Tuesday morning which means we're picking up groceries for the rest of the week. It's the only consistent indication that another seven days have passed. Our trips are mostly spent in silence, though we've come up with our own system of grunts and gestures to communicate with each other.

When my grandma moved to the States two years ago, we were strangers. E-stranged except for the

monthly video calls when mama would call her, us in the States, her in Argentina, mama always speaking too loud, shooting eye-daggers at me from the other room until I joined behind her, hazy in the background, using up all twenty words I knew in Spanish. The video calls had only started when I was in late middle school, before which we were actually estranged. My grandma cut off contact back in the late 90s after my moms announced their engagement. She had written off their relationship as close roommates, but refused to accept that her daughter could love another woman.

Taking after my grandma's Argentine stubbornness, mama refused to engage her intolerance until I was born, and then she softened. She would send my grandma a photo of me every year on my birthday. My grandma never replied until seventh grade, the year I cut off all my hair and wore a studded choker on photo day. Mama was pissed at the time, but the photo now sits on the mantle in the living room. I think my decision to go butch finally made my grandma see me as a real person, her own flesh and blood. I guess she didn't want to miss out, or whatever.

The only other family mama had in Argentina was her older brother. After he died a few years ago, she convinced my grandma to move to the States and live with us. Even though my grandma was well-connected with the people in her apartment building, she was getting old

and needed the support of a family. She moved in a year before I graduated from high school. Three generations in one house, 175 years of lived life and counting between us four women. Our own sovereign matriarchy.

We walk through the sliding doors and start making our way back to the car. This is one of two remaining grocery stores in a city that used to have dozens. Most have been replaced or converted into grocery pools, where people pick-up groceries they ordered online from some benevolent food overlord. It's mostly a rip-off, paying a monthly fee for overpriced mediocre groceries. But it's convenient and affordable enough, and often times the only option for an overworked population. Most of the reason we still go to an actual grocery store is because my grandma refuses to pick avocados on-screen.

I fill the trunk of this month's collabo-car with groceries and push the shopping cart into one of the parking lot stalls where it collides with a chain of metallic others. The stall must sense that it's full because as I walk away, a small red steel box on wheels rolls up behind the last cart and starts to wheel them back into the store.

After helping grandma into the passenger seat, I settle in and turn the key into the ignition three times until the engine starts. Thee Midnitters surge through the speakers mid-song: "You gotta know how

to pony...” Grandma is already bobbing her head. Garage rock is the sweet spot between our musical preferences. I pull out of the parking spot and start making our way back home.

Today my grandma has something to say. When we actually want to use words to communicate with each other, we use an app on my phone that translates spoken words in real time. My grandma speaks into my phone and I wait for the translation. This would normally happen really quickly, rivaling mono-language conversation. The fucked part is the ads that play over my grandma’s translation. The ads go away, for free, if you link your Faceblurb account, but I don’t have a Faceblurb account. Never did. The translation sounds something like:

“Should we pick up flowers for your mother’s anniversary? I was thinking sunflowers and roses. We can put them on the table for dinner tonight. Let’s stop at the bodegas down the street from the library.”

CHANGED MY LIFE! I HAD THIS CONSTANT NEED TO BROADCAST. IT LAUNCHED ME OUT INTO THE WORLD. I BECAME PART OF A LARGER COMMUNITY OF CREATORS. IT’S A PLACE WHERE YOU’RE VALUED AND SEEN. JOIN NOW TO START SHARING!”

I don’t buy anything online so the ads are always random and completely tone-deaf. With nothing to go off of, no online choices to monetize, the app’s advertis-

ing algorithms make desperate guesses. It's a complex moment of satisfaction and frustration. My indecipherability makes my grandma's words indecipherable to me. Fuck this noise.

I grip the phone and pull it up to my mouth. "Go FUCK yourself Babbelo!" Grandma rolls her eyes. My phone replies, "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

I pick out the gist of what I heard and start heading towards the bodega. Grandma is singing along. "Naaa na na na naaa, na na na na na na na..."

Some days we'd skip the field and head to the library in Old Downtown. Old Downtown was a strange anomaly. Forty, fifty years ago, it was thriving, considered the city's cultural and economic center. Then it stopped being profitable, probably due to white flight and redlining. "Downtown" moved north towards the lake. These days Old Downtown is mostly vacant buildings and unregulated air space for spam drones.

The library is next to a worn-down theater that we used to sneak into in high school. We walk past the theater's big gilded entrance, now severely boarded up. Above an empty marquee, two unlit neon lions stand at attention facing a towering phallic electric sign emblazoned with the letters "E S P E C T R O." The library is just a few paces further.

For being in such an unpopulated part of town, the library is never empty. Today there is a white wrinkled middle-aged man yelling at an unamused clerk behind the checkout counter. He's pointing at his girlfriend, 20 years his senior, leaning against a nearby wall. "WHY ISN'T THERE A WHEELCHAIR FOR HER? SHE IS CLEARLY UNABLE TO WALK BY

HERSELF. HOW IS SHE SUPPOSED TO GET UP TO LEVEL 3? WHAT KIND OF MOTHER-FUCKED BUSINESS IS THIS PLACE?"

The library attracts all kinds of folks. As unpredictable as the library can be sometimes, it's the one place in this city that you can just... exist. You're free to read or talk or just sit and think or do nothing at all. Doing nothing: that pesky human behavior criminalized as loitering.

We wander up to the second level, greeted by rows and rows of empty metal shelves that kiss the ceiling. They are in the process of recataloguing, or so they say, but these shelves have been bare for years. We know it for what it is: a book graveyard. Past the steel gravestones we slog into the CD section. Given how much of a void the rest of the library is, this section feels like the resurrection. It is a big room brimming with decades and decades of options; you'd think people still use CDs. Luckily, we do.

It isn't nostalgia, honestly. Mostly it's the only place we can find any music that isn't already on automatic rotation on the mall's Zoop station, playing the top hits from the last decade like those are the last options available on this lonely planet. Besides Sid's older sister, who is stingy as fuck with her music, this is the only place we can find anything that isn't being pushed on us by some streaming service.

Once inside, we splinter off into our typical genres. Raf and Wev, arms linked and giggling, scurry off to PUNK/GARAGE ROCK in the corner of the room, which incredibly has its own section. Not a very big section, but there it is. Sometimes Sid would join them, but today he heads toward ELECTRONIC/EXPERIMENTAL. I make my way towards ALTER-NATIVE ROCK and POP nearby. Because our tastes are reasonably different, these library trips feel like we're backing music into a corner, holding it hostage for all of its intimate secrets.

After several minutes of sifting through clicking cases, I bump into Sid, our arms gently bumping into each other.

Back over my shoulder, "What did you find?"

"Eno, Wendy C-c-carlos, Pauline Oliveros. The usual suspects." He smirks. "You?"

"Some Cocteau Twins. Kate Bush. Miami Sound Machine."

"Nice."

He turns back to rummage some more. I'm satisfied with my picks. I make my way to one of the adjacent listening rooms where the walls stop about waist-high and continue as glass windows up to the ceiling. I toss the CDs onto a table in the middle of the room. I face the window and wave my arms, making exaggerated strides across my body until they

all notice. Whoever makes it to the room gets first dibs so I pop in *Heaven or Las Vegas* into the player installed on the room's wall.

I turn to the open window and see everyone starting to make their way over. I catch Wev's eye and start walking down an imaginary set of stairs until I disappear beneath the wall. I hear her guffaw.

Sid is the last one in and closes the door behind him, sealing us and the sound inside. Raf is sitting on the table. Wev pulls the gum she's been chewing out of her mouth and slaps it under the table before sitting down against the wall. There must be a formidable stalactite forming by now. I fondle the controls on the music system and skip ahead to track seven, "Fotzepolitic." The melody swells in, followed by the saccharine strumming of an electric guitar...

"Damn I love this album."

"Elizabeth F-fraser has the voice of an angel."

"Some critic once *actually* said that she had the 'voice of god.'"

Wincing.

"Oh christ. She must have been so embarrassed."

"I think she was."

As the chorus picks up, I'm swooning. This song always brings out the romantic in me. "When I listen to music, I'm not just letting the music happen to me, I'm connecting to the people who made it, in a

way that makes me feel like I'm connected to the rest of the world."

Raf rolls his eyes. I elbow him.

"I'm serious! It's like when you hear a song that totally blows you away, short-circuits your mainframe, you become immediately addicted to it, you have to listen to it a hundred times on repeat. Not because it takes you somewhere new, but because it somehow meets you exactly where you're already at, articulated in the most raw, emotional, fist-pumping way. And then you have to listen to everything that artist's ever made, not because you want to feel that feeling again, but because you want to know if they ever felt that feeling again. Or if they ever felt anything else that intensely. And then they introduce you to a whole world of sensations and—"

Raf cuts me off. "Yeah but that's a thing of the past."

Sid looks over, "What do you mean?"

"No one listens to music like that anymore. Sure, they listen to music for the way it makes them feel, but more for some ambiguous, untextured... atmosphere... than anything specific. An empty-headed haze that lets them go on about their unspeakably boring lives."

Now I'm rolling my eyes.

"Everything they listen to comes through some drone clone music zone, and these parasitic blood-munching corporations are changing the way

that human beings relate to music, which is really fucking scary. Music was sacred to humans, for like 50,000 years up until about a decade ago. People don't listen to albums or even singular artists, they listen to 'stations,'" he says with scare quotes.

"H-how is that different than what radio used to be?"

Raf ignores him. "So these companies prioritize 'playlists,' whatever the fuck that means anymore, and algo-rhythmically pick songs based on users' listening histories. But at the end of the day, they don't care about exposing people to new and exciting and groundbreaking music, they just want you to listen to more music, forever, infinite play, because that's what makes them money. So they emphasize 'chill' music. Stuff that you can listen to while you're shopping, while you're going for a run, while you're going to sleep. If it's not 'chill' then you might actually stop and think about what you're listening to, you might WAKE UP."

He's bug-eyed and shaking his hands above his head. "All the good shit gets buried. Even if you do listen to anything remotely interesting, the algorithm will always drag your ass back to the vacuum of perpetual mindless melody. And if you're not listening to music for every waking hour of your insufferable life because maybe, just maybe, you're trying to live out some meaningful existence, then you're not generating revenue. That's why everything sounds like elevator

music now. Totally fucking innocuous. Everything is background now.”

Wev sticks her hand up in the air and croons out to nobody, “*And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife, and you may ask yourself, how did I get here?*”

“Exactly!” Raf says emphatically. He doesn’t pick up that Wev is making fun of him.

“You’re acting like no one makes good music anymore.”

“Yeah that’s what I’m saying!”

“That’s not even true though. There’s probably ten times as many artists as there were ten years ago, because of the internet and alternative platforms and stuff like that. Yeah, it might be harder to make money, and maybe they’ll go broke because they can’t syphon off enough pocket change from streaming services or whatever, but they’re out there.”

Raf is shaking his head. “Musicians are a dying breed. More and more independent distribution services are shutting their doors or selling out to Facebook. People are left to fend on their own. Music, as we know it, is singing it’s swan song.”

I’m not convinced. “I don’t think you’re giving people enough credit.”

Raf opens his mouth to say something else but just then the album ends, so he swivels towards the

player, his back facing us, and swaps CDs.

“Pleeeeeease no Black Flag, Raf.” Wev moans.

A fuzzed out guitar splits the room open in three violent chords. A cymbal, snare, and bass drum stagger in behind it.

Raf turns around with a crazed look in his eyes, miming a microphone at his mouth, his body tensing up in euphoric hysteria. He whines with the singer, “WE’RE GONNA BEEE A WHITE MI-NOR-I-TY! WE WON’T LISTEEEN TO THE MA-JOR-I-TY!...”

Wev sighs. “Same as it ever was...”

A sheet of dust slides off of its surface as I dislodge it from the precarious pile of electronics that it's nestled into. It's small and black, like a tablet of slate. Its width fits between my thumb and pinky but its length stretches past the top of my fingers and the bottom of my palm, oblong like a miniature monolith. It isn't very thick, maybe about an inch or two. After wiping away more dust, the surface is shiny and sleek like black marble. There is a column of ridges that line its middle like vertebrae. For ventilation? On one of its short edges there's a long red display next to a small rectangular button, the only button I can find after inspecting each side. Next to the button, a small gold logo announces "TYME" in bold bulky letters. It looks like it is from another century.

"W-what's this?" I ask.

My uncle looks up over the edge of his glasses from the papers he's sifting through at his desk. He lets out a chuckle of recognition. "That, is a Tyme machine."

A pause.

"...huh?"

Another laugh. “At least that’s what we called it. Otherwise known as a modem.”

I give him another blank stare. He sighs, sets the papers down, and walks over. We are in the garage attached to his house which he’s fashioned into a den. It looks old and smells older but feels warm and comfortable. The walls are covered with faux wood panels of differing widths only interrupted by windows, one on the north side and another on the south. There are rows of shelves lining the walls and one long row that cuts the garage in half with a gap in the middle so that you can walk through. The shelves are filled with manuals, file boxes, floppy disk containers, CDs, and sci-fi books. The floor had once been tiled, but he must have changed his mind because it’s stripped now and all that’s left are the glue stains marking where the tiles had met.

On the weekends I spend time at my uncle’s house to help him with odd jobs, which he pays me for. Sometimes I mow the lawn or run an errand for him. Lately he’s been trying to get rid of the mass amounts of old tech and documents that cannibalize his den, so he has me sorting. He is also a flaming anarchist. *Nervous Gender* is playing in the background.

“Back in the early days of personal computing, there were a lot of people out there creating these great machines.” He points at a stubby-looking computer

console sitting on a shelf. “You could play video games, type and print documents, stuff like that. But because there were so many different versions of essentially the same kind of system, there was no common language. All the hardware was completely incompatible. This made it pretty much impossible to communicate or transfer files between different computers.”

He pauses and makes eye contact, probably to make sure I am still paying attention. I nod to let him know I am.

“So then they created modems, which were this really ingenious little piece of hardware. It made use of technology that people already had in their home, a landline, that connected them to the rest of the world. Now, a landline is an earlier version of a telephone that—”

“I know what a landline is Tio.”

“Just checking!” He raises his hands in defense. “So what a modem did was allow you to connect your computer to a landline, and BOOM! You could now connect with an entire planet. Modems were a bridge to the unknown. Of course this is still very pre-internet, at least how we understand it today, but it allowed people,” he gestures towards himself, “like me, to bust the world open like a seashell. Just the simple idea that we take for granted today that I could talk to people and they could be anywhere and I had no idea who

they were. It was exhilarating! Even if a lot of those people turned out to be really boring nerds like me.”

I laugh. His black labrador whines from underneath his desk and walks over to let me pet her. She has a cone over her head from a recent surgery which is simultaneously adorable and sad. Her tail wags anyway.

“S-so it was like proto-email, or message boards?”

He shakes his head. “This is before all that, before instant messaging, before forums, there was BBS. Bulletin Board Systems. Modems allowed you to connect to a BBS as a node and to talk with other computer users. It wasn’t real-time at first, but it was faster than anything that had come before it.”

He holds the modem in his hand and looks it over. “We were all so mischievous in those days. Back then it was total anarchy, anti-hierarchical mayhem, sheer bliss. This is before Faceblurb and all the other totalitarian corporations that rule the net today. Everything was totally decentralized. And it stayed that way, more or less, even through the 90s as companies started wising up and realizing that they could profit off of this ballooning populace of users. Being connected in this way felt like a way out, a way to escape the cycle of control. It really felt like the internet would save us, the great liberator, or that we might finally have the tools to save ourselves...” He shakes his head again, like he’s remembering an old

joke. “Boy were we wrong, HA!”

“Yeah, f-fuck Faceblurb.” I squirm a little. It is still a sore spot for me, the reason I stopped using social media almost a decade ago. A wound that won’t heal, something I am still trying to forget. It feels silly that I can’t move on. Tio must know what I’m thinking.

“You’re lucky you’re not on Faceblurb. Believe me! The drivel people post everyday, it’s nauseating, BLEGH.” He sticks his tongue out and jabs his finger in his mouth dramatically. “The internet used to happen to you. It was a lot more random, stochastic. You were one node in an ocean of islands that lead to other islands, or sometimes lead nowhere, but that was the point. That there could be dead ends. A finale, a conclusion, not a forever-succession of perpetual horizons. Not to say you couldn’t go on forever... but at least you could come up for air instead of always getting pulled back by the tide, flailing in the flow where up is down and down is up and you’re miles from where you started.”

I nod. “No more islands, T-tio. Faceblurb has taken us back to the prehistoric. Everyone’s been herded into the borders of its m-m-micro-pangea.”

“That’s my boy!” He pats my back. “The multiplex poet. But have you ever thought of doing anything about it?”

“What do you m-mean?”

He paused. "A wise old man once told me, 'the only important elements in any society are the artistic and criminal, because they alone, by questioning society's values, can force it to change.'"

"Is that true?"

"I don't know, but it sounds like a hell of a dare, doesn't it?"

The bar was empty, or felt like it was. The lights were low. The brightest lights in the room came from phones that the handful of people in the room were staring at, eyes glued while they brought a bottle to their lips and took another swig. Someone was controlling the jukebox from their phone and had been jumping tracks mid-song for the last five songs. Every other track the jukebox announced, “Great choice music lover!” and giggled. Whatever, his credits.

I was bringing up cases of beer from the basement, rewashing washed glasses between trips. Moving very slowly. The bartender was on his phone too. His back faced the mirrored bar lined with a pyramid of spirits; he looked up every once in awhile.

This establishment was old. It looked like it'd been there for a hundred years, and probably had. It was like a lot of bars in this city in that way. Dark wooden counter with curved edges bordering on ornate. A pay pad where the cash register used to be. Low ceilings, old light fixtures, LED bulbs. It smelled like someone who quit smoking years ago but couldn't get the smell out of their clothes.

Most of the people who came into the bar worked downtown or lived downtown or both. The bar was not downtown, but in a neighborhood just south of it. Close enough to walk or carshare or drunkdrive home after. They come for the cheesy happy hour specials my uncle promoted like half-price bar nachos and two-for-one glowing red cinnamon whiskey shots. #TuesdayTinis, don't forget to like and share!

These people exposed themselves. They looked like the most fun they'd had that week was watching food-hack videos on the feed. Their apartments probably reeked of unchanged cat litter. Their walls likely filled with shitty inspirational quotes next to cinemagraphs of their pristine ceramic-white family; a perfect likeable, sharable illusion. Please kill me.

It was only eight o'clock but I felt like I'd been there for a hundred years. The bar and I were alike in this way.

I was zoning out, placing beers in the fridge under the bar, when my subconscious registered the sound of the bell above the front door as someone walked in. Crouched down behind the counter, I heard them walk over, then sit down on a stool in front of me.

"Hey," a voice said with a low growl. "Can I get a whiskey neat?"

I stood up to say something, to let them know I was just a bar-back, but I immediately froze. Fucking

green eyes stared right back at me. His dark brown hair was short on top but ragged on the sides with some longer hair curling up below his pierced ears, definitely self-cut. Thick eyebrows on milky white skin. A translucent acrylic ring chandeliered from his bullish nose. Perfect lips haloed by dark stubble ran up to his ears. Those teeth. Like I ever stood a chance.

He was smiling already, but the corner of his mouth tugged up towards his cheekbone, a new dimple creasing into their cheek.

“Do I have something in my teeth?” he asked after I’d been standing there like a fucking pillar of salt. Give me Sodom and Gomorrah.

“Sorry, no...” I stuttered, looking around the bar for the bartender who was not there, must’ve gone to the bathroom or stepped out for a cigarette. “I’m just a bar-back.”

He laughed, which made me relax a little. “Alright. Can I just get a Schlitz?”

Hell yeah you can.

I grabbed a can from the fridge and slid it over.

Couldn’t have been that much older than me. 22 if that. As he cracked the seal of the can, I noticed a big metal cock ring hooked onto the shoulder epaulet of his leather jacket. Dark chest hair peeked out from the neckline of his white tattered t-shirt that was draped over his chest.

He took a gulp then looked back at me. "You look familiar. What's your name?"

"Raf. Yours?"

"I'm your man." He gave me another side-smile. My knees were starting to give out.

"...huh?"

"I said my name's Erman," then laughed again.

"Oh," I laughed too. "Rad."

He noticed my Los Crudos t-shirt, then started talking about music. We were both at that Downtown Boys show at Chupacabra the weekend before, he was DJing in between sets playing the Bags, the Plugz, the Zeros, a lot of early LA punk, yeah, I remembered that. Great music taste. He was talking about his friend who played in the band who opened at the show. I was listening, intently. I was crushing on every word he said. Everyone else who'd ever walked into this bar had been a square. Where did this fractal fall from?

"Hey BOY." The bartender was back behind the bar, had been there for awhile probably. He was holding an empty bottle of gin and looking at me with eyebrows raised like a jackass.

I looked at Erman apologetically and he shrugged. The bar was busier, people were starting to socialize. I grabbed a full bottle and handed it to the bartender. As I did, he grabbed the bottle and tugged my hand with it. "Don't make me wait again." Glaring.

“The people that come here wish they were at one of those fancy humanless bars with auto-stocked beer and self-washing glasses. You need to learn to become invisible. Go grab another case of Modelos.”

As I came back up from the basement, I scanned the bar to find Erman gone. I kicked myself for not asking more about him before he left but then I saw his beer can on the bar with a napkin on top. When I finished unloading the beers, he was back sitting at the bar, smelling faintly of clove cigarettes. He was almost finished with his beer.

The bartender was busy at the other end of the bar, so I walk over to Erman and put my hands on the bar in front of him. I was going to go for it.

“Listen. He’s gonna yell at me again so I’ll keep this short but we should hang out sometime.” I paused. Erman was smiling back, but I couldn’t get a read on him. I took the plunge: “You seem really cool, and I think you’re hot, and—“

His eyes grew wide. His face flushed, then drained of color. The smile was gone. He looked down at the bar. He didn’t make eye contact with me again.

“Dude, I think you got the wrong idea, I’m not... gay.” That last word left his mouth like bile coming up out of his esophagus.

I looked at him, then looked at the cock ring on his jacket, then back up at him incredulously.

“What’s with the fucking cock ring on your right shoulder? Don’t you know that means *I Want To Get Fucked?*”

He looked at his shoulder horrified. “This isn’t a cock ring, it’s, it’s... I bought this at a...” What a joke. This motherfucker was completely clueless.

He lurched off of his seat, fumbling his phone out of his pocket, the barstool screeching as it scraped across the floor. A couple zombies looked up from their screens. He tapped his phone on the pay pad and walked towards the door. On his way there, I heard him mutter under his breath,

“Faggot wetback.”

Then, the sound of the bell. At this point just another Pavlovian signal to make me gag.

I hate this fucking town.

“He called you a what?” Wev, propped up by her elbows, throws her head back and cackles.

I snicker, “Are you, are you sure he didn’t call you that because your back is always covered in c-cum?” Everyone but Raf loses it, banging our fists on weeds and dirt, our laughs carrying across the field.

Raf: “Fuck you bitch.”

“Who even says ‘wetback’ anymore?” Wev throws her hands up towards the sky. “Was it the last dying word of his croaking grandpa while he was thinking about humping his childhood sled?”

I’m howling and holding my abdomen. Tears are starting to come down Gen’s face. Raf tries to act annoyed but then gives in and starts laughing too.

After the laughing dies down and we’re all quiet for a moment, I look over and regard Raf.

“Why are you so fa-fascinated with white boys?”

“Dunno.”

“You know they’re just gonna break your h-har-heart.”

“Yeah...”

Another few moments of silence, and then Wev

shoots up, standing on the balls of her feet, knees bent, arms contorting out from her torso, cigarette in hand, head cocked and panting like a dog. We all groan, and then give in laughing when she starts squawking. She does this when things get too serious. Classic spastic.

After she collapses dramatically back onto the ground, we lay there for awhile until the sky starts to crimson, watching the clouds unfurl out and collapse in on themselves into an amorphous mass.

We walk back to my sister's car that she let me borrow for the day, kicking dirt weeds on the way. As we make our way back through town, Timbiriche is blasting through the speakers. We all grew up listening to this band. None of us really know the words, but that doesn't stop us from screaming along in broken Spanish anyway.

"NOOOO CRESCASMAS! QUETE QUIERO A SICOMO ERASOY! NOOO CRESCASMAS! QUE MESUSTA ELQUE VAYAS ACAMBYA!" We holler in unison.

Wev is slapping the top of the car when a pair of police lights, a caustic collocate of blue and red, blinker in the rearview mirror. It's quickly followed by the "whoop whoop" of a siren.

Gen wails out a "come oooooon." I glare at the speedometer: we are under the speed limit. My mind starts racing through all the other reasons we might

be getting pulled over until the obvious sets in, like it always does, seconds later. The crime is always the same.

As I pull the car over to the side of the road, the police car follows and parks about twenty feet behind us.

“This is such fucking bullshit,” someone fumes from the back.

“Every fucking time.”

“No, n-not every—“

“Every fucking time.”

A minute passes and an officer emerges from the driver’s side, stands up, then closes his door. He’s wearing sunglasses even though the sun is almost set. I follow his gaze in the side view mirror as he walks up to my window, which is already down.

“Handle and registration.”

I sigh and reach for the glove compartment. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the officer’s body tense up as I extend my arm, so I say to break the silence, “I’ve g-got the registration right here...” The compartment pops open as I press the latch. “...but I don’t ha-have a handle.” I grab the registration and hand it over through the window.

The officer grabs the papers, but before looking at them he pushes his sunglasses down the bridge of nose and looks at me suspiciously, one eyebrow cocked up into his miserable receding hairline. “No handle?”

I nod.

Raf, from the backseat: "It's not a crime you know." Gen ribs him and snarls, "Shut up Raf."

"Not having proper identification? Yes, that is a crime," the officer barks back.

"I've g-got an ID, I have a license," I offer, trying to appease. "I'm re-reaching into my b-back pocket."

The officer motions toward his waistband, but relaxes when I pull out my wallet. I hand it over open-faced, my license visible behind a sheet of plastic.

He takes a look at it, pauses for a beat, then says, "We've got a report of a missing vehicle that matches this description. I'm going to need you to step out of the vehicle."

My mouth goes slack. I stammer more than I usually do, "S-sir this is my s-s-sister's c-c-car, I s-sw-swear. W-we were just t-taking it for a—"

He barks again, voice raised now, "I need you, to step out, of the vehicle."

I can hear more than one whispered "what the fuck" from the backseat. My hands are clammy. Dumb-founded and scared, I unbuckle my seatbelt, open the car door, and step out. The officer's hands are on his hips. He gestures with his chin towards the cruiser. When we get to his car, he opens the back door and pushes my head down as I duck in. There is another officer sitting in the passenger seat.

The backseat is completely made out of a grainy molded plastic that feels like the bottom of a non-slip bathtub. A glass partition separates me from the officers in the front seat. The blue and red police lights umbrella the cruiser in a circling motion. The lights are circling so fast that they begin to blend into a menacing violet that envelopes the car. Am I seeing things? I am silent as they look at information on their screen, muttering things to each other. Whatever they are saying is muffled enough that it doesn't sound like any language I've ever heard of. They might as well be aliens in the process of abducting me. But no, I assure myself, I am the alien in this situation. I try to look between them to see if I can see the others in the car in front of us, praying that they don't do anything stupid, but it's impossible to see or hear anything happening outside. I take deep, unsteady breaths. I start to feel light-headed. I try to imagine what my uncle would do in this situation.

Finally, after an indeterminable amount of time, the officer in the driver's seat gets out, opens the passenger door where I'm seated, and says, "Step out of the vehicle."

He's behind me when I step out. The purple glow is gone but the lights are still spinning. Beyond our two cars, the dark road stretches out in front of us. I stand motionless, waiting. "You can walk back to your car." So I do, and hear the click of his boots on the pavement follow me back.

As I get back into the car, the officer grabs the top of the door frame before I can close it and says, “You kids stay out of trouble, you hear?” There is no signal of human eyes under his wide, opaque sunglasses.

I drive off and the cruiser tails us for a couple minutes before turning off into a subdivision. “O-k-kay, they’re gone.” We all let out a collective exhale. Had I been holding my breath that entire time?

“Jesus Sid. What happened back there?”

“N-nothing, they... nothing. I just s-sat in the back until they let me out. They didn’t s-say a word to me.”

“Were they just trying to spook you?”

“I don’t know. They must have been checking my si-sister’s handle to s-see if I was telling the truth. Maybe she has a picture of me on her p-p-profile. I don’t know. They p-probably gave up when they realized they couldn’t p-pin anything on me.”

“I’m sorry Sid. You okay?” Gen puts their hand on my shoulder.

Raf now: “This is such. Fucking. Bullshit! I swear these motherfucking pigs think they own us, they assume we’re illegals or criminals or—”

I grip the steering wheel, twisting it under my palms. Looking into the rear view mirror I shout, “SH-SHUT UP Raf. Shut up. For once in your life just shut the fuck up.”

We ride silently into the night.

“Can I kiss you?”

It comes out of nowhere, but I’m happy to hear her ask. I realize I’ve been waiting to hear her say those words. I blush.

“Yeah.”

She leans in and her glossy warm lips meet mine. We lock for a second, then she pulls her lips back before giving me another kiss. I turn my face away embarrassed and laugh, even though I was enjoying it.

She sighs and turns around, walking around the small attic room, ducking near slanted walls. “So this is where you grew up, huh?”

“Yeah... childhood bedroom.”

Her fingers graze the surface of the bright yellow walls. Water evaporates out of a glowing humidifier’s coin-sized blowhole on the nightstand next to my bed and wisps up through her fingers. She stops at an old sun-faded poster of Selena hanging above my computer desk that I found in my parents’ basement. I’d added hearts around the edges.

“I had no idea you were gay in high school.”

“I think I pass as straight to most people...”

it bothers me.”

“I think it’s sexy.” She turns around and ogles me. “A fag in femme’s clothing.”

She is staring at me intensely. She wants me, and I want her to want me. But I don’t think... I want her. Which seems crazy, because this is a fantasy come true. Hooking up with my high school crush. She pushes me onto the bed behind us and stands at the mattress edge between my legs. We start to make out. Slowly, she pushes me down onto the bed, her long golden hair caressing the sides of my face as we kiss. After awhile she moves down to my neck. Then,

“Your skin is so beautiful...”

I smile.

“...It’s like caramel.”

Damn it.

She starts tongue-fucking my mouth. I let her. She stops breathlessly for a moment to say, “Speak *sucio* to me in Spanish” and then continues.

Well first off, my mouth is full. And second, “I don’t speak Spanish.”

She pulls her head back to look at me with one eyebrow raised. “...I thought you were Mexican.”

“I am.”

She squints her eyes in confusion. She looks like she’s about to short circuit.

“I don’t speak Spanish. My parents don’t either.

My family's been here for four generations."

"Oh, I just thought..."

My phone chimes on the nightstand and saves me. I roll out from under her to see the update. It's a message from Trouble: *You should be watching the sun go down with me.* I put the phone back down and lay down on my back, hands behind my head.

"Who's that?" she asks, curling against my side with her head on my shoulder.

"No one."

"Anyone I should be worried about?" She looks up and winks.

Yeah, actually. "No."

She sighs again and pulls out her phone.

My ex and I stopped talking a few weeks ago. It was mutual, ended in a fight, both too prideful to admit that we were both wrong. This hookup, admittedly, is my attempt at a rebound.

"Weird... I'm trying to tag you on Faceblurb but I can't find your handle..."

"I don't have one."

She laughs. "Oh my god! Fr fr? The rumors were true! You really are a trog."

My mind wanders out of the bedroom into the library in Old Downtown. I think back to middle school when I first started going there on my own, my early days of identity formation. I remember hanging

out in the Young Adult section and thinking the classification system was all wrong. The sharp delineation between fiction and nonfiction was problematic to me. Some of the nonfiction books didn't have a clue of what life, *my* life, was like, while the experience of reading some fiction was like looking into a mirror. When I found out there was an LGBTQ section on the third floor during freshman year of high school, it took me almost six months before I summoned the courage to go up and see what it had to offer. I hated that all these books were grouped together. First, because it outed me as I was still trying to understand my gender and sexuality. Second, when I was older, because I found that category to be totally inapt. What did a book on sex positions and a book on commune life have to do with each other except that they had "lesbian" in the title? It was probably supposed to make things easier for us queers but it felt more like a ghetto. I want to queer the entire library. Turn every spine inward so that every book refuses immediate legibility and consumption. Make everyone cruise for knowledge. Blur fact and fiction, smut and critical theory, into our all-encompassing *existence*.

"Damn my Faceblurb rating is way down this week... gotta up my engagements or people are gonna think I'm an anti-social like you." She ribs me, a little too hard.

Across the room, the computer screen on my desk flickers on. A video starts playing. It's a 360-degree view of someone watching the sunset on the coast of the lake. Their legs stick out of the bottom of the frame stretched over rocks, waves licking the bottom of their feet. It's my ex, the hacker.

"That's kind of creepy. Is that live? Is someone spacing you? What is that?"

"Looks like Trouble."

At this point I just want this person to leave. The fantasy is over. I want to get back to reality. I pick up the controller on my nightstand and start mousing around on-screen, looking around the panoramic ecosystem. She is quiet. "I think I'm gonna go."

She slides off the bed. "Maybe we can do this again sometime," I lie. "Do you want me to walk you out?"

I get the sense that this encounter wasn't what she was expecting either. "No, I'm okay. See..." She's gone before she can finish her thought. I peer out the window and watch her leave the house, get in her car, and sit on her phone for a minute before backing out of the empty driveway and driving out towards the fading day.

I turn back towards the sunset on-screen and zoom into the horizon. The lake is on fire. I send back a message from my phone: *It's beautiful, isn't it?*

I'm outside on a smoke break and eyeing a man pushing a stroller with a child inside towards the entrance. He's got something in his hand that looks like a tallboy. He brings it up to his mouth and chugs the remains. Is he drinking a beer? He tosses it in a trash can. After he and the tiny one roll in, I put out my cigarette on the side of the building and walk it over to the trash bin, leaving the butt on the rim. I glance in to find: a slightly crushed can of Four Loko. This guy has the right idea.

Once inside, I swipe my badge at security, stuff my oversized polo shirt back into my pair of blocky khakis, and walk through a series of musty corridors until emerging into the galleries. I wander through until I find my post, nod at the other guard, and take their place next to a painting of a gnarled phantom sitting on the chest of a snoozing gringa. The other guard and I give each other knowing glances as they head off to another gallery or down for a break or out the door and onto another job.

We're not allowed to talk to each other or risk getting written up. In the break room, some of the older guards bitch about the way things are, remi-

nisce about laxer days when museum guards could be friendly and familiar and make small talk, with each other and visitors. Back when there used to be a guard in every gallery. I guess there'd been some changes in management up top and they strong-armed the security team, forced them to de-unionize, fired a bunch of people and replaced most of us with security cameras.

We're not even allowed to talk to visitors. The only things we're allowed to say are "don't touch" and "time to go." I don't even know why they bother with having guards anymore. they say it's to give a human face to the museum but I don't buy it. I think they just want to intimidate people from doing anything besides looking. God forbid anyone actually become aware of their own sad middle-classed body while looking at a painting of some stiff in gold silk holding a scepter.

At first it felt like being gagged in a straitjacket but I eventually found ways to pass the time. I keep a tally in my head of old white people with blue hair (today: 7), someone talking a selfie (13), all the people with their fly down (3). When that gets boring I tap "S O S" with the toe of my shoe to a guard in another gallery. Every once in awhile I hear someone tap back.

Someone peeks their head into the gallery on the other side of the room but doesn't come in. A second later they're gone. Sunlight comes in through a skylight, blushing the walls as the sun sets. My nails

are starting to chip. The splotchy navy polish looks like an archipelago of inverted islands spread out across the tips of my fingers. I take notice of the baseboards lining the bottom of each wall. They are a different type of wood than the one used on the floor. I can hear a baby crying a few galleries over. Is it Four Loko Dad?

Today has been very slow. The galleries are sparse. But an empty gallery is better than a noisy one. At the beginning of my shift I was stationed next to a mid-mid-career retrospective of a video artist whose primary medium is sensory overload. I used to like them but this exhibition is driving me up the fucking wall. There are a million screaming sirens yapping about augmented intercourse and tumors that double as input jacks.

Someone walks into the gallery and slowly paces around the room with their hands behind their back. They spend time with each painting, pausing to take it all in. I watch their head follow the details, starting in a corner of the frame then meandering towards the middle before making their way back around the perimeter. They repeat this sort of careful examination until they reach one that they want to inspect closer. They lean in, closing the space between their nose and the painted surface when a short loud beep causes them to jerk their head back and look around. They must have tripped a sensor by getting too close. When they see me they bare

their teeth sheepishly in apology. I shrug my shoulders. They move on to another painting but must be embarrassed because they leave the room shortly after. I wish my grandma was here. She'd probably try and argue with a guard over why she couldn't touch it and then get kicked out after putting her hand on a canvas. Anyway she hates art museums, which is why she hasn't already been blacklisted.

More time passes without any visitors in the gallery. I turn to the painting I'm standing next to. It's wider than it is tall. A sleeping white woman is horizontal, laying on a bed and stretching the length of the painting. Her body is draped in a white gown that clings to her skin and shows off her mama thighs. She must be arching her spine; there's a gap between the small of her back and the bed. Her cheeks are rosy so we know she's alive even though her eyes are closed. Her head and arms dangle off of the foot of the bed and dark blonde hair flows down in waves that don't quite reach the ground. She's vignettted by darkness, the bed and floor below her, a nightstand with a vial on it at her feet, red billowing curtains in the background. The wildest part: a demonic phantom gimp perched on her chest. His skin is tinted brown, scorched by the fires of heck. He's sitting with his fist at his chin like he's contemplating something, it's so perverse. Glassy crimson eyes meet the gaze of the viewer. It looks like

he has horns, which is echoed by the shadow he casts on the curtain behind him. On the left side of the painting, between folds of fabric, a ghastly black horse head emerges from the curtain. Grey hair on the top of its head whisps up like a flame. His eyes bug out of their sockets, bleached and unpigmented; they do not make contact with anything.

Just then the museum director walks into the gallery with two greying men in blue business suits and I straighten up. The two men look like middle-aged fuckbois who spend most of their day in glassy high-rise offices smoking cigars and sexually harassing their secretaries.

“This gallery houses a great deal of our paintings from the Romantic Period in late 18th century Europe. One of my favorite rooms. You’ll notice that many of the artists in this gallery employed heavy use of the chiaroscuro technique. A strong delineation between light and dark, not much room for ambiguity.”

She sees me, smiles with red-stained lips, and nods, “Hello.” I nod but don’t smile, just stare.

She looks back at the men and motions towards the top of an archway, “This is where we list donor names, and where your logo will be if you choose to sponsor this gallery.” The two men look at each other and nod in feigned interest like monied people do when they want to make a point of their authority.

“Now, in this gallery we have works by members of the Hudson River...” her voice trails off as they saunter off into the next room.

I roll my eyes after they leave. That kind of shit gets under my skin. Anyone in power knows that it’s a construct, so they spend the better part of their time maintaining the illusion to keep things from descending into chaos. This is what they make the big bucks for. This is why CEOs and presidents and deans don’t actually do anything except massage the mediums that construct their given reality slash power system, which is really just a part of a much larger, impenetrable distributed power network, a blockchain of wealth and influence. Power begets power, cronies in cahoots!

They say you should observe people in power, see how they treat their subordinates, the janitor, the intern, the museum guard, to judge their true character. But this “true character” is always just a shade of the same value: a value that requires that their boot remain planted firmly on our necks as they squat on our chests. Some phantoms just happen to wear lipstick.

It’s almost the end of the day and the end of my shift. Another guard steps into the gallery and nods, letting me know that I can start asking people to leave and snap them out of their art trances. I make my way through the museum and approach various visitors:

A college student with notebook in hand.

“Time to go.”

Four Loko Dad and the tiny one.

“Time to go.”

An old woman wearing a colorful fascinator.

“Time to go.”

A young couple with arms around the other’s waist.

“Time to go.”

“Time to go.”

“Time to go.”

“Time to go.”

I was six drinks in when I saw him on the dance floor.

The club was pulsing, a dark sea of bodies stained by blue and white pins of light bouncing off of every surface. Everyone was sweaty, sticky, way past drunk. Deafening trance music flooded the room. The bass cascaded bodies against each other, violent erratic grinding.

I had come to the club with Gen a couple hours earlier. Their cousin was the bouncer and had looked the other way (we didn't have handles for him to verify anyway). It was past 2 a.m. Gen had left, gone home. I insisted on staying, needed to dance, to lock eyes, to feel my body against the groove of someone else's.

I lost my balance when I saw him and took a step back to center myself, bracing my arm on the edge of the bar behind me. I couldn't stop spinning. Everything was spinning. I told myself it was impossible, that my vision was foggy, that I was just drunk. But when I looked back up he was still there, surrounded by swaying bodies.

He was making direct eye contact with me. He looked terrified. His arms were flailing, but he

wasn't dancing. It looked like... it looked like he was drowning. A wave of panic shot through my body. There was something unsettling about the way his arms swung, like his movements were caught in time. When he lifted his hand, it took a second for his arm to follow. He was maybe fifteen, twenty bodies in. I pushed my way through, squeezed through twisting arms and legs, pissed people off on the way. Someone dropped their drink on my heel as I waded in towards the center. But when I thought I reached him, he was gone. I jerked my head around to look for him, looked down at the ground to see if he'd fallen, but he'd disappeared. I looked crazy and frantic, as more than one dirty look told me.

After this, I decided to leave. I was clearly so fucking wrecked that I was hallucinating. I pushed my way back through bodies and followed the stairs back down towards the door and stumbled out of the club. It was chilly. I pulled the jacket from my waist and stuffed my arms through the sleeves. I could see my breath. I decided to walk home anyway.

The streets were mostly deserted except for the occasional drunken couple falling out of the front door of a bar and into a car they had just called. I passed an empty bus shelter with an illuminated video ad that followed my movement, flickering onto each pane of glass as I walked by. It was an image of the

President in his signature cool-gray t-shirt, hands on his hips and smiling doe-eyed. “Hi—” The video scrubbed for a moment while it tried to put a name to my face. “Government-issued ID cards are phasing out by the fall of 2022. Have you linked your handle yet? It’s simple and easy! Download the Documerica app on your smart device and...” His voice faded as I rounded a corner.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. The cold made me feel less drunk than I was. My mind drifted back to the dance floor...

How long had it been? Had it already been a year? Life had been a hazy blur in the months after his death. His passing had gutted me, hollowed me out. I was angry and despondent. I hated him for leaving. I drank, a lot. But, slowly, things had gotten better. After six months I began to get over him, started to get horny again. I was able to go days at a time without thinking about him and the way that he left. Before this night it’d been weeks since I’d thought about him. I really thought I was over him, but seeing him brought it all back. Everything. I was furious and heartbroken.

Things were already rocky on the night that he left. When we first started seeing each other, we’d been so in sync. The first few months were amazing. It was spooky how in tune we were with each other’s sense of humor, the ways we wanted to pass the time, the needs

of our bodies. But in the days leading up to the end, things had started to go downhill. My jokes fell flat. We had bad sex. He was easily irritable, and I was annoyed about it. It was all starting to feel lopsided.

That night we had gone to a house party his friends were hosting. He drove but the ride there was silent. When we got to the party, we spent time in different parts of the house. I was talking to a few of his friends but he was mostly drifting through the party not saying anything to anyone. Every once in awhile between swigs of beer we'd make eye contact: knowing glances that I knew then meant that it was the end. That night he felt so different, like we were on opposite ends of the spectrum and everyone else in the world was somewhere in between.

A couple more hours had passed before I realized that he left. Ghosted his own friends' party without saying goodbye. With no ride back, I walked home that night too.

A few days later I texted him to see if he wanted to hang out. No reply. A week went by and I decided to call. When he didn't pick up I left a voicemail. At this point I assumed he was dumping me but I just wanted to hear it from him. I asked him to call me back, to give me the courtesy of breaking up with me. Then his friends started texting me to see if I'd heard from him. They were looking too. A couple days later his bloated body washed up on shore.

I was still a ways from home but I was growing tired. My legs knocked into each other. I just needed to lie down, for a little bit. A car sped down the road next to me; someone yelled something and threw trash out as they passed. Nothing good would happen at this hour. I came up to an abandoned parking lot, empty except for a long chain link fence that bisected its length. I walked in and fingered the fence's metal links. Weeds sprouted up through the concrete and squirmed through the bottom rung of diamond-shaped orifices. I was about halfway across when I decided that was as good a place as any to lie down. I slowly bent down to the ground, my hands in front of me meeting the pebbles and broken chunks of concrete that would serve as my temporary bed. I laid down on my side, curled up, back against the fence. A light from behind on the far end of the lot cast long shadows from my prostrate body out in front me. I drifted off.

I must've been asleep for awhile because I started to dream. I found myself out in some large anonymous body of water. I saw him in the drink, struggling for his life, thrashing as sheets of sea mutilated and suffocated him. But I wasn't looking down on him from the sky like a drone or a god or some combined blasphemy. I was in the water with him, and because of this, I could see the horizon. The water and the sky met in brutal collision. As blue as the water was, the sky was redder.

A blazing blood-red dwarf illuminated the atmosphere and stretched its crimson sleeve as far as the eye could see in any direction. Then, the red sky started to mix with the blue sea. The horizon line disappeared, or multiplied. In no time at all, everything was swallowed by one big glowing purple mass.

I woke up because I could feel someone staring at the back of my head from the other side of the fence. Sweat was already pooled on my goosebumped skin. The hairs on the backside of my neck stood up like tiny daggers. I twisted around and backed up fast, but there was no one there. Just a puddle of water in a shallow pot hole.

I stood up and started walking towards home again. The air was thick with fog. It was still dark, the streets eerily quiet. Everything was so... static. It had the effect of making everything feel flimsy, made of cardboard. It felt like I was on a movie set. A lone star cowboy making his bowlegged way through a dusty desert town. What confrontation did those leering eyes behind each window anticipate? What shadow awaited me?

When I finally reached home, I fumbled with my keys before ambling through the front door and up the stairs. I left the lights off and relied on muscle memory. Unlocking my bedroom door, I collapsed on my bed, fetal in a pitch black cocoon. I couldn't shake

what I'd seen. I tossed and turned, trying to forget the agonizing expression I had seen on his face.

I was facing the wall, starting to drift off, when a blue lozenge of light appeared abruptly in front of me, its edges wooly from the window it was streaming through. My body froze in abject terror. My bones felt heavy as gravity pulled them down into the mattress. I felt sick. I didn't think I could will myself to move, but somehow I pushed myself up from my pillow to turn around.

And there he was.

Sitting on his heels on the flat patch of roof outside of my window. I looked at him; he looked at me. He lifted his hand and waved. The tips of his fingers swayed to one side while the rest of his hand caught up, then swayed to the other. He smiled, gap-toothed.

He was glowing in milky blue luminescence. There was a... buzz around him. Tiny little sprites of light leapt off his skin and then disappeared. Wraith residue. Ocean mist cresting off a wave. Suddenly I wasn't afraid anymore.

He pointed down at the bottom of the window. I walked over and opened the latch and the pane creaked up halfway.

"Aren't you going to let me in?" he grimaced sheepishly.

"No."

His mouth grew small, but before he could protest I crawled out onto the roof with him. We crouched down next to each other, knees close to our chests, looking out into an inky web of twinkling celestial tissue.

After awhile I mustered, "You know, I was just starting to get over you..."

"Oh?" he said without looking over.

"...I wish you wouldn't have come back."

We sat out on the roof for a long time. Didn't talk, just fed off of each other's animal magnetism. I wanted to ask... but I was nervous to hear his answer. Another dark hour passed. Then, off in the distance, the night gave way to a waxing belly of flaxen light, engorged and swelling with the coming daybreak. Finally I pivoted towards him and asked,

"Orlando, why did you leave?"

His face, then head, turned to me, translucent skin glinting in the halfdawn.

"It's about time."



Thank you Stephanie Gage & Rudy Medina

