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OCTOBER 25, 2020 (/STORY/FALL-2020-HULL)

*Sandhill Cranes by Anna
Prawdzik Hull (/story/fall-
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CARVE MAGAZINE (/STORY?AUTHOR=53AA0565E4B041458A7586D3) · FALL 2020
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■

Tía Consuelo, with her big mouth and big earrings and eighties perm, sits me down at the kitchen table and says, “I don’t want you to work for that puto.” By puto, she means Johnny González, owner of Speedy G Car Wash on San Mateo. “The biggest pendejo in town,” she says, and her two chain smoking friends and permanent kitchen features, one with the tetas, and the other—Mari—with those dimples, tap their long nails on the kitchen table. Tetas says, “He killed his wife.”

I say, “How do you know?”

“People talk,” says Tetas.

“Like who?” I’m not going to let them dirt-talk my new boss.

“Lo que pasó,” says Tetas, “was he sliced his wife with a butcher knife.”

“And dumped her in the ocean,” says Mari, all smiles like she takes pleasure in another pendeja’s tragedy.

“Andále,” says Tetas. “Right in the ocean.”

“Listen, m’hijo,” says tía Consuelo. She’s now standing by the stove. “I know you need a job.” She covers her mouth with her wrist and coughs. “But you stay away from him. You hear me, Hector? Johnny González is trouble.” She serves me dry-as-sand Colombian arepas on one of her flowery plates. She’s not Colombian or anything, my aunt—a proper Mexican through and through, turned New-Mexican Chicana on the verge of a green card. But her boyfriend is, from Bogotá or Barranquilla or Cartagena, a lover straight from Márquez, minus the cholera. And what Pablo eats, Consuelo makes, and the rest of us—Tetas, Mari, and I—endure. Consuelo pushes the plate toward me and I stuff an arepa in my mouth. It’s dry concrete, like hardened grits patties. The thing is, Consuelo’s just worried all the fucking time, and Tetas and Mari forget we don’t live in Miami. Or even Tejas. “The ocean’s two days away,” I want to say. Instead, I grab another arepa and say, “No one else will give me a job, tía.”

“He’s lived with me two years, Hector has,” says Consuelo. “Two years and this is how he thanks me.”

“Wait a minute,” I say. “I did—”

She tssks me, and says, “Señorito drops out of college, in his last semester at that, because he’s too good for Shakespeare”—she says Chakehspeer—“And what does he do now? You could have become a teacher, Hector, and helped your poor mother in that shithole of a hospital in Oaxaca. But no. Claro que no.”

“That’s why I got a job,” I say. “To help her.”

Tía Consuelo’s on a roll, though. “Help her? By working for that puto González?” She lights another cigarette. “If diabetes doesn’t kill your mother, your stupidity will.” She’s now standing against the kitchen counter, her right arm propping her left. Smoke clouds part of her face. She takes out a tobacco bit from between her teeth and spits it out. At the table, Tetas and Mari are so enjoying this. Consuelo says, “Look at him, girls,” and she points at me with her index and middle finger, and a cigarette between the two. “The eagle nose, the curly hair. That’s his dead father, just there.” She pauses, signs herself, but she’s not done, and I stir in my chair. “Now look at his eyes,” she continues. “The color, the shape. Same as Pilar’s, the mother he sent straight to ICE hell.”

Right. I’ve had enough. I get up and leave the kitchen and go to the veranda. The afternoon air is cold. Wild geese, or sandhill cranes—or does it even matter what they are—are flying high above in a V formation, heading south. They sound like dry squeegees on dirty windows. I take a deep breath. That’s my tía for you. In her many moments of anger, she likes to remind me—lest I ever forget, and never mind forgive myself—that it was because of me and a traffic ticket I got that her sister, my mother, who was in the car with me, was deported.

When the last of the cranes fly away past the tallest trees and I go back inside the house, and tía Consuelo says, “That murderous puto will be the end of you, m’hijo,” I don’t listen. I just don’t. Because biggest puto in Albuquerque or not, Johnny González gave me a job when no one else would even look at me. So, I’m not going to run away from it like a wet rat, not when I’m in financial deep shit with student loans, car loans, and immigration-lawyer fees up to my throat. And especially not when Mami’s sick in a dilapidated hospital in Mexico. Desperate measures, blah blah. I’m living my own Pedro Páramo.

...

Consuelo loves dragging me to church and dumping me in the choir to sing for the Virgen and her white-ass Niño Jesús. And nothing, as in nothing in the damn world, can possibly be slower and more boring than standing at attention in the pews near the priest during Christmas mass, or Easter mass, or worse, that Asunción one that drags on for hours, like we've got nothing better to do than celebrate god knows what about some ascension, or some forty or fifty days after resurrection or some shit like that. Nothing, until I start working at Speedy G's Car Wash. I say, take me back to church anytime you like, tía, because working at Speedy G, those first days, when barely any car shows up and we just stand there, or sit there, or watch the sun move in the sky, is the death of my soul.

Me and the boys, we come up with games to kill time. In the locker room where we catch and race cockroaches between washing cars, the guys, they talk, and I find out that Johnny G's wife's name had been Elena. And that before she was murdered—or disappeared, poof, no one knows—she had the ass of a café con leche and the vocabulary of a chula who'd gone to college like me. She had been a bomba, they all say, and whenever morning-shift Julio mentions her, he walks funny after and pulls at his pants. The cabrón has it for dead girls.

So, there. It's all boring and all, until the day Johnny G sends me on my first errand, two weeks into my job. He then sends me every day after that to buy water bottles by the ton, and food, and clothes, and kid shoes. But never at the same store. Which is weird, because Walmart's got lower prices than Target sometimes, and there are places with better quality clothes for cheaper. I don't complain, though, it's better than watching Julio get a hard-on, so I do as Johnny G says, and at the end of every errand, I leave everything inside the garage by his house. When I return the key to him, and before I go back to the locker room and the boys and the cucarachas, he always tips me and says he's glad he can trust me.

Another two weeks go by like that, and then, that third Sunday, when we finish waxing a black Ford (the first car in three hours), Julio and the boys head to the locker room. I'm still wiping my hands on my overalls when Johnny G calls me into his office.

"How's your ma?" he says, and I wince, though not at the question but at his smile—his teeth are crooked and one's missing on the side. Finally, I shrug. "Oh, you know."

"Yeah, qué pena. It's really fucked up."

Then he says nothing, and I say nothing, and thank god the locker room erupts in a cockroach-race cheer. I relax some. The jefe says, “I know about your situation. About the hospital in Oaxaca.” Then, “If you’re interested, I’ve got a job for you. I’ll pay triple. Cash.”

Another cheer erupts in the locker room. I scan the office—not a single photo. If my woman had died, she’d have an altar with Christmas lights and all the Virgen de Guadalupe candles I could find. I think of Elena in pieces at the bottom of the ocean. Maybe he really had driven two days with her in a garbage bag. I say, “Your wife, she died, right?” And I freeze. Shit. I’ve got a freestyle mouth with a mind of its own, like it belongs to an abuelita sitting on a porch.

“Who told you that?” he says.

I swallow, and say, “Your ring finger,” and point at it. “You always touch it.” He touches it just then and looks up. His bald head glistens and there’s something real ugly in his eyes just now.

And then, a fucking miracle, or two, as if all that singing for baby Jesús has finally paid off—a car honks outside the carwash, and the boys spill out of the locker room like a firework on the Fourth of July and Julio calls my name. Also, Johnny’s phone rings. He lets it buzz and looks at his hands—how long did he have to scrub her blood off them, I wonder—and when he finally picks up and says, “Yeah?” I do a 180 on my heels and go wash-wax the red Corvette and suck up to its driver for an extra fat tip. Two more cars after that, and I punch out and I’m out of there.

The next day as soon as we open shop, Johnny G calls me into his office again, and I shit my pants just walking up. He says, “We all make mistakes, kid.” I’m not sure if he means me and my big mouth, or him and whatever he did to his wife. Then, “You still need some fast cash for your ma?”

I don’t even have time to reply before he says, “This afternoon works for you?”

I hesitate.

“You want the job or what? Your ma, what’s wrong with her?”

Shit. I think of Elena, the ocean. But then, I also think of Mami, laying in her bed, alone. I want to hire a private nurse for her. So, I nod.

“Órale, pues,” he says. “I’ll pick you up.” And just as I turn away, he adds: “Maybe on the way, you and me, we can also have a little chat between hombres, he?”

Fuck.

...

I wait for him at home, in tía’s kitchen. “You be careful now,” says Tetas. Mari, smoking to my right, smiles and squeezes my knee. Consuelo says nothing. She already has, and many angry things at that. Now, she peels off her fake eyelashes and leaves them on the table before getting up. She goes to her room and slams her door.

“She’ll get over it,” says Mari.

Tetas lights up a cigarette and puffs. “At his funeral, she will.” She gives me a look and says, “If you break Consuelo’s heart, cabrón, I will dig you out of your grave and kill you a second time and burn your eyes out.”

A car horn sounds on the street. I take tía Consuelo’s eyelashes off the table and cradling them in one hand, I knock on her door. “Dejame en paz,” she says. “If you wanna get killed by that wife murderer, go ahead.”

“Tía—”

“If you die, you’ll have to call your mother yourself.”

The car horn beeps again and I leave the eyelashes on the bathroom sink. My stomach churns. Wives, even the chula ones, they die all the time, right? As in, it happens, and it’s not always someone’s fault. Maybe Elena couldn’t swim and drowned. Or maybe she had some very quick cancer or something, like a cancer of the ass—how ironic would that be. And with that, I go outside to meet my fate.

...

The sky’s purple by now, and pink, the way it gets here when things are about to go to shit, which is to say, it’s always purple and pink in the late afternoon in New Mexico, and things almost always go to shit for me. For one, Johnny’s got a knife tucked in a shoulder holster

inside his open jacket—and I don't. The knife is big, Rambo style. Before Johnny zips up, I catch a glimpse of the white handle and turquoise inlays. At least I might get murdered in style.

We're driving, he's smoking like a dragon, and he says, "Who told you about my wife?" Now, I'm no puto myself, I won't denounce anyone, especially not Julio at work or tía or the kitchen girls. So I mumble something like "rumors" and he spits out onto the road. We're at a red light, corner of Wyoming and Central. The meth heads are there with their puckered faces and a look that says too much; they're like hawks, but helpless and pathetic. A helicopter goes over us. Above the sound, Johnny says, "Who's spreading rumors?"

I shrug. I'm not fully sure where he's going with this but goddamnit, tía is always right—and she's going to make me pay for this one if I make it out alive. "You hear things," I say, and I watch a man—Native or mixed, it's hard to tell. He passes by with his hand outstretched, his eyes that say God knows what. I avert my gaze. If it weren't for tía, I'd be living in a cardboard box with him and his friends.

These are the longest traffic lights, and I wipe my sweaty palms up and down my jeans. Johnny says, "Why you move so much? You nervous?"

I want to say, "Should I be?" Though it would sound so Hollywood, like a dare which I'd rather not make. He gestures toward the back of the car. "I got us chips," he says. "And there's coffee in that bag."

So, that's new. A murderer who offers a last meal.

We pass by the fairgrounds and continue east toward the Sandia mountains. "Where exactly are we going?" I say, and perhaps I don't want to know, though maybe I should text someone before the pendejo clubs me in the head under a Joshua tree in the middle of the desert. "North," he says, which means most of North America at this point, maybe not Mississippi or Tejas or Florida. Or Arizona. But that's still a hell of a lot of country to kill me and dig my grave, and good luck to tía Consuelo. Then again, I bet she'd be able to sniff me down and dig me out for one last scene, though.

Which reminds me of my mother and I focus on that because what else am I to do—jump out of the car? He knows where I live and if anything, I'd rather confront him away from tía and her teta-friends. We drive past the last suburban houses on the mountain slopes. The boulders are red in the setting sun, like Mars.

We get off old Route 66 onto a dirt path scattered with potholes, which Johnny takes as if his old-ass pickup were a 4x4. By the time we take a sharp right and park in front of a flat-roofed adobe house, I'm considering bashing the puto in the head myself and running away. We're in the middle of the desert now, a drought-plagued stretch of yellow and brown studded with mesas. The wind cuts through my clothes and swells them like sails; it blows sand against the car at such speed that the old Nissan seems to sigh and moan. A cone of dust rises to our left, lifts dirt and tumbleweeds, then dies. Johnny says, "Follow me," and I do, like a cow to the slaughterhouse, aware of its fate but unable to revolt. It's this surreal moment of no-shit, this moment when things that only happen in movies happen to you, as if the director had decided to go for slow-mo—pura vida to the extreme, but bad, because you're about to die.

He pushes the gate open and it creaks on its rusted hinges and the wind swings it to the side. I think of tía, and her fake eyelashes, praying the rosary. And as my boss unlocks the door and we enter the darkness, I think of Elena.

Then, someone says, "Johnny?"

There are people somewhere in the dark, and they're standing up now. Their knees are creaking, and there's a faint shuffle of clothes above the whistling wind outside. A small hand takes mine, and I recoil the way I would had it been a fish touching my skin in the water where I'd think no fish would be. To my right, on the edge of the light, all I see are a pair of big eyes and the tip of a small nose, and a mouth saying, "Hola."

Two adult hands—a woman's by the look of her overworked slender fingers and the thinnest of wedding bands—appear on the child's shoulders and pull her back. I look around for Johnny, and when I finally distinguish him between the people who are in the shadows, eyeing me, I say, "Who are they?" He doesn't answer.

Someone's hands push a door in front of us, and light spills on the little girl's face. The child grabs my fingers again. She's just a tiny thing, with two thin plaits.

We walk into a kitchen lit by a swinging light above an oval Formica table, on which stand plates and pots, steaming with the smell of my own mother's cooking. The child points at one of the chairs and says,

“Siéntate aquí.” I sit down, and I notice the boarded-up windows and a bolted back door. The fuck.

People spill from the darkness into the kitchen’s light. A woman says, “Comemos.” Hands appear from behind me and pass plates and cutlery. Women, men, their faces darkened by the desert and the wind, and by the now setting sun that wants to burst through the wooden planks in the windows. They pile on food and pass on dishes filled with mole. Johnny sits down beside me, his legs spread out.

“So?” he says and smiles, as if he’d taken me to a fun fair. Then, “Eat,” he says, and, “Oye, niña”—he takes one of the last plates on the table, and gives it to the girl—“ponle un poco al Hector.”

The little girl does as told: she loads the chicken and with a ladle, on tiptoes, pours brown liquid on it and sprinkles it with cheese. I take the food from her and it smells the way my mother’s skin does; of earth and of chocolate. It smells of that red light I burned last time she was in the car with me; of the blue sirens behind us; of the cop’s hand when he reached for my driver’s license; of the finger he pointed at Mami. I sniff the mole, which now stinks of the cop’s voice when he said, “Papers.” It reeks of the screeching of his radio; of “We’ve got one.”

I put the plate away and look back at Johnny. “Where the fuck are we?”

“A safehouse.”

The pendejo’s playing me. I say, “Safehouse for whom?” and he gestures at everyone in the kitchen. “For them.”

“Who are they?”

“People like you,” he says, as the six adults—two women, one old, and one young with a hat; and four men, the only young one with a baseball cap—sit around the table, plates in hand. The younger man tells us they had crossed the border, months ago, in the height of summer when it was so hot even the redneck Minutemen patrolling the desert wouldn’t come out. “Nos entrenamos para el calor,” says another man with fine beautiful lines on either side of his eyes. They had trained for the heat. “Pero la niña sufrió,” he says. He pulls the girl in close to him, and adds, “Es Juanita. Mi nieta.” His granddaughter.

Fucking hell. Illegals. That's all I need. Johnny puts a hand on my shoulder, hisses for me to sit down, and says, "Esté es Hector." Then, "Sus padres llegaron a los Estados Unidos como todos ustedes." My parents had crossed the river, they had. Baseball-cap motions toward me and says, "Y él?"

Johnny points at the ground. "Born here," he says, and now their loser eyes look at me as if I were their hero; the promised land; the hope for their empty hands, for their sunburnt children. Some hope, I am. "My U.S. passport's been revoked," I say to clean myself off of the anointment.

I turn to Johnny. "The hell you brought me here for?" I say. "What job is this?" Instead of answering, the pendejo takes out a picture and holds it for all but me to see. His hands are trembling now as he says, "Have you seen her? La han visto?"

The picture goes around the table, and everyone shakes their head. Johnny says, "Are you sure?" Finally, it lands in my hands. The color photograph is of a beautiful woman with broad-rimmed glasses, a mouth to kill for, and long, curly dark hair. Johnny says, "Se llama Elena."

Elena smiles back at me from her paper self. The chula with the ass of a café con leche. The chula who should be rotting at the bottom of the ocean. Morning-shift Julio would have peed his pants seeing her eyes again. Fuck. I give Johnny his photo. He tucks it away and says, "Are you sure?" He reaches for his pocket again. "Quieren verla de nuevo?" The man in the cap waves his palms. They've seen enough—she's never crossed their path, they've never heard of her.

From inside his jacket, Johnny takes out a folded map. Two of the women help him remove the pots and plates off the table, and he spreads the graph open. "Estamos aquí," he says. His finger taps the buttfuck of nowhere, in the upper tongue of the Chihuahuan desert, a little north of Albuquerque and east of the Sandias. At the bottom of the map: the U.S.-Mexico border, with handwritten blue X's and dates. Thirty, maybe forty red X's dot the empty desert between the border and Albuquerque, some as far as the first towns in Arizona, and others on the state border with Texas. "Do you know where you were held captive?" he says, and repeats himself in Spanish. The Mexicans shake their heads.

"Captive?"

He ignores my question. “O mejor, where did you cross the border?” he says. Baseball-cap points at the space between El Paso and Santa Teresa; he doesn’t even hesitate, as if he knew the terrain better than his own house. “Por el río?” says Johnny, but baseball-cap shakes his head. “No,” he says. “Por el desierto.” Then, through the mountains. There, they hid in the back of a first pickup truck, and waited for a second one. Another coyote picked them up at dawn, and from there, they proceeded on foot. Baseball-cap says, “Caminamos durante tres días, pero solo de noche.”

I look at the little girl, her cheeks puffy and red; I look at the shoes of the woman, her grandmother, who’s standing beside me—old sneakers held with masking tape. They had walked three days, sleeping by day and marching by night, equipped as if going to the market. The grandmother sits down. She remembers something—a very white desert, to their right.

Johnny G gives me a glance, and I point at it on the map before he can say it. White Sands. And to the left of it, a mountain range. Gesturing with his hand, Johnny says to the woman, “And after that, did you go up or down?”

I turn toward him. “What’s the difference?”

“Shut up and watch.”

The woman with battered shoes says, “Más por arriba,”—she points at the ceiling—“y luego abajo, hacía una carretera.” She gestures at the floor, and Johnny traces their way with his finger on the map. “Up Oscura Peak,” he says, “and down toward Route 380.”

A pickup truck met them where the mountain licks the highway. They had driven through the desert at night and on until sunrise, when they had stopped at a dead end, a sort of loop road that came full circle on itself. A van was waiting there for them. Cream-colored, with no windows at the back, just an indent on the passenger’s side. They were pushed inside, and then, they don’t know. The van drove until the sun was high up. When they got out and were taken to a tin-roof house—the coyotes’ den—heat waves were shimmering off the sand and dust.

“The house could be anywhere,” Johnny says. “But a loop, a loop.” He squints at the map and taps a small spot—a road in the middle of fuck all, with a little circle at the end, like the eye of a needle. Everyone’s quiet while he measures the grid and slides his finger down toward

Route 380. He marks a red X, to the left of the Chupadera Mesa. He hovers over the area with his hand, and says, “This is where”—he counts the X’s on all sides of the mesa—“nine groups of smuggled people were picked up by a cream van. You are the first I heard of to have crossed the mountains.” He scans the men and women and child. “And then, how did you escape?”

There were four coyotes, says the grandfather, and they were usually gone between sundown and midnight. Sometimes, one of them would come in, armed, and he’d point at the women and the girl, and the four men, and say things like, “Your brother doesn’t want to pay us more, and if he doesn’t—” and he’d make a sign of cutting their throats.

“La casa,” says baseball-cap, and the men and women wave their hands and tap parts of the kitchen we’re in to show us how similar the coyotes’ hideout was to this one. Then they point at the door—unlike this safehouse, the hideout had a large, easily removable fanlight above the main door. “So,” I say. “That’s how.” They all shake their heads.

The evening they escaped, they walked blind, not knowing if they were going north or south, until they saw a ranch house with lights. One of the women was sent to knock at the door. We got lucky, says Juanita’s grandma.

“And then, they were moved again, by night,” says Johnny. “To this safehouse.”

He claps his hands and tells them, “Oigan, we brought you food.” He sends me back to the car with two of the men, to pick up grocery bags—apples, frozen goods for the oven, bread, potatoes, and bottles of water; the ones I got at local supermarkets during my errand runs.

Back inside, Johnny says, “Wednesday, we’ll take you to your families in town.”

I look at him. “What do you mean we?”

“I thought you wanted to help,” he says.

“Not like that.” I mean, their story of survival is all moving and heartbreaking and I wish all them the best of luck. I’ll send them karma points and good vibes, I promise. Maybe I’ll even give Johnny some money for shoes for the girl and her grandmother. But there’s no way in hell I’ll be dragged into smuggling illegal immigrants into town.

Johnny G says, "Suit yourself, but after tomorrow, I'm driving them to Albuquerque."

"I don't want to be mixed up with anything like that."

"So you'll just continue walking as if nothing?" he says. And I'm not sure what he means by that, though I think I do—my father, my mother. I stand up. "Get me the fuck home."

...

Later, much later, when the stars are already all out and the moon is huge on the horizon, we drive back, Johnny and I, toward the city lights. I say, "What happened to Elena, then?"

"Same thing that happened to your mother."

"So, you didn't murder her, then?" Fuck. My big mouth.

"The fuck you're saying, son? Is that what you think of me? Is this what everyone thinks of me? That I killed my Elena?"

I don't answer.

"She was deported," he says. "So, I paid coyotes to get her across the border."

"And?"

He gets off the highway and on through Los Ranchos toward Barelas and my house. He says, "I gave them everything they asked for. More money, more promises. Until they demanded the deeds to my business. They said that if I didn't pay them, they'd kill her."

"Did you?"

"I thought I'd manage a way to get her back," he says. "I thought I'd negotiate. And that's the last I ever heard of her."

He doesn't speak for a while as we pass shopping mall after shopping mall, and when he opens his mouth again, he says, "I've been searching for her for over a year now. That's how I got involved with, you know." He jerks his head back to mean the safehouse we just left,

and he parks in front of tía's. "I'll drive into the desert tonight," he says. "I've found three coyote hideouts before, and now maybe a fourth if what these poor bastards told us today holds."

"And what will you do?" I say, but maybe I'd rather not know. Actually, I'd rather not hear any more.

"I've got equipment in the back," he says. "Night vision. Stuff like that." He twists and grabs his backpack from behind, and as he does, he says, with a strained voice, "I'm not asking you to come with me tonight. But if you want to help, I need people like you on my side. People who understand."

"Help you how?"

"I knew from the start that I could trust you," he says. "You and me, we're not that different." He searches for something in his backpack. "We usually take them straight from our safehouse to a big store, a real busy one on a busy evening, or to a parade or some street fiesta if there's one around. And that's where they're met by someone who knows their family, and who can take them in."

"I can't," I say.

Johnny's face hardens. "Just as well, m'hijo. Just as well." He looks into the rear mirror at a car that's just parked behind us. "Still there," he says, and he pulls out a roll of cash from his backpack. "Take it. You've earned it. No need to declare it." Then, "I hope you understand that this never happened." I nod. I nod again, faster. "Get the fuck out, then," he says, and as soon as I get out, he drives away. An old El Camino that had parked behind us trails him into the dark. They both stop side by side down my street, their red brake lights on, and they stay there immobile for a moment, until the other car drives away, and Johnny follows.

...

At home, tía is waiting in her nightgown and robe by the stove, armed with anger up to her teeth. The kitchen is floating in cigarette smoke and her eyes are red because of it. That, or she's been crying. I'm such a pendejo. Pablo, the Colombian lover, is there, too. He's stuffing his face with arepas. When they see me come in, tía Consuelo doesn't even

look at me, but Pablo kisses her on the head and gets up. As he goes to tía's room, he points at me as if to say, "Don't you fuck with her, hijo de puta."

"Tía, I'm sorry, I really am," I say. "I didn't mean to worry you."

She points at the chair across from her. I sit. She's going to kick me out, I can sense it. She's had enough of me, of my loser life, of the stupid decisions I keep on making, of the—

"It's your mother," she says.

I hold on to the table, I think. I hold on to the table and let all the smoke in the kitchen fill my every thought.

Tía says, "Her vecina Fernanda called."

My mouth is dry. "Who?"

"She's the one, you know, with the other neighbor, who visits your mother at the hospital since her diabetes got bad." She lights another cigarette. "Fernanda, she sent me a picture of the doctor's report. Septicemia," she says and with her forefinger's knuckle, she dries the skin under her eyes.

Septicemia. Septicemia. It means nothing to me, though tía's face and smudged mascara do.

She adds, "Blood poisoning."

Now it means everything, and the kitchen swivels. I steady it by holding on to the table again. "I'll call the lawyer tomorrow," I say.

"For you?"

I shrug. "Maybe for me so I can get my passport back and go to her. I don't know, or maybe we can bring her back, maybe since she's ill."

"No, m'hijo," says Consuelo. "They don't let sick people through the border, you know that." She pulls on the cigarette. Her hand is shaking. "And she can't travel." She pulls so hard on her cigarette again, that the ashes take over paper. "There's an open bed in that private hospital, the one in downtown Oaxaca," she says. "Fernanda's got your mother's name in, but we need to pay."

“How much?”

“In American? Sixty-five per night, plus the tests and the drugs.”

In my room, I count the cash Johnny gave me: three hundred bucks. That’s already three days in a better cleaner hospital, maybe four. And extra money for her insulin, and for whatever other drugs she needs. All right. If Johnny triples my salary again, I’ll accept his offer. I’ll move the poor pendejos from that safehouse and will drag them to wherever they need to go, and bring them food, and make them comfortable, and kiss them goodnight, as long as he pays me the way he paid me tonight. If I do five or six of those trips with Johnny G, and work at the car wash on top of that, and if the hospital accepts to give us a bit of credit, Mami will get better. She will. She will. She will.

I hide the cash inside my pillow and sleep on it like it’s my mother’s hand, there, under my cheek.

...

Dressed in my overalls with *Speedy G* across the back, I enter the auto spa the following morning, hoping to catch him in his office. Johnny’s not there yet, and the receptionist says, “He didn’t call.” We wash a few cars, and just before noon, a blue El Camino pulls in.

I’m working on a Jeep with Julio, and I ask to swap with another guy. I approach with my sponge and bucket full of soap water, when the driver lowers his window just enough for me to see his hazel eyes. He says, “You the kid from last night?”

“Yes.”

“Johnny here?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me, cabrón,” he says. The receptionist comes out to investigate, so he hands me a small piece of paper and says, turning his engine on, “Dáale eso. It’s for Johnny G.” Then, he drives away.

The jefe doesn’t show up all day. After my shift, I wait outside, pushing away this one meth-head who just won’t go, like a booger that sticks to a finger. I read the small note over and over again, and I fill in

the gaps. Easy if you know Albuquerque: “Walmart Menaul, Wednesday @ 7:15 p.m., aisles 3, 6, 9. Wednesday.” That’s tomorrow.

When the car wash closes, I drive to Johnny’s house. His lights are out and his day car, the little beat-up Toyota he drives to work, is visible through the garage windows. Beside it, there are boxes that look like those we took to the safehouse, and some of the water bottles wrapped in plastic I bought last week when running his errands.

At home, there’s nothing new. Consuelo at her kitchen table tells me the same thing. Still septicemia, still needs to move hospitals. So I take out the money from inside my pillow and tell her to send it to the vecina, that Fernanda woman. I tell her to get Mami a room, maybe one with a view, one with something else to look at other than empty space no family member will ever fill. “And get her a bouquet of flowers,” I say, “and a balloon or two. Whatever this can afford.” Tía accepts the money, and for once, doesn’t ask me how I got so much and in cash, though she says, “I don’t want you to get mixed up with anything, you hear me?” She takes hold of my chin. “You get in trouble with the police and you won’t get your passport back. Is that what you want? To never see your mother again?”

...

I have off the next day, but I still go to work—not officially, though, just to see Johnny. I’ll tell him he can count on me for tonight, for Walmart on Menaul. I’ll tell him that I’ve changed my mind. “As long as you pay me,” I’ll add. And I’ll give him that note from El Camino.

There’s no sign of his red Toyota or of his pickup truck near Speedy G or anywhere near, though, so I don’t even stop. At his house, nothing’s changed since yesterday. I park across the street under a sycamore tree, whose yellow leaves and fruits hang low. The day is so quiet and still, and the shade cold. Above, in the sky, cranes in their V formation cry like hungry children.

At around noon, the blue El Camino passes by twice, slowly. Each time, he stops in front of the house for a moment before driving away. I take out the little note he’s written for Johnny G. Walmart. Tonight. “Where the hell are you, puto?” I say out loud in my car, and when the clock says two p.m. I drive back to Speedy G and ask the receptionist, who says, “Haven’t heard from him in two days.”

I call tía Consuelo. No news on the Oaxaca front, except a few extras, like them freebies you get when you buy something expensive. Septicemia, and now: fever, vomiting, swollen hands and legs.

After a pause, Consuelo says, “What do you want for dinner?” Which she never asks, ever, because it’s always what Pablo the Colombian wants.

It’s three p.m. and if I want that job and the money for my mother, I better find Johnny now. My best bet is he’s back at the safehouse, helping them pack, watching them gather their things together, their rosary and their black-and-white photographs wrapped in handkerchiefs. Maybe he’s brought them the new shoes and new clothes I bought last week, and nail polish for the women to hide their desert past. Maybe they’re all cleaning up, the women and girl plaiting their hair, the men combing theirs with gel and putting on white Norteño hats. Perhaps they’re getting ready for their outing into the world now. Johnny must be there.

So I drive north, northeast, on Route 66 with the Sandias to my left. I pass a first rancho drive, and just before the second one, I take a right onto a dirt path that seems to lead nowhere. The safehouse is a way down a small slope. I drive slowly, mindful of my suspension. In the rearview mirror I see desert and desert and desert—not a single car following me, just Joshua trees erect like sentinels.

It’s four-twenty by the time I arrive. The wind has risen and shakes my car, and I’ve got dust in my mouth. I open the gate, knock on the door, and when no one answers, I say, “Soy yo. Hector. El amigo de Johnny.” Baseball-cap opens and rushes me in, into the dark, where I hear cracking of joints like last time, but also the ruffling of skirts and the lifting of small backpacks. I say, “Johnny está?” Though obviously he isn’t—there’s no pickup outside. Little Juanita takes my hand and says, “Hola, Hector,” and we move into the kitchen. The Formica is empty, and the counters clean.

We sit around the table. They say they haven’t seen him, not in two days, but they’re glad I’ll be taking them to their loved ones.

I say, “I can’t take you. Not without Johnny. No puedo.”

They’re ready to go. I say, “Let’s wait for Johnny, all right?” They don’t understand. So, I say, “He said he went to investigar los hideouts.” I don’t know the Spanish word for it, so I say, “A la casa de los coyotes.

That's where he went on Monday night. Lunes, por la noche."

Someone says, "Madre de dios."

"What?" I say, but their hands are already up to their mouths or down on their laps, rubbing their legs the way I had in the truck the first time I came here. They've seen the coyotes, they tell me. They've seen what they can do. Baseball-cap looks at me and at his wife, who covers Juanita's ears. Finally, he says, "Johnny dead, seguro."

I say, again, "Johnny will come," but they all shake their heads. Fuck me. What if they're right? Oh, you dumb puto. I need to get the hell out.

"No nos dejes acá, Hector," says baseball-cap. Don't leave us here. "Por favor."

"I'm sorry," I say.

We sit in silence, again. Sometimes, the wind hits the roof so hard the tiles shake above our heads and a draft comes from under the kitchen door. Baseball-cap asks who will help them now. They all look at me, hoping I'll volunteer my life. I purse my lips and clasp my hands. Juanita jumps off her grandmother's knees and runs into the dark, to the front door. When she comes back, she says, "Johnny todavía no está."

I say, "Elena, la mujer de Johnny—" I try to distract them, but I change my mind. It's not the time.

I want to say, "You're the lucky ones." But I drop that, too.

I have to get my ass out of here and go home and play the good boy for all to see, and maybe find another job, and send money to Mami, and go back to college, leave those stupid graphic novels behind, and become what everyone wants me to be—a teacher, a responsible man, a caretaker of all loved ones. I will teach Chaucer, goddamnit. I will teach Chakehspeer. I think of tía's dinner waiting for me in her kitchen.

The wind bangs on the roof now and whistles through the bushes outside. It's five-thirty p.m. Yeah, no. Johnny won't come. Another bang on the roof, and I jump up. "Me tengo que ir," I say and start to go.

They stand up at the same time as me. “No te vayas, Hector,” says the little girl. I gently push her away. “You can’t ask me that,” I say in English. I hope she doesn’t understand. They plead for me to take them in my car. The women put their hands in prayer, the men remove their hats. “I can’t,” I say. “I can’t.” And I go back into the darkness and then, through the door into the orange glow. How scarlet the sundown, the mountains, the whole of the desert sand.

I get in the car. I think I get in the car. Because I’m already swerving to avoid potholes. I drive and behind me, there’s a cloud of red dust. I reach Route 66 and for a moment, close my eyes. And I think, “I left them behind. I fucking left them behind.”

When I finally look up, a van is passing slowly on the main road, going toward the second ranch. A big cream van with no windows at the back, and a dent on its side. It stops, and the man in the passenger seat lowers his window and looks into the dusty distance of the dirt path behind me, past my car. The man gets out and walks toward me with a big smile. Just a normal-looking guy: sunglasses, jeans, a hat. As he nears my window, the wind picks up and inflates his jacket. In his belt, a gun; by his chest, a holster with a white-handle knife adorned with two turquoise inlays.

He says, “Listen, I’m looking for a little adobe casita. My network’s down. What’s down this path?” He means the dirt road I drove up on.

I think of Juanita’s little sunburnt face, and of her grandmother’s raw cracked hands, like those of a peasant after harvest.

“A soccer field,” I say, my heart in my throat. “Just dropped my little brother for an evening game. He sucks ass.” I try a laugh.

The man nods with his chin, goes back to the van, and says something to the driver. They cruise away slowly down Route 66, taking the next right toward the second ranch. I watch as the van finally speeds down, turns left, and disappears behind a small bushy mound.

In my rearview mirror, the dust of the dirt path is settling down. I reverse, and where the trail widens, make a U-turn, careful not to create a cloud. Then, I drive as fast as I can back to the safehouse.