

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE BALLAD OF RAVOLO SOTO
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This is an excerpt from a novel set in 2008 Puerto Rico that aims to explore the relationship between the confluence of constructed masks of personal identity and the interconnected nature of community in the worlds of politics, media, activism, and business through a narrative examination of the ways in which three characters affect the lives of those around them. Jaime, a meditative young man with a penchant for planes, comes home to find the power shut off and his drug-addict mother gone. His best friend, Yarique, a disaffected stoner with a false sense of machismo, becomes an overnight sensation after an escalating series of violent run-ins with his abuelo's neighbor. Ravolo Soto, a reclusive pitorro distiller, drinks to keep The Other in check, but takes off into the jungles of Lares, hiding out in his father's mountain shack, after a violent encounter with the police leaves one officer dead.

THE BALLAD OF RAVOLO SOTO

by

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el verano de 2008

martes, 1 de julio: la yola

Yarique: la ropa de espíritus

A flash bulb pop:

And stoned, they stumbled out of the jungle, hands raised against the sun, beach burnt to monochromatic shapes of blinding sand and ink-black waves. They saw it a hundred yards down, an oblong silhouette.

“What the fuck is that?”

“You see it too? For a minute I thought this shit was laced.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

His name was Yarique. Jah-ReeK. Not Yarick. Not Yore-ick. And definitely not Jah-ree-kAY as Mami’s family insisted on calling him. For them, he was still the pudgy-knuckled ñoño hiding behind her pant leg, the greasy mop-top with the tight little curls and a belly hanging over his jeans, the kid that, even at nineteen, couldn’t grow more than a dusting of hair above his lip, but even so he wore it with pride.

The wind shifted.

“What the fuck’s that smell?”

“Why we down here again?”

“This was your idea.”

“Fuck it was, I hate the ocean.”

Yarique picked up a T-shirt carried in by the tide, kids large, with a big picture of Mickey Mouse in cap and gown under giant white letters; *Con-Graduations!*

“There’s some shoes floating out there if you wanna make a set.”

Yarique tossed the shirt at Jaime, who jumped back and almost tripped.

The jagged silhouette came into focus, a thirty-foot, handmade, wooden yola with a six-foot hole ripped down the starboard side.

“Where the people?” Yarique looked back down the beach to see dozens of clothes, shoes, shirts, pants, hats, tumbling in the breakers.

Jaime shrugged. “They swam to shore or they didn’t, either way there ain’t much for us to do about it.”

The north west coast was a favorite of captains running loads of twenty, fifty, a hundred migrants at a time, almost all from the DR, some Haitian, less Cuban, up through the Mona pass. Most aimed for the sandy bottoms of La Puente or Playa Grande, only spooked north by Coast Guard patrols or the high-chop of a late season storm. The less experienced burned their motors for the north corner of Aguadilla where spikes of igneous rock waited beneath the calm, flat waters to rip their boats in half.

“Come on, let’s get outta here.”

“You scared or something?”

“I just ain’t looking to see no dead bodies.”

miércoles, 9 de julio: el incidente aguacate

Ravolo: felicidades

It was the morning of their anniversary, and the sun hadn't risen above the mountain. If it hadn't been for the crippling headache, he might have thought it was still evening. The more he tried to remember, the less he could. Time was slipping and getting worse. A few minutes at first, gaps in short-term memory, like losing track of a stretch of road on a long drive, growing into hours that would eventually become days. It had happened before.

The cold kitchen tiles had pressed a grid corner into his cheek, deep enough to feel without checking a mirror. On the counter, an empty pitorro bottle, almost empty, enough left to settle his head.

He was a sight, caña-swollen belly poking out from the bottom of a stained tank top, denim shorts longer than his knees, whole body covered in a layer of gray fuzz, all except his head, which was bald and smooth as polished stone. If only she could see him. But Juanita was dead, and the dead don't see much of anything.

He hated himself almost as soon as he'd thought it.

By then, she'd been gone more years than they were been married, and in all that time he had never stopped tending her vegetable garden.

The tomato seedlings were three fists tall, grown in old coffee cans, lined up in a row on the west-facing window.

In the yard, a small wooden shack housed the gardening tools, as well as a propane fueled, copper bellied distillery kettle, his most valuable possession. In it he brewed a high-potency sugarcane moonshine known as caña. Too strong to drink

straight, it had to be steeped with piña, quenepas, pecans, or anything else in season. Bottles of the finished product, known as pitorro, lined the walls in racks.

Tucked behind the racks, in a sliver of space too small to reach without unloading the fifty or so bottles in front of it, was his machete. Rusted and worn, the handle long since replaced with thick wraps of clothe tape, it had lived there since he had, in a drunken rage, destroyed every piece of furniture in the house, leaving him with only a bathtub for a bed.

A quick toast for calm nerves and steady hands, besides, it was their anniversary. He finished half the bottle before lunch, and soon he was on his back in the grass, watching the clouds push in from the west.

Voices, movement next door. They were gathering in the yard.

It was the only house on the hill when he and Juanita bought it. The road was a long and winding dirt path, inaccessible to most. And on warm nights the two of them would sleep in the yard, knotted together in the hammock he made of lashed bits of vine, the way his father had taught him. Juanita didn't live to see them level the hillside.

The whirl of a chainsaw brought him back. Whether he had lost time or past out, he couldn't tell. The bottle was almost finished, though he couldn't remember drinking it. The tomatoes were still in their coffee cans. The day was slipping away from him.

Shouting and the thunder snap of a downed tree limb. Laughter. It was the laughter that filled him with rage. Welling up hot in his gut to spill across his skin like oil, pooling down in the tips of his fingers, balled into fists. His muscles tightened to

the point of spasm. And soon he was standing, staring at the machete, stuck in the ground like a sundial.

The quenepa tree started to shake, raining loose twigs. The chainsaw whirred and a foot-thick branch began to sag and dip above the vegetable garden. Her garden. The blade screeched to a stop. Engine cut. And he ran for the branch, hoping to brace it.

Everything went dark after that.

When he woke up, it was night, and he was hiding in the bathtub. A gash opened on his head had long since crusted over. The machete leaned against the wall beside the sink, handle spattered with dry blood. The blade was still clean. There was that at least.

Machete in hand, he went out to the yard, where a foot-thick branch had leveled Juanita's garden. There was a rustling in the trees behind him, and for a brief moment he saw it, a shadowy figure, watching, staring at him. He opened the shed and threw the machete inside, not bothering to tuck it behind the racks.

Footsteps circling.

He grabbed a fresh bottle of pitorro and went back inside.

Yarique: hombre con un plan

Get your life together or find a new place to live that was Mami's ultimatum.

"Do you even know what you want to do?"

"I got a rough idea," Yarique ate a bite of avena.

"A rough idea doesn't make a career," Selena scooped a bowl of avena from the pot on the stove. She had been up and dressed for three hours by then, but she and Papi always were earlier risers.

Not Yarique. He took after Mami, who chimed in, "What are you gonna do in ten, when you've got no income, no marketable skill set, nothing? You can't live off other people the rest of your life."

Yarique shrugged, "I got a plan."

"Getting stoned on the beach with Jaime isn't a plan." Selena put down her bowl and sat at the table.

"Did I ask you?"

She rolled her eyes and took a bite of avena.

Mami wiped the counter with a rag, "At least get a part time job while you find yourself, or whatever the hell it is you're doing."

"And when was the last time you went looking for work? People my age, we ain't never gonna buy a house or get a pension, or none of that. Shit, the only places hiring ain't even pay enough to cover the cost of getting there. Even if I did have a car, which I can't afford in the first place."

Selena turned to Mami, "He's got an excuse for everything."

"Yeah? Where you working?"

She flipped him off, pretending to rub her eye.

Mami started a new pot of coffee, “Anything's better than you're making now. Besides, it's only temporary.”

“Here we go.”

“What?”

“I ain't going to college.”

“I didn't say that.”

“Well, I ain't,” Yarique took a bite.

A beat of silence as Mami waited for him to swallow, and once he did, “It's not like it'd cost you anything.”

Yarique rolled his eyes.

“It's just a shame to see SAT scores like yours go to waste.”

A political speaker truck rolled through the neighborhood, bringing an abrupt pause to their conversation as it blasted support for Jaycob Del Toro, “Your next city council president.”

The truck rounded the corner, fading into the distance, “My SAT scores got nothing to do with it.”

Selena dropped her bowl in the sink, “It's laziness, pure and simple. It's in his blood, always has been.”

“Ain't you got studying to do, or you plan on failing that shit a third time?”

“Fuck you, Yari.”

“Selena!” Mami smacked her hand on the table, rattling the silverware.

“Whatever,” she rolled her eyes and left.

Mami waited until they heard her bedroom door close before, “What’s really going on?”

“Just like I said, ain’t no real prospects in life.”

Mami let out a long breath.

“I’m serious. Look, there ain’t no employment for the majors I wanna study, not outside of academia anyway.”

“It worked for your father.”

“Yeah? Ask him how much UPR’s paying adjuncts.”

“Still there’s options.”

“Options,” He scoffed and stared at the ceiling. “Half the cashiers at Econo got graduate degrees, ain’t helping them get out the grocery store? Only options I got are pre-med and pharmacy, both of which might make me wanna kill myself before I finish my first semester.”

“Come on, Yari.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Mami dropped the dishes in the sink, turned on the water. “Well, abuelo Julio needs help clearing the quenepa tree. He’ll pay fifty-a-day, to you and your friend.”

“That’s your solution? Go be a gardener?”

“It’s more than you’ve got.”

A horn honked, Jaime waiting out front.

Yarique stood up, “Yeah, I’ll think about it.” He pounded his coffee.

“Either do it or look for a new place to live, because I just can’t watch you throw it all away, not anymore.”

“Bet you ain’t never gave Selena that kind of ultimatum.”

“She never needed it. She’s got a plan.”

“I got a plan. But it sure as hell don’t involve yard work,” and Yarique left the kitchen.

Jaime: altos vuelos

They parked in a dirt lot off the 107, across from the end of the runway at Rafael Hernández Airport. At eleven thousand seven hundred and two feet, it was the longest in the Caribbean, used for training young combat pilots, teaching hostile touchdowns, take offs, and cargo drops that while necessary on the battlefield, could never be performed on a high-traffic airfield.

Yarique kicked back on the hood while Jaime rolled a big fat bomber in the car. His older brother, Bebo, kept him pretty well stocked, but the time between visits was growing, and Jaime was down to picking through stems.

Yarique knocked the windshield, “You just about done. We ain’t got all day.”

A low rumble hummed in the back of his chest. Jaime hurried to finish and got out in time to hear the screech of three Pratt & Whitney PW4000 high-bypass turbofan engines rip across the sky, screaming forty two thousand horsepower apiece. Staring straight up beside the car he watched as the FedEx branded McDonnell Douglas MD-11F drifted overhead, the clean countersunk rivets of its belly punctuated by three sets of landing gear, ten tires in total, with another set of two at the nose. The rubber puffed clouds of smoke as the tires touched down with soft squeaks on the tarmac. Five hundred thousand pounds of composite metal put down with precision of a silk-threaded needle.

“What the fuck you doing, man? Give it here.”

They kicked back on the hood, smoked, and watched the ground crew open and unload the cargo packed plane. “You know all this used to be off-limits, used to be part of the Ramey Air Force base. Attack squadrons from this runway, launched

troop deployment missions in World War II. Then in the cold war, U2 spy planes flew missions over Cuba, but that's all classified."

"Then how the fuck do you know?" Yarique passed him the spliff.

"It's all there if you know where to look," Jaime took a long hit and held his smoke. "That's gonna be me one of these days, wait and see."

"Working at FedEx?"

"Nah, man, flying the plane. Forty thousand feet at six hundred and fifty miles an hour, a full payload of fuel and you can go wherever you want. There's nothing to hold you back."

Yarique lost it laughing, "Man, I'm sorry, but what makes you think they're ever gonna let your caco ass fly one of those billion-dollar mother fuckers?"

"Least I'm working toward something," Jaime passed back to Yarique.

Yarique took a hit. "You got no idea."

"Go on then, enlighten me."

Yarique sat up. "You got, what, fifty-percent of the business on this island done all in cash, no taxes, nothing."

"Probably more than that."

"And who's the biggest players in that?"

"Fruit vendors."

"Man, be serious."

"Spit it out, then."

"Cockfights, man. You think they're taxing that shit. Fuck no."

"What you know about cockfights?"

“It don’t matter, because all I gotta do is find the biggest players in the game. And what’s that take? Two, three nights down the Gallistico.”

“Yeah, but your dumbass still don’t know shit about breeding birds.”

“Who said a damn thing about breeding? I ain’t breeding a fucking thing. I’m gonna rob their ass.”

“You?” Back in school Jaime used to whoop his ass daily. Beat the boy so bad at one point he made him piss his pants in front of the whole cafeteria. Now look at him, the hardest motherfucker to never win a fight. It took everything in him not to reach over and pop Yarique in the mouth, right then and there, remind him who he really was, but instead, Jaime got up off the hood. “Lemme know how that works out for you.”

“You want anymore of this?”

“Nah, man, finish it.”

The two of them got in the car, and as Jaime pulled out of the dirt lot, he buried the gas pedal, churning up a huge cloud of dust in his wake.

Yarique: apodos de vecinos

Mami never let Yarique set foot in tío Ernesto's gym, no matter how much he begged. It was always the same response, "Some people just aren't built for fighting, Yari."

God he hated that. Yari. Her childhood nickname ascribed to the soft-knuckled son she had with her pacifist husband. In a family where individual worth was determined by fighting skill and physical prowess that was about the most demeaning thing any of them could call him.

"Whoa there, Yari," tío Ernesto cut him off as Yarique reached for the small electric chainsaw, sitting on the grass next to bins of gloves, clippers, and safety goggles. "How about you leave this to someone a little more qualified."

"What makes you think I ain't?"

"Call it a hunch."

"Don't act like you know what I can do."

"OK, tough guy," tío Ernesto set the chainsaw on the ground between them. "Show me how to change the blade on this."

"Since when's using a chainsaw the same as servicing one?"

"That's what I thought," tío Ernesto picked the chainsaw back up. "Why don't you and your little friend put on some gloves and goggles and make sure to clean up all our trimmings. Okay, Yari?"

"Why don't you go fuck yourself, Hollywood?"

Tío Ernesto threw the chainsaw down so hard that the blade bucked loose off the track, "Come here, you son of a bitch."

Yarique sprinted back down the driveway, his eyes fixed on Ernesto, strolling toward him.

Abuelo Julio doubled over laughing, wiping tears from his eyes.

After a lap around the front yard, tío Ernesto stopped, “You’re lucky you’re blood.”

“Luck ain’t got nothing to do with it, old man.”

Tío Ernesto picked up the chainsaw. “Put on the fucking gloves.”

“What you think I’m doing?”

“Then go.”

“I am.”

Former welterweight world champion, tío Ernesto got the nickname from a recurring SNL character portrayed by Jon Lovitz called Hollywood. A direct parody of the young prizefighter, the Lovitz character was a homophobic boxer whose fiery temper left those around him too scared to confront him about his ambiguously gay actions.

The character came about after Ernesto knocked out a photographer who had, weeks earlier, published a series of photos depicting the young champ, grinding it up in Tunnel, one of the premiere gay clubs of 1980’s New York. Needless to say, it was a touchy subject for Ernesto “Hollywood” Ramos, even two decades later.

They were an hour into their work when the chainsaw squealed and the blade caught in a thick branch that stretched out through patch of trees, separating abuelo Julio’s yard the hermit next door.

“Cut it off, cut it off,” abuelo Julio shouted at tío Ernesto. The two of them

stared at the chainsaw, stuck in the middle of the branch. “You two, get over here,” abuelo Julio snapped his fingers, and Yarique and Jaime dropped what they were doing.

“Grab onto this thing and see if you can give it a good tug.”

And they did, bouncing the limb down to relieve the pressure as tío Ernesto tried to yank the chainsaw free.

“There we go, that’s getting her,” abuelo Julio, supervised from a distance. “Go on Ernesto, turn on the blade, power through it.”

The chainsaw motor screamed to life as the blade shook it’s way into the wood.

“Keep on with it, now. Keep on.”

A thunderclap splintered through the branch as the whole thing gave way, knocking tío Ernesto back with the chainsaw still in his hand, and tossing Yarique and Jaime to the ground.

“You alright?”

Jaime brushed the dirt from the back of his jeans, “Yeah, I’m good.”

“Hey, abuelo. You best be paying us double for all that.”

Abuelo Julio’s face contorted, but before he could say a word, the neighbor came running through the trees, blood streaming down his face as he swung an old machete.

He charged abuelo Julio, who turned into him, trying to close the distance, ready for a fight. An old sugarcane factory worker at Central Coloso, abuelo Julio had more than proven himself as a cane field bareknuckle champion. But the drunk, old

hermit brought the handle down hard against abuelo Julio's eye, opening a gusher that sent him stumbling over to the ground, blinded.

Tío Ernesto ran for him, but the hermit stopped and swung the machete in wide sweeps, screaming gibberish that a more religious person might confuse with biblical tongues, but Yarique knew to be nothing more than the mad ravings of an old drunk.

He pointed the blade at them, one after the next and paused, heaving a few breaths before he disappeared back into the trees.

Ravolo: The Other

“You’ve done it now, really fucked it all up.”

He grabbed the bottle from the windowsill and took a long swig, half of it finished by then. He put it back, and the papaya chunks swirled in the moonlight, a waning crescent. Funny what he still remembered. Juanita liked to think of herself as an amateur astronomer, or was it astrologer. He always got those two confused.

“You can’t ignore me forever. They’re coming for you. It’s only a matter of time.”

Staring through the open metal window slats above the bathtub, he searched for Orion, but no, Orion was winter. What was summer? Scorpius.

Standing on the broken zucchini patch, The Other waved his arms above his head as if signaling a chopper, and then pointed to his feet, where poking out of the dirt he saw a small swatch of baby-blue fabric, the corner of her apron.

Another long swig, and he gulped down the pitorro, letting it spill from the sides of his mouth and down his shirt, swallowing as much as he could stomach. Bottle back in the window, he squeezed his eyes, trying to rub The Other from his sight. And when he looked back out at his wife’s demolished garden, The Other was gone, but the corner of her apron was still there, gleaming like a beacon.

The clank of heavy glass on ceramic tile as The Other set a bottle of pecan pitorro on the floor beside the bathtub. “You’ve gotta move her, but you know that. Think you’ll be able to do it before the cops come, or they do. You don’t even remember what you did. Do you?”

All he had were fragments; flashes of imagery and emotion, as if recalling the

memory of another person's dream. Fear tightened his chest.

The Other sat on the back of the toilet, shoes on the seat, cleaning his nails. "Did you even bother to see if that old man got back up? Bet you two-to-one he didn't."

And he launched the bottle of papaya pitorro at The Other's head.

The Other leapt out of the way, disappearing into the hall as the glass shattered on the wall.

He got up and walked to the yard, put the pecan pitorro back in the shed, and turned on the spigot of the water collection tank on his roof to fill a small basin. He rinsed the blood from his face and then washed his tank top and shorts.

The rain began in large drops, quiet, like soft footsteps on dry leaves. He closed his eyes and let it run over his naked body. The world spun and he toppled over onto his hands and knees, vomiting up a stream of papaya chunks.

The Other laughed. "If she could see you now."

He pulled on his pants and shirt, still soaked, and crept through the trees to the edge of the neighbors yard. There were no cops. That was good at least. The light in the kitchen spilled amber stripes across the yard. He thought about stepping closer, trying to peek inside, but a cigarette flare in the carport, stopped him cold.

Frozen, he waited, wondering if they'd seen him. His clothes dripped rhythmic pings onto the dry leaves scattered around his feet. The cigarette spiraled out into the driveway, and the side door opened, spilling light into in the carport. It was the son, the boxer. "You need to put more ice on that eye."

"Don't you tell me--" But door slammed and cut off the rest of their

conversation.

On the way back to the house, he plucked an avocado, the hardest one on the tree. The Other was right. They were coming. It was only a matter of time. He needed to defend himself, but the thought of the machete made his palms sweat. They hadn't called the cops. Odds were they'd settle it themselves.

He put the avocado on the edge of the bathtub and curled up to sleep, listening to The Other pace outside.

Yarique: allanamiento de morada

“Gimme a bag of ice and the bottle of disinfectant. I’ll be fine.”

Teddy Roosevelt would have idolized abuelo Julio. But abuela Rosa’s discontent was expounded in the heavy rhythm of her fingernails drumming on the kitchen table, “You should at least let them look at it.”

He slammed a fist on the table, “I’m not going to a God damn hospital.”

And the room settled into a long beat of silence, filled out by the onomatopoeic chirp of the coquis outside, cut by the screech of chair legs sliding on tile as abuela Rosa stood up and stormed off, slamming her bedroom door with such force that it’s pang echoed in the ears everyone in the kitchen. That’s when abuelo Julio turned his attention to Yarique and Jaime. “What the hell are you two still doing here?”

“Waiting to get paid.”

“Paid? Go look out that window and tell me, is there still a tree in my yard?”

He knew it would come to this. From the minute Mami told him abuelo Julio needed help, he knew it.

“You’ll get your money once your get rid of my tree, not a second before.”

Staring at Yarique down the barrel of his pointed index finger, “And don’t you go thinking this somehow counts as a full day’s work. This is a half, at best.”

Abuelo Julio led the charge for Yarique’s exclusion. An armchair historian with a penchant for family history, he claimed to have traced the Ramos lineage all the way back to a clan of Carib warriors who proved themselves in the Mandingo fighting pits of old San Juan. Though Yarique was almost certain this narrative was

spun in order to reinforce abuelo Julio's opinions that the value of a man could only be measured in physical prowess and fighting ability. He took every opportunity to point out Yarique's soft posture, weak shoulders, or any other way he took after his pacifist father. Still, the harder he pushed, the more Yarique wanted to impress him.

That's why two hours later, when he and Jaime were sitting in front of El Meson, pounding down a pair of pavo clásicos, "I think we need to go back there."

"Back where?" A piece of lettuce fell out of Jaime's mouth.

"Where you thin? That fucking Jibaro's place."

"I think you oughta leave that to your tío."

"Fuck Ernesto. That clown ain't doing shit about nothing."

Jaime looked him up and down.

"What, you think I can't do it?"

"Did I say that?" Jaime swallowed his last bite and balled up his wrapper.

"If you're scared, I mean..."

Jaime started the car. "I'll keep watch, but I ain't coming inside. They're not my fucking family."

The street was empty except for a stray dog with nipples distended to look like a row of utters, hunting for scraps to take back to her pups. Tío Ernesto's car was still parked in abuelo Julio's driveway, but the lights were off inside. They were early risers.

Before they got out, Jaime asked, "What's the plan?"

"What do you mean, 'what's the plan?'"

"What are you gonna do when you get in there? I mean, I don't think he's

gonna be the type to get offended by harsh language.”

“I’m take a rock from out front and bash him in the fucking head with it. Payback, eye for an eye style.”

“I’m just saying, you might wanna get that machete off him first, is all.”

“Why don’t you just worry about keeping watch?” But Yarique knew he was right.

Yarique stood in yard, staring at the house. It looked abandoned from the street, half swallowed by the jungle, ferns sprouting from cracks in the foundation, vines wrapping any surface they could, broken furniture strew across the yard, even the doors and windows were gone, stripped and sold long ago. The only sign that anyone still lived there were the giant overlapping scribbles of neon, pink, orange, and blue spray-paint, two words repeated like a mantra; *¡NO ENTRE!*

He looked back at Jaime who shrugged as if to say *you-doing-this-or-not*.

The smell hit almost immediately, old fruit juice and vinegar. Yarique caught a dry heave in his throat. The rooms were scattered with trash and old clothes, torn pages of catalogues and newspapers, sun-faded scraps porno mags, like patchwork flooring.

Overcome with the unshakable feeling that someone was watching him, Yarique stopped and backed into a corner, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. But even when they did, he still saw movement in the shadows a peripheral outline of that scraggly Jibaro with his rusty machete.

Stepping carefully, through the master bedroom, Yarique began to wonder if Ravolo was even there at all or if he took off into the woods, wouldn’t be a first for

his kind. Or maybe tío Ernesto had come by to take care of business and scared the old drunkard away.

He checked the master bathroom almost as an after thought and that's where he found him, curled up asleep and in the tub.

Yarique froze in the doorway, watching the gentle rhythm of Ravolo's body, rising and falling with his breath.

The rock. Fuck. He forgot to grab a rock from the yard.

He scanned the room, looking for anything he could use, but there was nothing.

Ravolo's breathing stalled. Yarique's chest tightened as he worried the Jibaro might leap from the bathtub at any moment. And then after what felt like an eternity of stillness, Ravolo rhythmic breaths resumed as if nothing had happened.

In the bedroom, Yarique found a broken strip of particleboard, the leg to some now unidentifiable piece of furniture. The wood was bloated and soft, but there was a bolt sticking out of the end that he thought might be good for something. It better be. It was all he had.

Ravolo was on his back, snoring, mouth open, face to the ceiling.

Yarique crept in one step at a time crunching over the broken glass that covered the floor and stepping around the toothbrush, toothpaste, and open jar of Vaseline.

He cranked his table leg back like a batter at a mound, and then stopped and stood there, staring at the gash in Ravolo's forehead, almost identical to abuelo Julio's.

Just then, Ravolo's tongue caught in his throat. He choked out a snore, and his eyes blinked opened to see Yarique standing there, ready to smash him with a table leg.

In a flash, he slammed Yarique against the wall, knocking the wind out of him.

Yarique kicked and squirmed, trying to hit any part of Ravolo he could find. His elbow worked loose and he landed three hard hits in Ravolo's ribs. The Jibaro grabbed for something on the windowsill, but before he could out what it was, the world flashed yellow and then burned off to black.

He tasted blood in the back of his throat. And when he came to, Ravolo was dragging him through the house by his ankles. He kicked and squirmed, no use. He could hear broken bits of concrete and old magazine pages bunching up under his back.

Once they were out front, Ravolo let go of his ankles and ran back into the house.

Fearing he'd gone to get the machete, Yarique scrambled over to his feet and took off running for the car, blinded by the water pouring out of his eyes.

Jaime was sitting on the hood, smoking. "What the fuck happened to you?"
"Let's get the fuck outta here."

Ravolo: culpa, miedo, paranoia

The avocado was still in his hand. “Are they gone?”

“What am I, your errand boy?”

“You’re outside aren’t you?”

“They’re gone. But you already knew that.”

He dropped the avocado in the sink, a dime size spatter of blood on it’s skin, and went out to the yard to wash his hands and get a new bottle of pitorro from the shed.

The Other was standing under the bathroom window, balancing on one foot, his arms teetering at his sides, like airplane wings. A breeze picked up, rustling the trees.

“Are you gonna move her?”

“Mind your business.”

“Looks like our business is one in the same.”

“Might be as much.”

The Other lost his balance and put down his other foot. “At least you’re talking to me again.”

He had never given much thought to the family next-door, not one-way or the other, and he never meant to cause them any harm. Especially the boy, he got it bad if enough from the rest of them.

A long breath out. None of it would have happened if his wife were still alive.

“Are you done yet?”

“Shut your mouth.”

“Are you gonna cry? You are, aren’t you?” The Other started to laugh, a little at first, escaping from his lips like a cough, and then tumbling out in guffaws, snowballing into a full-on belly laugh that hinged him at the hips and filled with tears. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry... it’s just... too much to think.” And The Other lost it again, whaling, laughing, and falling on his back to kick his feet at the sky.

Ignoring The Other, he walked to shed and dug out the rusty machete. He then stuffed bottles of uncut caña and another of mango pitorro into a satchel, and grabbed a third of pecan to help him get through the night.

It wasn’t the end. He knew that much. The only question was when. Whether the boys had gone to their abuelo’s house or run off somewhere else.

He took long swig off the pecan, and with the machete in hand and the satchel slung across his back, crept through the trees to get a look at the house next-door. The lights were off, but that didn’t mean much. A step at a time, he crept through their yard to put his hand on the outside wall, cold, still. They were asleep.

The phone rang inside and he jumped back. A light turned on. He slid to the ground, back against the wall, heart pounding in his ears. The phone stopped, mid-ring, someone inside answered, but they were on the other side of the house.

Hoping to get close enough to hear their conversation, he inched around to the back wall. No sooner had he rounded the corner than the side door flung open. A second longer and they would have seen him.

He heard footsteps, car doors unlocks, and engine start. The car drove away, and the lights in the house went dark again.

“They’re coming for you, sooner than you want. You need to be ready.” The

Other sat on the kitchen counter, peeling a mango.

“Shut up and let me think.”

“You should just go now.”

“These are good people. They’re not like you.”

“Everyone’s like me, they just don’t want to admit it.”

He took a long swig from the pecan bottle, closing his eyes as he drank. When he opened them again, The Other was gone, a half-eaten mango on the counter where he had been.

He took the satchel and the machete into the bathroom, guzzled down a bit more pitorro, and curled in the tub to sleep.

Jaime: cosa de familia

“I’m calling the police.” Rafael took off for the kitchen.

Yarissa right on his heels, “Put that phone down.”

They’d been at it close to an hour by the time Ernesto finally got there, and neither one of them showed any signs of stopping.

Preferring to avoid family confrontations, especially when they weren’t his own, Jaime pulled out a cigarette, “I’m gonna go smoke, right quick.”

No body even looked in his direction.

Rain had come and gone to soak the dry leaves dropped from the avocado tree that littered the ground on all side of their house. Palming his cigarette to hide the flare, Jaime stood outside the living room window and watched as Ernesto examined Yarique’s face, still caked in dry blood. “One of these days I’m gonna have to teach you how to take a hit.”

“He must have had like a rock or brick or something.” His sinuses were swollen shut, making it sound like Yarique was holding his nose.

“You have to move with the punches, not against them. That way, if they do connect, it’ll pull some of that sting out of the hit. Same thing Tyson used to do.”

“Don’t try to tell me about Mike fucking Tyson. I already told you he ain’t break my nose with no fucking punch.”

“That’s not broken.”

“I heard it pop.”

“I don’t care what you heard that’s not broken.”

Jaime smiled and walked around back to the kitchen, where things between

Yarique's parents were really heating up.

"Damn it, Rafi, would just listen to me for two God damned seconds."

"Don't give me anymore of your warrior code bullshit. Contrary to whatever crap he shoves down the throats of everyone else in this family, we aren't living in a society governed on tribal fucking rule."

"You're being completely unreasonable."

"Unreasonable? No, unreasonable is expecting your brother to go over there and unleash some kind of vigilante justice."

"Vigilante." She scoffed and turned around, staring out the kitchen window right at Jaime, and he stared right back at her. As long as he kept out of the light, she'd never see him.

"I mean, Jesus Christ, Yari, what if he's holed up in there with a gun or God-knows-what? Much as your father's got you thinking otherwise, you're family's not invincible."

"Are you finished?" She turned back around. "Can I say something?"

He waved a hand as if to say, the floor is yours.

"First off, he doesn't have a gun."

"How do you know?"

"He doesn't have doors, where's he gonna get the money for a gun."

Rafael started to say something, but thought better of it.

"Second," Mami continued. "Unless there's a dead body splayed out on his lawn, the cops don't give a shit. Sure, they might, give him a talking to, but that's all."

“This is assault. Not a fucking noise complaint.”

And their conversation stopped cold as Yariisa motioned to the doorway behind her husband, where Selena was standing wrapped in a robe.

“Can we get him a towel or something? He looks like a horror-movie reject.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it.” Yariisa grabbed a roll of paper towels from the counter.

“This isn’t over.”

Rafael shrugged and looked down at his feet.

Jaime walked back around to the front of the house, where Yarique was getting more worked up by the second.

“Are you fucking deaf? I said I heard a snap.”

He stubbed out his cigarette and went back inside, where Ernesto was lounging on the couch, thumbing through a copy of US Weekly as he continued to challenge every word out of Yarique’s mouth.

“Yari, don’t talk to tío like that.”

“He’s being a fucking asshole.”

“Yari!”

“Ernesto, if you’re not going to help then...”

“No, I’m sorry, I’ll stop.” Ernesto sat up and tossed the US Weekly back on top of a basket full of magazines at the end of the sofa.

“Selena, go get the alcohol from the bathroom.”

Selena tightened her robe when she saw Jaime and then took off to the bathroom as Yariisa grabbed Yarique’s face in her hands, pressing her thumbs to his temples and sliding them around across eyebrows. Weekends during elementary

school, the factory workers from Central Coloso would bring their boys together for WBA style bareknuckle fights. The short-lived Aguadilla Amateur Peewee Bareknuckle Boxing League was little more than an excuse for their dads to get drunk after church while feeding their long-standing gambling addictions. But it was also where Ernesto first learned to box. Yarissa, on the other hand was tasked with tracking the fighter's stats and calculating odds, and acting as resident cut-man, or cut-girl as she preferred, which resulted in her comprehensive understanding of ringside care.

“Let's see what we've got.” She pressed her fingers into the corners of his jaw and probed her thumbs along his cheeks and up to the bridge of his nose. “This is going to hurt.”

Yarique nodded, and Yarissa bore down. No sooner had she started to apply pressure than he yanked his head out of her hands, tears filling his eyes.

Jaime forced a cough.

“It's okay. Let it out. Let it all out.”

Ernesto laughed. “Are you fucking kidding?”

Yarissa stared down her brother, whose hands went up instinctively.

She turned back to Yarique. “Don't listen to them.”

Selena walked in from the bathroom. “Found some peroxide, but I think we're all out of alcohol.”

And as Yarique's eyes went to his sister, Yarissa bore down on his nose, a hard, pop to the left, like snapping a watermelon rind. And then, as if tapping some long blocked valve, blood poured from both nostrils, thick and dark, flecked with

coagulated chunks. Yariisa shoved a wad of paper towels under his chin before any of it dripped off.

Selena stood there, frozen. “That’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen.”

Selena handed Yariisa the peroxide. “Why were you two over there again?”

“None of your fucking business that’s why,” Yarique’s voice muffled by the paper towels on his face.

“There’s a new bottle of alcohol in the top cabinet in the kitchen, ask your father.”

And Selena took off to the kitchen.

Yariisa gave Yarique a clean wad of paper towels. “Hold this and tilt your head back,” and as she jerked his arm up into the proper position, Yarique groaned and fell forward.

“What’s that?”

“Think I must have pulled something when I took a swing on him.”

Ernesto and Jaime scoffed in stereo.

Yariisa raised his elbow above the shoulder. Yarique recoiled.

“We should tape your ribs, just to be safe.”

Selena came back from the kitchen with the bottle of alcohol. “Dad wants to talk to you.”

“It can wait.”

“He said the cops are on their way.”

“Ernesto, can you help, Yarique. I have to speak with his father.”

She got up and stormed back into the kitchen.

Jaime stood up. “If it’s all the same to you. I’d rather not talk to no cops.”

“Yeah, I hear that. Catch up tomorrow?”

“You know it.”

Yarique: interrogatorio

Mami and Papi weren't even looking at each other by the time the cops arrived. They sat on opposite sides of the living room, each speaking as if the other wasn't there. The cops walked opposing concentric circles, making eye contact with the family almost at random, Mami, Papi, Ernesto, Yarique, sometimes staring at one while speaking to another, like a living shell game.

As if that wasn't confusing enough, the pair of them looked just about identical, jarhead haircuts and olive cargos tucked into black combat boots. Both men introduced themselves as Officer Colon and gave no first names, though they claimed no relation. Papi would later call that an interrogation tactic meant to throw a suspect or suspects off their game. Mami thought he was reaching. After all what would a poetry professor know about interrogation.

"So, tell me again, why you were there in the first place?"

"Because of what happened with my abuelo." Yarique's eyes darted from one Colon to the next.

"Remember, this happened at all once. Right?"

"You guys want some coffee?" Papi stood, motioning to the kitchen.

"No we're fine. Thank you." Officer Colon turned to Yarique. "Answer the question."

"No, the stuff with the tree..."

"What tree?"

"The machete. When he ran at us, we were cutting down a tree."

"And that was earlier in the evening."

“Afternoon. I don’t know maybe, three, four o’clock.”

“And when did,” Officer Colon motioned at Yarique’s face, swollen and bruised. “All that happen.”

Yarique shrugged. “Maybe ten, ten-thirty.”

Mami grabbed his knee and shot him a look that Yarique hadn’t seen since high school, a look that he knew meant to shut his mouth and stay quiet. “I don’t really see what all this has to do with anything. This man attacked my father with a machete, broke my son’s nose. I mean, why aren’t you arresting him right now.”

Officer Colon underlined something on his notepad three times. “The tree you were cutting down. Your abuelo had a permit for that, I assume?”

Yarique shrugged. “He just hired us to bag up the clippings, I don’t know what he had.”

“Us?”

Ernesto coughed into his hand and stood up. “Yeah, I was there too. Took care of my father after that mad man attacked him.”

Officer Colon scribbled another note. “I was a big fan of your when I was little. We watched all your fights, me and my dad. He even put in boxing classes.”

Ernesto smiled, a car salesman’s grin. “You come by the gym sometime, show me what you’ve got.”

Meanwhile, the other Colon stopped pacing and sat on the corner of the coffee table, directly in front of Yarique. “Look, help me out with something. So you guys get attacked sometime, early afternoon. He comes back, attacks you again, and...”

“Nah, he didn’t come back. I was over in his place when this happened.”

Again, Mami squeezed Yarique's knee.

Officer Colon put his pen in his shirt pocket. "As you said, and we'll get to that. But my point is, you go back there, he roughs you up. Now this is maybe ten, ten-thirty, and you wait four more hours before calling the police. I guess I just wanna know, why?"

"Because I thought I could handle this myself."

"And why did you think that?"

Yarique's eyes found his father. "Because I ain't a little bitch, that's why."

Mami jumped in. "This man is a menace, for as long as I can remember. An alcoholic, shut-in, you know he used to go up on the roof, buck naked, and scream at the sky every night. Did for like six months straight."

"Did you call the police then?"

Mami nodded. "And they never showed. So we learned pretty early on that we were gonna have to take care of ourselves. And that's what we've done every time since then. Now, should we have called you earlier? Probably. But was my son wrong for standing up for his abuelo, a seventy-two year old man? Definitely not."

Officer Colon stood up, "Señora, I don't doubt that your son had the best intentions. But the fact remains, he entered a private residence without cause."

"He ain't even have doors. How you gonna call a place private when it ain't got no doors."

Mami put an arm around Yarique trying to calm him.

"As far as I see it, the only possible recourse we have is to take your son into custody until we can ascertain whether or not any charges will be filed."

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Mami stood up. “If you put one hand on my son, I swear to God...”

Ernesto stepped between them. “Yari, calm down. I’ll call my lawyer. He’ll sort this out.”

The other Colon took a step toward Yarique, but Papi stopped him cold.

“Hold on, now. I’ll be damned if you’re booking my son.”

And for the first time in a long time, Mami stared at her husband with a look of true adoration.

“Now just wait. Everybody, listen. We’re not booking anybody. Right now, we’re just going to take a ride and go check on this neighbor. If he’s half as volatile as you say, I doubt he’ll be in any position to press charges. And all of this can go away.”

Papi wasn’t buying it.

Officer Colon looked him dead in the eyes, his voice dropping to almost a whisper. “If he needs a lawyer, I promise, you’ll be the first to know.”

Jaime: llegada

The streetlights were still on though the birds had already begun to chirp, an early indicator of sunrise. Every house in the neighborhood was quiet and dark. Most would be up within an hour. There was a neighborhood of working class stiff.

He found her passed out on the living couch, remote clutched in the hand of her outstretched arm. Not asleep. She didn't sleep on her stomach. The TV was off. She wouldn't have remembered to turn the thing off herself, or bothered to set a sleep timer. He tried the light switch on the wall. Nothing. The power company had finally caught up with them.

"Mama," Jaime nudged her shoulder. "Mama, get up."

She groaned and dropped the remote, but didn't open her eyes. He slipped her arm over his shoulders and hoisted her up to her feet. She was babbling to herself, something about an ex-boyfriend, the one that drove the orange van and slept on the beach in Rincon.

He dropped her in bed and rolled onto her stomach. She flung a leg off the side, as if still on the couch, and started laughing at whatever it was she was watching on the backs of her eyelids.

The genie was an old Honda E2500. He gave the starter cord a few hard pulls, but the damn thing never caught. The fuel gauge needle was buried in E, though it had never worked properly to begin with. A few more tries, and he gave up and went back inside.

He sat on the counter, eating pickles straight from the jar, as he tried Bebo's phone. Voicemail. "Bebo, the power's cut off. Call me back."

If he didn't call in five minutes, he wouldn't call at all. Jaime closed the jar and lit a cigarette, clicking his lighter on and off at random intervals, cutting the darkness of the kitchen with the popping flash of an orange flame. Done smoking, he dropped the smoldering butt in the garbage disposal and ran the sink, and then grabbed the gas can, the big five-gallon one, from the hall closet and took off.

He pulled over and popped the hood a few hundred yards from the gas station, the soft glow of its lights blooming a halo above the distant treetops.

Nearing the station, Jaime cut through the back of a grass lot, out of sight of the attendant, and then sat on the curb along the side of the booth with the gas can at his feet.

The story never changed: forget his wallet when driving his girlfriend home, since she only lived five minutes down the road, and then after he dropped her off, realized he barely running on fumes.

"I meant to fill up tomorrow on the way to work, but you know these things are." They'd share a laugh maybe even a nod or two. "If you could spot me a couple gallons to get home, it would really help me out."

The first few people ignored him completely. At least they didn't rat him out. It wasn't until a city worker with a thick neck and baldhead, rolled up in a municipal vehicle that Jaime had any luck. The worker had a deep belly laugh that made his belt buckle bounce up and down. "Man, if I had a nickel for every time some woman went and screwed my night."

The city worker swiped his card at the pump. "Here you go, brother, city's dime, not mine. Get home safe."

Jaime topped-off his five-gallon gas can and then struggled to carry it back down to his car, stopping every now and then to shake the blood back into his fingers.

Back at his car, he put can in the backseat, closed the hood, and got in.

Key in the ignition, he sat there, staring at the empty stretch of black road, counting the space between his breaths, trying to find the moment between the end of one and the beginning of the next.

It curled into his gut at first, tightening his stomach, the anger that burned into the backs of his eyes, bleeding the world to red.

And before he even knew what was happening Jaime started unloading blow after blow after blow on dashboard, shattering two air vents and shredding the skin on his knuckles.

Finished he sat there, hissing breaths through clenched teeth, his hands hot and shaking. There's gotta be more to life than this.

A dot of blood pooled on the tip of his middle knuckle. He wiped it on his pant leg and started the car.

Yarique: presentando cargos

“You don’t have to cuff him do you?” Mami wouldn’t leave Yarique’s side.

“No, nothing like that.”

Papi held the door for Officer Colon. “You’ll call me as soon as you know what’s going on?”

“On my word.” And they shook on it, then and there.

At a glance, their car looked like any standard, dealer-bought Crown Vic, all silver with identifying markers. Windows covered in ink-black tint, all except the front, with a small light bar mounted in the back.

“Watch your head.” Officer Colon lowered Yarique into the car.

He had never been in a cop car before, and maybe it was the newness of the situation that suddenly kicked his senses into overdrive, but the first thing he noticed was the smell, stale cigarette smoke and cold McDonald’s fries. He couldn’t quite say what smell he was expecting. It’s not like the thought had ever crossed his mind. But if he had been pushed on the subject, Yarique probably would have expected a cop car to smell like the inside of an old baseball glove, not the back of a discount publico.

The cops drove fast. Much faster than he expected, flashing their lights to blast through intersections with no regard for traffic patterns or regulations. They weren’t the bastions of law-abiding society anymore than they were models of moral fortitude. Really, they reminded Yarique of the kids he tried to avoid in high school. The tough ones that knew they could get away with whatever they wanted, because who the hell’s ever gonna stand up to them. They reminded him of Jaime.

They parked in Ravolo's driveway and left the headlights on when they got out.

Yarique went for the door handle, but it didn't work. He couldn't even lower the window.

"Probably best you stay here for right now," and Officer Colon got out.

Both Colons had their flashlights out, sweeping the landscape, stalling in dark corners and vestibules, anywhere someone might be able to hide. One approached the front door, or what would have been the front door if the house still had any doors or windows, as the other one continued up the driveway, to the back of the house.

Officer Colon swung the beam of his flashlight into the living room. "Ravolo Soto? It's the police. Can we talk to you for a minute?"

No answer.

"Be advised, I am entering the house," and Officer Colon stepped inside.

The other Colon had disappeared around the back of the house, the occasional flash of light illuminating the trees. Through the window frames, Yarique saw the glow of Officer Colon's flashlight moving through the house, lighting one room after the next.

At the end of the driveway, the other Colon's flashlight was scanning along the downed limb of the quenepa tree, lying on top of a small patch of dirt and what looked like scraps of yard trimmings or a mulch pile. Officer Colon emerged from around the corner of the house. He crouched in front of the downed limb, and brushed a bit of dirt away.

And they heard it, a scream and a pop, muzzle flare, a gunshot, flashing

orange in the bathroom window.

In the split-second that Yarique looked to the bathroom window and then back to Colon, the officer had pulled his gun and started advancing on the premises.

“Alexis! Alexis, you alright?”

Officer Colon disappeared around the back of the house.

Frozen, locked in the back of the car, Yarique stared at the dark windows surrounded by the stillness of night. The temperature seemed to drop by ten degrees as goose bumps pricked up on the back of his arms.

The trees on the hill began to rustle and bend, a wave moving toward the car. “It’s wind. It’s just wind, you fucking pussy.” As if saying it out loud would help.

The movement in the trees stopped at the side of the car.

Yarique slid to the opposite end of the seat.

The passenger’s side door flung open and Officer Colon dove in, cradling his hand to his chest as if carrying a wounded baby. He grabbed at the radio receiver.

“He’s in the trees. Come on, man, look where I’m pointing, he’s right there in the fucking trees.”

But Officer Colon was out cold.

And that’s when Yarique saw the blood, covering his shirt and pants. He started kicking the seat, shouting. “Hey! Hey! Get the fuck up.”

The radio hissed static as Officer Colon whispered into the receiver, “Shots fired, Camino Reyes, need assistance,” and he was right back out.

Ravolo: sin otra opción

“It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault.” He ran fast and hard, his legs wobbling at the knees. Vines tapped the back of his head as he hunched at the gut, almost curled over fetal, some decrepit monstrosity no longer recognizable as a man, boring through the jungle at speed. When the path got too steep to continue on foot, he clawed his way up with thick handfuls of earth, pulling himself up the soft, sloping side of the mountain. Only when the earth gave way to sheer granite slabs did he finally stop to breathe.

The Other was waiting for him, kicked back against the base of a tree growing out of mountain at a forty-five degree angle. “Do you even have any fucking idea what you’re doing?”

He tried to speak, but his tongue caught in his throat, choking him.

“That’s what I thought.” The Other stood up and started to walk back down the hill. “Come on, there’s a stream down here, around the back of the hill.”

Through heaving breaths, “I’m not going back there.”

“Well you’re not going up there. It’s too steep and you are not in shape for that kind of climb.”

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do.” He laid back and draped his arm over his face.

“Suit yourself, but don’t come whining to me when your dumb ass heart stops working.” The Other took off down the hill.

“Hold on. Help me up.”

“Doesn’t quite work like that.”

“Then how does it work?”

The Other laughed.

The stream was little more than a small trickle of water drizzling out of a pile of rocks to disappear into a small rift in the dirt, the beginning of a cavern.

He stripped off his clothes and cupped handfuls of water onto his hands, arms, and face, rinsing off the blood. And then did the same with his shirt and shorts.

The Other leaned against a tree, picking his teeth with a twig. “Where to next?”

He shrugged, “Arecibo?”

“Lares?”

“It’s too far.” He pulled on his shirt.

“And Arecibo isn’t?” The Other flicked the stick like a finished cigarette.

“How long’s it been anyway?”

“I’m not going back there.”

“I don’t think you have much of a choice.”

He sighed and picked up his backpack. “Yeah, probably not.”

Yarique: vivo desde la escena

The local station, WJNX-TV, was on scene almost as quick as the cops. Their camera on sticks before the crime-scene tape went up. That night's stand-up delivered by the lovely and enticing Sonia Vera Cruz, who tugged at the edges of her low-cut shirt, bringing her breasts right up to the edge of the hem. The nights Yarique spent drooling over her on the couch in high school, he could have traced her figure in the dust of the TV screen, blindfolded.

They took Officer Colon to the hospital as soon as possible, his right hand barely attached to his wrist. The paramedics thought he'd lose it, "But don't quote us on that."

"Did I say this was off the record?" Sonia used the ambulance side mirror to brush on mascara.

"Have some respect for his family."

"This isn't my first rodeo." She snapped the cap on the mascara tube.

"They should be bringing him out in a minute."

She slipped something to the paramedic that Yarique assumed was probably cash and then snapped her fingers at her cameraman and pointed at the door. And right on cue, the coroner's office wheeled out on a gurney with the other Colon zipped into a white body bag. Funny, Yarique always thought those bags were black. They loaded him into the back of a black van with no lights or sirens and took off down the road at a casual speed made all the more ominous by the silence its departure left at the house. It seemed like an eternity before any of them said another word.

The lead-investigating officer was a homicide detective named Manuel Torres, who referred to Yarique as ‘the witness,’ helping police to identify the perpetrator of an earlier assault. The crowd of reporters, by then had grown to include every outlet of TV, radio, and print journalism west of Manatí. There was even a satellite branch from WBQR in San Juan. But Detective Torres wasn’t answering questions. “We will release more information as it becomes available. Thank you.”

He told Yarique not to talk to the press, but who in their right mind would say no to that kind of adoration.

His bruises had darkened and spread to surround his eyes, like a bandit's mask.

Hoping to work an angle that might lead to more private interviews, he gave Sonia Vera Cruz the exclusive.

There was a presence about her, an aura that television compressed and flattened to simple aesthetic beauty. But up close, Yarique began to get a sense of who she really was, a woman with the power to control public perception. With a few simple words, she could turn victims into villains as easily as the inverse. She was a wolf masquerading as a lamb. And with this realization, Yarique felt at ease. After all, his was a family of wolves.

jueves, 10 de julio: secuelas

Jaime: despegó en la noche

A thin layer of dust coated the top of the P-51 Mustang, just enough to make it shimmer in the soft haze of morning. Children were playing in the street, shouting an unintelligible slurry of words that always made perfect sense to those lost in the throws of freeze tag. Jaime stared at the model plane dangling from the ceiling on strands of monofilament string, drifting in the breeze. He relaxed his eyes and tried to focus the moment into a snapshot that could extend into eternity. But his stomach growled and doubled over in pain. His hunger had other plans.

The house stank of burnt bread. Not just burnt, but burned to blackened charcoal briquettes. That's how he knew she was gone. He could almost imagine the scene before he set foot in the kitchen. Almost.

At some point she decided to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Three loaves of bread, two of which were frozen, torn open and scattered around the kitchen, walls smeared with handprints of mayonnaise, ketchup, and Thousand Island dressing, floor covered in broken glass from smashed jars of jams and jellies, olives and sofrito. The plastic jar of peanut butter stomped on in the middle of the floor, the entirety of its contents vomited out in a single glob, emblazoned with a size five and a half footprint. Inside the fridge wasn't much better, racks dislodged, the food scattered onto the counters and floor.

The taking off didn't start until after they got the house, which happened after tía Anita fell asleep behind the wheel and popped the guardrail of the Guajataca turn coming back from a co-worker's wedding in San Juan. That house was the only thing

of value in his entire family, which by then consisted only of Jaime, Mama, and Bebo.

Mama must have tried a dozen times to take out a mortgage on the place. But the bank saw her coming a mile away, shuffling about in her mismatched chancas, clothes all stained with food and sweat and sometimes worse, a ratted up mess of hair knotted on her head. They wouldn't even let her in the front door, and called the cops after her third attempt to meet with loan officer. Bebo helped Jaime file for power of attorney and convinced Mama to sign over control of the property for three hundred dollars and a carton of Marlboro lights. That was back when Bebo still came by the place from time to time. Not anymore.

He started with the broken glass and then mopped the floor, washed the racks and reseated them in the fridge, opened the window slats on either end of the house to let the western wind blow out whatever smell still remained.

The generator tank was close to full. With the fridge empty he could leave it off till night. Sitting on the hood of his car, he lit a cigarette and checked his phone, still not a word from Bebo. It never took him this long to reply, but Jaime knew if he thought about it too much his mind would run away with him.

He clicked over to contacts, scrolled to Bebo, and hit send. Straight to voicemail. "Mama took off again, so there's that. She smashed up all the food in the fridge. I think she's barefoot, or her shoes are still here anyway. I'm gonna go look for her, but I've got about seventeen cents to my name so... Fucking call me back, man."

She was easy to track on the shorter runs, usually hanging off the arm of some

puta tecato slumming down the Aguadilla plaza, looking twenty tab of Oxy for a quick sloppy suck on his junk. But the plaza was empty. As if a tsunami had blown through had blown in and washed them all out to sea, leaving only the seagulls, huddled together.

Pedro Navarro ran a small marqueta that sold everything from shoe polish and floor cleaner to Medalla singles and empanadillas, the best in the west. A small gray haired old local with short stubby fingers and skin like tanned leather. Rumor was his parents were a pair of Santero priests from up in the mountains of Lares. But islands spread rumors like fire. Jaime sometimes wondered what people said about him.

“She run out again?”

“Something like that.” Jaime leaned in the side service window.

Pedro’s eye drifted over Jaime’s shoulder to focus on the plaza. “You eat breakfast?”

Jaime shook his head.

Pedro whipped up a café con leche with extra sugar and empanadilla de pulpo, all free of charge, because he was just that type of guy.

Jaime’s phone buzzed. Yarique. He silenced it and let it ring to voicemail.

“What happened out here anyway? Like a fucking ghost town or something.”

“Cops came through a couple days ago, some new clean streets initiative. Won’t lasts though, never does.”

“Where’d they go?”

“Who knows? Where the roaches go when you turn on the light?”

Jaime took his last bite of empanadilla.

“I’ll give you a call if I hear anything.”

“Yeah. And thanks for the coffee.”

Yarique: quince minutos

“One officer is dead and another is in critical condition after a neighborhood dispute turns violent in this quiet community in the hillsides of Moca. It was just after midnight when police arrived at the home of Ravolo Soto to follow up an earlier altercation between Señor Soto and Julio Ramos, abuelo of Yarique de Santos Ramos.”

“Hold up, hold up. This is my part.” Yarique cranked up the volume. “Shh. Shut up a minute.”

“You’ve already watched that thing like ten times this morning.”

“Bitch, I ask you?”

And the room broke into a chorus of scolding.

“Yari.”

“Hey! Don’t talk to your sister like that.”

“Fuck you!”

“That’s enough.” Mami unplugged the TV.

“What the hell?”

“I’m sick of you two. Now nobody gets it.”

“You just gave her what she wants.”

“Come on, Yari. Let him have his fifteen minutes.” Papi got up to refill his coffee.

Mami rolled her eyes and started making a fresh pot. “Fine, you figure it out.”

Yarique plugged in the TV and cranked up the volume, even though it was only a commercial.

“I’ve gotta study.” Selena dropped her plate in the sink and took off for her room. A few seconds later, she slammed the door so loud it echoed through the house.

Papi opened his laptop and began scrolling through his morning news, which right then included a mix of local political run-up and back page financial stories trickling in from the states. “These ratings agencies, they’re the ones to watch out for. No regulation, none. You’ll see.”

He did this from time to time, continuing conversations out loud that were only going on in his head. Less than twenty-four hours and the previous night’s predicament had already faded in familial short-term memory.

But that was how most of their arguments wound up. Yarique’s parents fought more than anyone he’d ever known, but in their fighting a sort of honesty emerged to form a dialogue in which neither ever had to guess what the other was thinking. This kind of discourse left little room for contempt.

Jaime came in through the backdoor, the way he always had.

“Yo, Jaime, you seen this shit yet?” But it was a political ad for Luis Peña.

“What him? He’s running for governor, right?”

“No not that bullshit. Just sit and watch.”

Without bothering to ask if he was hungry, Mami made Jaime a plate.

“You got a favorite in this race, Jaime?” Papi didn’t look up from his laptop or even bother to stop scrolling as he talked.

“Which race?”

“Governor.”

“I ain’t never follow much politics.”

“That’s too bad.” And Papi’s eyes began zigzagging across the page.

“Here it is. Here it is.” Yarique grabbed Jaime and turned him around to watch.

The piece was short, a few minutes at the most, with three sound bites from Yarique, interspersed throughout. “I’m telling you, boy, if I could-a got out the back of that cop car, there ain’t be no search to have.”

Jaime swallowed his bite and looked Yarique dead in the eyes. “Yeah, why’s that?”

“Because I would-a beat his ass.”

“The guy that took out two cops with a machete?”

Yarique nodded. “You’d have beat his ass?”

“Yeah.” Yarique forced a laugh looking around.

Jaime put down his fork. “Show me.”

“Show you what?”

“Show me how you would-a beat his ass.”

Papi looked up from his laptop.

Yarique half smiled, looking around the kitchen for anything to get him out of it, but once he saw that nothing would, he thumbed his nose and stood up. “Alright, you wanna see? Here we go.”

Standing in the middle of the kitchen, he put his arms out at his sides, as if checking distance. “Now hold up, everybody stay back. I ain’t gonna be responsible if none of y’all get hurt.”

Jaime sat back and bit into a piece of toast.

Papi closed his laptop.

Mami rolled her eyes and left the room. “Don’t break anything.”

Yarique squared off, pinkies poking up above his fists like little periscopes; ready to break on the first punch he threw. He let loose a couple quick left jabs, sloppy but quick. It wasn’t until he tried to follow up with a hook cross combo that his pancita started swinging side to side, sloshing him off balance. By the time he got Ravolo into a mimed headlock, he feet were already starting to slip on the tile.

Papi shook his head and opened his laptop before Yarique was finished.

Yarique had a seized up clinch on Ravolo’s invisible head when Mami came back into the kitchen. “Are you quite finished?”

He was heaving so hard he couldn’t even get the words out.

Mami sat at the table as Yarique stuck his head under the faucet, letting the water run over his face. “So tell me, Jaime, what are your thoughts on all this Ravolo Soto nonsense?”

Yarique sat up from the sink, “Come on, Mami.”

“What?”

“Don’t put him on the spot like that.”

“I’m not putting anybody on the spot.”

Papi’s eyes stayed fixed on his laptop, “Cut the crap, Yari. You know exactly what you’re doing.”

“I’m not *doing* anything, Rafi.”

Papi shut the laptop, “If you want him to take a side, tell him straight out, don’t pussy-foot around with all this passive-aggressive bullshit.”

“Go back to your news stories.”

“God damn, would you two knock it the fuck off already.”

“Language.”

“Language yourself.”

“Don’t talk to your mother like that.”

Jaime swallowed his last bite of eggs. “What’s all this about then?”

“Nothing. Mami’s just getting in a few jabs before this blows over.”

“I’m not jabbing anything.”

Papi let out a large bellowing laugh.

Mami picked up Jaime’s plate and threw it in the sink so hard it shattered, and before the sound had left their ears, she stormed out of the room. “I should have married a real man.”

Papi’s eyes went from Yarique to Jaime and then back down to his laptop.

Ravolo: regresó a la cabaña de su padre

A small lizard bent down a fern frond down that brushed against his nostril. His eyes flickered open and focused. His breathing slowed and paused. And his arm snapped out to snatch the lizard and snap its neck with a quick flick of the thumb. It wasn't enough to make a meal, but it would keep his stomach from seizing up with that first shot of caña.

The trail had grown over. A path once wide enough for two grown men to walk shoulder-to-shoulder, had become nearly impossible to find, swallowed by the surrounding trees and lathed shut by crisscrossing vines. Still, he could have walked it blindfolded all those decades later.

Besides a few tight-lipped Jibaros, no one could make the climb to his childhood home, the largest of the four buildings that rimmed the small clearing on the leveled side of the mountain. A tool shed and pitorro distillery to the west and south, the old house sat on northern edge, pushed back against the jungle. Even as a child the old house was off-limits. He used to stay up all night, listening to the ghosts inside, rattling wallboards, and shuffling their feet across the floor. His father they were iguanas, but he knew the truth.

Using a twig, he unhooked the loose wooden latch that bolted the front door shut. Security had never been an issue on the mountain.

The lavender under the house had grown up through the cracks in the boards to cover the floor, and in the middle of it all, The Other sat cross-legged, cleaning his nails with a twig. "Took you long enough. There's three windows in the kitchen need to get their panes swapped, and two more in the bedroom. You'll have to make a new

hammock and maybe reinforce the walls to hold it. The roof needs a patch job, maybe more, but I didn't feel like climbing up top to have a look. Either way, you'll find out when the rain blows in."

"Don't worry about me."

"Well, who else am I gonna worry about?"

The whole place still had the air of his father, not his scent but his presence, as if at any moment the man may step in from the back bedroom to throw open the window and complain about the heat or send his boy to sort mangoes or papayas or whichever other fruit he had hauled down that day, or if he was drunk enough, send him out to cut back the jungle. The old man did that more than anything else, convinced that untended trees would one day swallow the land. Decades later, the jungle was right where they left it and not one inch closer.

He counted five steps from the door, kicked out the second to last floorboard on the left, and pulled a small metal cookie tin from the crawl space beneath the house. It was rusted shut, and he had to bash it open with a rock. Inside, a key ring with a skeleton key surrounded by fifty identical padlock keys and a piece of graph paper covered with small dots, penciled in almost at random, with a small arrow in one corner.

Starting at the skeleton key, he counted forward to the thirteenth key on the ring, removed it, and slid it onto a length of rope, which he then tied and wore around his neck.

"What was his punishment for stealing again?"

"Dead men don't beat no one."

The toolshed roof had collapsed. And after decades of open weather, the only items of any use were a pry bar and a pickaxe head.

The distillery door was still as solid as ever, reinforced with steel plates inside and out. The lock left rust stains on his fingers.

“You’re gonna have to cut it off.”

“I ask your opinion?” He pried a nail from the toolshed wall and used it to scrape the rust from the keyhole. No use. More scraping, another try. Still nothing. More scraping, over and over, until the key slid into the lock and after quite a bit of shaking and cursing the cylinder clicked over and the lock released. But the shackle was stuck, rusted to the body.

“I don’t wanna say I told you so...”

“Then don’t.” Using the pickaxe head, he gave the lock a few taps, trying to work the rust off the shackle enough to open the lock, but it wasn’t long before he took a hard enough swing to snap the thing off.

The rubber seals had turned to dust, the joints of the copper tubing had corroded to neon lime, and the high-carbon gas line had rusted through, almost solid, but the rigging was strong and the glass tank looked almost good as new.

The Other slapped the side of the glass tank. “You know what this means, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Looks like you’ve got shopping to do.”

Starting at the southwest corner he counted his steps across the clearing, one for each box on the graph paper. Twenty-paces forward, three more to the right, he

dropped to his knees and used the pickaxe head to rough up the dirt, scooping out what he could before digging down a bit farther.

That was the bank of a man who never believed in organized forms of government, a man whose own abuelo had witnessed the collapse of the Spanish colonies and the beginning of the American occupation. His father sealed his savings in mason jars and buried them in the yard, and that map was the only way to find them.

The Other kicked back against a tree. “Find anything yet?”

He had already dug three holes and was beginning to wonder if the map was wrong, or worse, if someone else had stumbled upon the place years earlier and cleaned out every last cent. “Would you leave me alone and let me work?”

The Other let out a long breath and scanned the surrounding jungle. “You know they’re gonna come for you right?”

“Expect they will, or they’ll try to at least.” And as his fingers wormed through the soil, he found it, the clean smooth side of a sealed glass jar. Jackpot.

Yarique: suministros

The kid at the register looked away so fast he damn near snapped his neck.

Jaime pulled a chewed up toothpick from his mouth. “What you thinking?”

“I don’t know, piña.” Yarique could feel their eyes burning into his head, all of them watching. It started in the parking lot, heads turning to track his every step, judging the twin black eyes joined across the bridge of his nose. Treating him like some common criminal. It took everything in him not to grab the nearest by the collar and scream in their face, ‘I ain’t no fucking shoplifter.’

“We got piña last time. How ‘bout passion fruit?”

He could feel them closing in every time he looked away. “I don’t care, man, get whatever you want.”

“What I want and what you’ll drink are two very different things.”

A pair of old women in the express line whispered behind stiff fingered hands.

“Can we hurry up? This place is giving me the creeps.”

Jaime laughed. “Yeah, man, whatever you say.”

A young mother at the end of the next aisle stared him up and down, sneering as her toddler smashed Thomas the train against a Cheerios box.

Jaime grabbed a bottle of piña Don Q.

“Let’s go back around this way.” Yarique motioned down the aisle.

“I thought you wanted to get outta here.”

“This ways quicker.”

“The register’s right here, man.”

A grizzled old man at the dairy case, watched him with a half-crooked smile,

and that one, more than any other really burrowed under his skin. He couldn't pin down what it was, something about the way he stood, his Rorschach blobs of faded tattoos, or the way his arms hung like pipe cleaners from the loose sleeves of his guayabera. Something about that old man unsettled him to the core.

“Would just shut the fuck up already?” Yarique grabbed Jaime's arm and dragged him down to the end of the drink aisle, back around the deli case, and down the produce-lined racks on the opposite side of the store.

Their cashier was a middle-aged man with a bad comb-over and a birthmark under his left eye that looked like an upside down Vieques. He'd seen the man a hundred times before and never gave him any thought. Though he didn't avoid eye contact, he didn't stare at them either. Yarique paid, because he always paid. The cashier tore their receipt. “That was some good work last night.”

“What'd you say?” The statement came off more aggressive than he intended.

“On the news, I mean, I wouldn't have recognized you, but that bruise is kind of hard to miss.” He paused. Yarique said nothing. “But anyway, it's good to see somebody finally standing up for what's right.” And the cashier shook Yarique's hand. Not just shook it, but grasped it, clutched it between both of his own as if greeting a priest.

The realization washed over him in a wave of heat as he stepped out into the sunbaked parking lot, he had become an overnight celebrity. All those incriminating eyes became beacons of adoration, praising him, longing for him, hoping to one day to be just like him. His spine straightened, and without even realizing it, Yarique began to strut.

Jaime: Sabor Rico

The Moca Massacre, Yarique's encounter with Ravolo Soto, became more of a battle every time he spun it, and by the time they got to playa Jobos, Jaime expected the whole thing to have warped into a knock down, drag out action flick climax that ended with Yarique victorious over Soto's bloodied, a half-naked Sonia Vera Cruz, dangling from his arm. But it was his narrative to spin, and the news reports were doing a pretty good job helping him sell it.

“I ain't jealous.”

“Bullshit, man.”

“Look, all I'm saying is, ain't nothing would have happened any different if you weren't there in the back of that car.”

“But I was there, wasn't I? And you weren't, so you don't know.”

Neither said a word for the rest of the drive to Sabor Rico, a beachside burger shack turned temporary tourist destination in the wake of a Travel Channel declaration of best mofongo on the island, though locals knew not to order anything other than burgers, tostones, and alcohol. Still the heavy gringo traffic meant eventually had to close off the small dirt parking lot between their shack and route 2, as more than a few fights erupted between visiting blancos and the local population.

Almost the minute the two of them set foot inside, the place erupted in a chorus of applause, led by the owner, Sonia Ranchero, who hadn't missed a day behind the bar in twenty-three years. “Let's here it for the local hero.”

She had the voice of a boiled toad. And with a wave of her hand, two men on the sand side of the bar gave up their seats. “First drinks on me.”

“How ‘bout a shot of caña with a Medalla back.”

“You got it, baby.”

“I’ll do the same.”

“It’ll cost *you* two-fifty.”

“Start us up a tab. We ain’t leaving anytime soon.” Yarique drummed his fingers on the bar.

For the first time, the drinks and food felt less like trade for driving his soft-ass and more like charity. Jaime’s neck started to burn, but the drinks showed up before his rage took hold.

Sonia poured a shot for herself. “May you serve as a model to us all.” Her eyes landed on Jaime as knocked back the shot and slammed her glass on the bar. “It was a good thing you did for him. The cop. For his family.”

“It weren’t nothing, really. Not more than any other one of y’all might have done in my same position. It’s like, you see something bad happening to someone good, it’s just human nature to wanna help them out. Like this little voice gets going in the back of your head...”

Yarique kept rattling on, telling them about all the ways he used to box with tío Ernesto out in abuelo Julio’s yard, the scraps he got in back at school. And they hung on every single syllable of that bullshit.

Jaime could feel every muscle in his back contort and tense, rippling down his arms to his, which balled into fists almost on instinct. And before he even knew had happened, he was fighting to keep from bashing that pudgy motherfuckers face into the bar, over and over, until his front teeth stuck in the chipped plywood top.

Instead, he popped an olive from behind the bar, lit a cigarette, and spun around on his stool, staring out at the ocean, watching the twin smoke trails of 767 blaze off into a point that touched the horizon.

Yarique: playa jobos

“Let me know if you need anything else.” For the life of him he couldn’t remember the old woman’s name. Sophia, Stella, Sonia, she was the owner of the place, he knew that much and shared it’s initials, but that was it. She patted his hand and took off into the kitchen.

He sipped his beer and scanned the dining room, if you could call it that, a dark little space with mismatched plastic tables and chairs, whatever was found on the side of the road from the looks of it, filled with people locked in the kind of rambling conversations that only happen over summer morning drinks. Their eyes would sometimes dart to him and back, stealing glances of a local hero. The way tío Ernesto must have felt every time he left the house, maybe not anymore, but at some point way earlier in his life.

And then, out of nowhere, there he was, standing in the doorway as if materialized out of thin air, the same old man from the grocery store dairy case. The paranoid part of him would obsess on a narrative where the old man followed him from the grocery store to Sabor Rico. But they hadn’t smoked all morning, so paranoid part of his brain kept its damn-mouth shut. On an island there’s no such thing as strangers.

Yarique spun around on his stool to stare out at the fishhook of sand that cradled the point of playa Jobos, a consistent set of ledgy barrels that on a soft sand bottom, one of the best, or at least most consistent, sets on the island, capped on the top by a big jagged peak of igneous rock. Weekdays, local surf hounds packed the waves, shouldering any newbie groms or gringo tourists into a tidal pool bed of sea

urchins, but weekends the beach belonged to cacos and the sandy-bottomed shallows filled with more abusadoras than a club in Carolina.

Too embarrassed about his doughy physique, Yarique preferred to burn his hours with a spliff and a drink in the shade, talking up a good came about the guapas he could conquer, but always too scared to do much more than drool in their direction.

“Hey, didn’t I see you on TV today?” She slid up beside him, almost busting out of her bikini.

He stammered for a moment, searching for the right words as the voice in the back of his tried to convince him that this was all a prank that her friends were really hiding off in some dark little corner, giggling their heads off as she made good on a dare to go hit on the chubby one. But as her fingers danced along his thigh and she pressed her hips against him that little voice in the back of his head faded into a distant whisper, drowned out by the waves crashing on the beach and the cacophonous sound of a hundred conversations spilling together into. “Yeah, baby, how ‘bout you sit down right here, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Jaime: gafas rosa

It's not like she was ugly, but she wasn't sexy either, dark bronze skin, almost Dominican features, with gold ringlet curls, pudgy little stomach in front but no real curves to speak of otherwise. She slipped off Yarique's lap and had to dig her claws into Jaime's shoulder to keep from falling on the floor. And as Yarique started in on his story she took off her sunglasses and put them on the bar, big pink heart lenses. He must have told it a dozen times by then and was really laying it on thick. But she was eating up every word, scooting her hips around in a little figure eight on his lap, and brushing her fingers along the side of his hip.

It took everything in him for Jaime not to reach over and smack Yarique in the back of his fat, greasy-ass head. But whatever let him have his little five-minutes in the spotlight, not like he had much else going for him.

Jaime put on her sunglasses and stared around at the world, all tinged pink by the heart shaped lenses. He ordered another caña y Medalla on Yarique's tab, and that's when he saw him, an old man in the dining room, using a fork and knife to eat a cheese burger while staring, unblinking, at Yarique. Sinewy with dark sagging skin, there was something about the old man that reminded him of Yarique. Almost as if someone had popped a plug on Yarique and drained all the air out until there nothing left but skeleton dressed in suit made of oversized skin.

Yarique elbowed him in the ribs. "Lemme hold your keys."

"What you need my keys for?"

That tubby motherfucker, first time Jaime saw him he punched him in the mouth, not for any reason, he just had the kind of face that made you want to hit him.

Jaime wanted more than anything to remind him of that, remind him how he started crying and screaming like a little baby back when that happened, and how he cried for his mom every other time Jaime whooped his ass for the next six years. Instead, he dug his keys out of his pocket. “Don’t get nothing on my seats.

“No promises.” Yarique winked and the two of them took off.

The old man’s eyes tracked them along the bar, and once they were out of sight, snapped down to his plate. He finished his burger and ordered a beer, using a napkin to wipe off the condensation before each sip. When the beer was finished, and Yarique still hadn’t returned, the old man stood up and left.

Jaime didn’t much care what that man might have wanted to do to Yarique or why he was looking for him in the first place, but he couldn’t afford to have no one fucking with his car. He waved to Sonia, letting her know he’d be right back and then walked out onto the beach around the back of the shack. He stopped at the corner and watched through pink heart shaped sunglasses.

Standing in front of Sabor Rico, the old man lit a cigarette, and scanned the parking lot. He cupped his hands and looked in the windows of two different cars on his way to an old green Contour parked at the far end, strips of red tape where one of the brake lights should have been. He dropped to the dirt in push up position and checked the underside of the car. He stood and ran his fingers along the inside of each wheel well. He popped the hood and looked at the engine. And then got in and drove away.

viernes, 11 de julio: planes bien trazados

Ravolo: baja de la montaña

The east side of the mountain was a sheer rock face where trees sprouted up at ninety-degree angles. He navigated branch-to-branch, leaping his way down the slope from one to the next, hoping each time that the roots would keep hold.

At the bottom of the cliff, a half-mile of jungle before the trees gave way to a clearing, plains of waist-high grass, half a mile across, stretching to the horizon on either end. He stood inside the tree line, watching the wind sway the green tufts in rippling waves. On the right, maybe a mile away, a small blue house, smack in the middle of the grass. Only a speck from there, it was the perfect staging area for a police operation that is if they knew where he was to begin with. Still, he was in no position to take chances.

“Looks pretty clear to me,” The Other chucked a pebble out into the field.

“But looks aren’t everything. Are they?”

“Did I ask for your input?”

“Take you for instance. At first glance, I’d think you were homeless, drunk, definitely a criminal. And, you are. So what do I know?”

He stared at the blue house on the horizon, halfway open window slats, a sign of people inside or left that way to let the wind blow through and keep out the mold. He could stand there three days waiting for a sign of movement, but an ambush would snatch him up the minute he stepped out into the field.

“Go on then cop killer, make a run for it.” The Other sat on a downed tree.

“You know he was married, the one you killed.”

“Shut your mouth.”

“What do you think Juanita would have said about that?”

“Don’t ever say her name again.” His hands were already shaking.

“The way I see it, you could make a run for it, but even if you don’t die of a heart attack ten feet out, your legs would buckle before you made it halfway. No, you’re gonna have to get down on your belly and crawl, hope to God your fat ass don’t stick up above the grass.” The Other pulled a cigarette form behind his ear.

A double-take, “When did you start smoking?”

“Friend,” The Other lit it. “The things you don’t know about me could fill a book.”

As much as he didn’t want to admit it, The Other was right. He would never survive a sprint. And so he got down on his belly and he crawled like a worm through half mile of grass and pebbles and mud until finally he felt the cool shade of the trees on his back and stood up.

He looked back across the field to The Other waving from the shade of the tree line, the mountains towering overhead. If things went wrong, he’d never make it back, not in a hurry. His only option for now was to be as careful as possible.

Ernesto: quesitos

That fucking line, he hated waiting in fucking lines, packed in, ass to front, right up against the counter, the man in front of him stinking like Aqua Velva. He wanted to grab that dirty piece of shit by the nappy gray curls on the back of his little blanquito neck and smash his head through the glass counter. Smash it to bits. Grind his face into the shards until they scraped his eyelids and liquefied his peepers to fucking jelly. Fucking Aqua Velva. His old man used to lather that shit on by the gallon like it just might mask the pitorro on his breath. It never worked. Still Mama never called him out, she wasn't that stupid. She left that up to Ernesto to do once he was old enough that the old man wouldn't touch him. But until then sack of shit just beat on her every chance he got.

“Hey, Ernesto.” Always the same two women behind the counter, and he could never remember either of their names. “You want mango or papaya.”

“Surprise me, sunshine.” Ernesto hardly set foot his gym anymore, and even when it was only long enough to check up on his champ. With the kid off in Orlando, he avoided that place like the plague. Still, he had his routines. And every morning he started the day with a café con leche filled with enough sugar to make the spoon stand on end and two glycemic peaking quesitos.

His phone started buzzing in his pocket. Not even ten A.M. and already a dozen emails from Hector, as if Bayamon wasn't far enough to put him. He turned the thing off and dropped it back in his pocket, sipping his coffee as he stared through the tinted plate glass windows on the front of the Ramos Fight Training Center.

He got the space for cheap, the end cap store front of a forgotten little strip

mall in Ramey that would have been torn down if it hadn't been for the bakery, the DMV, a small little surf shop with fiercely loyal clientele. Over the years the years his training center expanded to fill four of the storefronts, from the end cap all the way down to the bakery, where the owners' gave him a neighborly discount, which in this case meant free, but still refused to let him skip the fucking line.

Look at them in there. None of them would last a round with any real fighter. Memberships spike every couple of years, when a new fight film hits the theaters and they all suddenly wannabe Rocky Balboas or whoever the fuck the brawler of the moment might be. They were all the same. Thick-necked barflies more interested in watching themselves spar in the mirror than learning how to duck a punch.

Not Ivan that kid was raw, real deal material. The type he hadn't seen since his early days at Gleason's when he might catch of Tyson tearing up the heavy bags.

Less than twenty-four hours later, Ivan would make his first real foray into the world of professional boxing. Ernesto had planned to watch from ringside, but there were other aspects of the business that more demanded his immediate attention.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Sergio met him in the parking lot of the Aguadilla Marriot, where he had waited on Ernesto for almost twenty-minutes. Anxiety prone on a good day, make him a few minutes late and his head would just about explode. "And why aren't you answering the phone?"

"I turned it off."

"What do you mean you turned it off?"

"We gotta get my email off that thing."

Ernesto straightened his tie in the mirrored doors of the elevator. "How many

of them are in there?”

“Only three.”

Ding, conference rooms, their floor.

Sergio whispered as they walked down the hall, as if the walls themselves would rat him out. “But look, they’re not gonna budge on the golf course.”

“Well, they’re gonna have to budge.”

He motioned for Ernesto to lower his voice. “They think it’s the only selling point for foreign money.”

“We’ve got dozens of the damn things, shit there’s one attached to this hotel. A golf course ain’t selling fucking thing.”

“Then what do you have in mind.”

Ernesto walked through the double doors without a word.

The three of them sat in a row at the end of the conference table. But Ernesto preferred to stand, pacing as they laid out their detailed plan to develop the most challenging and luxurious links in the Caribbean. “Connected to one of the most exclusive resort hotels the island has ever seen.”

Once they had finished their nearly hour long presentation, he just stood there, staring at the wall a foot above their heads. And after silently counting to one-hundred-and-twenty-four, Ernesto dropped the real deal breaker. “How far from the beach is it?”

“Private cars will be on standby for guests twenty-four hours a day.”

“How far from the beach is it?”

“A short ride.”

“How far?”

They conferred among themselves, and then, “Seven miles.”

“Seven point four by my count.” Sergio always came through in a pinch.

“Let’s not get lost on the semantics.”

“These are hardly semantics.” Ernesto paused. He could almost see beads of sweat forming in the glands on their foreheads, these fucking corporate sycophants.

“You want to build an exclusive hotel on a Caribbean island and you can’t even offer your guests an ocean view? Seems kind of bound for failure if you ask me.”

“We’re in talks with the PGA to book three consecutive tours.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Those tours book rooms.”

“Do they front your construction costs, because last I checked that’s exactly why you needed me.” Ernesto leaned forward, fists down on the table. “Look, I’m not opposed to a golf course, shit there’s one attached to this very hotel.”

Sergio shot him a look.

“But I am more interested in turning a profit. This very hotel was built with two primary pieces of entertainment, a golf course, and video game arcade. Now, a few years down the line they realized the golf course was bringing in more than arcade.” Two of the men smiled at each other, and Ernesto leaned forward on his fists, cracking his knuckles against the table, imagining what the feel of their teeth breaking loose from their skulls. “So they replaced they replaced the arcade games with slot machines. Now the slots bring in more than golf course. And they’ve only ten of the things.”

“They’ve also got a beach.”

“That they do.” He stood up straight. “That they do.”

“Can you get us a beach?”

“Not exactly.”

The talkative one scoffed.

“But I can get you a cliff with a two-hundred-and-thirty degree view. How much do you know about the Vista Del Mar hotel?”

The three of them stared at each other, confused. Sergio stepped in, “It’s flea bag perched on the best on the west coast, run by an old drunk more interested in fucking the maids he hires off the side of a Dominican yola, than he is in running a business.”

“And I can get him to sign over the whole thing for half what the property’s worth.”

“Good. Do it. We’ll scrap the golf course and put in a casino. We’re not fucking retards.”

“Whoa. I never said I would.”

“Fine. What do you want from us?”

“There’s an abandoned sugar pier at the bottom of the hill, still controlled by the local government. And while I may be able to negotiate a deal with the owner of the hotel, the mayor and I have never really seen eye-to-eye. Get me the pier and the water for a half-mile out and I’ll get you hotel.”

“We’ll have to talk to our people in Miami, but it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Jaime: gasolinera

Somebody siphoned off half the generator's tank, which sent Jaime back to park and pop his hood down on the side of the 110. The traffic screamed past in a flash of taillights and short cut verses of salsa, bachata, merengue, and reggaetón, the drivers all off to laugh over wine and rum at fancy restaurant dinners. Meanwhile, he was lugging that empty five-gallon can back down along the shoulder, heading for the halo of gas station lights blooming up above the trees in the distance.

Is that what it meant to be an adult?

Bebo was the smart one. His older brother left home two weeks before his sixteenth birthday, and with the exceptions of Christmas and Three Kings Day, never looked back, and even these were only on account of Jaime still living at home. He always took care of his baby brother, slipped some cash, kept him stocked in herb, and even when he couldn't show up in person, he always made sure to return his calls, even if only in the form of a text, a single letter "A," their mutually understood code, "Ahorita, acho. Ahorita. I'll call your ass later." But it was three days by then without as much as a peep, and Jaime couldn't help but feel the worry pooling up in the back of his head. Still, he shook it off and kept marching down the road.

Bebo first got in the game at twelve, running bags for the boys in the plaza. At fifteen he started running with *La Nuestra*, staying out later and later, sometimes not coming home at all until one day Jaime came home from school and found Bebo all beaten and bloody, holding a popsicle over his swollen up eye. He played it off like it was nothing, but he moved out a week later, just took off in the night. The only time Jaime ever asked about his work, Bebo shot him a car salesman's grin. "How about

you worry about your life, acho, let me worry about mine.”

Cars poured through the station, never leaving a pump vacant for more than a few seconds, but not a single one of the drivers was biting on his line. The best he got was a bummed cigarette of a tourist girl, Midwestern by the look of her, a blond blue-eyed blanca that tossed her hair back and forth from one side to the other as she talked. The worst was an old woman with a wobbly hip in a homemade dress. “I work for my money. You should try the same.”

Most other nights, he would have taken that cue to walk around back and smoke, in case the old bat went and bitched to the attendant inside. Those like her waited around to make sure the attendant did something about the kid with the gas can set up out front. But there was something in the air that night, something hostile, whatever had crawled under her skin, now hung from his breath and made him want to burn the world. Maybe it was the day spent with Yarique, watching him alternate between free drinks and free women, bathed in the praise of everyone for twenty yards in any direction, all without doing a single fucking thing to earn it. Maybe it was the electricity, the food or lack of it, and the fact that he still wasn’t any closer to finding Mama. Maybe it was the lingering worry that something terminal had prevented his brother from replying to six calls and as many texts. Or maybe it was something darker, growing in the deepest folds of gray matter at the back of his skull, a realization that he would never fly a plane, never leave the island, and never have anything more in his life than the nights he spent begging for a couple gallons of gas.

Before she opened the door, before he even knew what he was doing, Jaime was on his feet, chucking the gas can, hard at the old woman’s head. He missed,

maybe on purpose. He couldn't be certain. And the empty metal clanged off the bulletproof window. On cue, the attendant inside leapt over the counter, minibat in hand, and charged through the front doors swinging.

Jaime sprinted across the parking lot and straight out into oncoming traffic. The shouts of the attendant fell into the distance as he ran as fast and hard as he could, heaving for breath, his feet tearing a path up the center of the double yellow lines. Cars honked and swerved. His veins burned and his heart pounded in his ears, muffling the world. He ran faster, lifting his feet as high as he could, stretching each step farther than the last, past his car to the bend at the end of the road, where he kept running through the trees and into the open field of waist high grass, until finally his foot caught a divot and he tumbled over into the dirt.

A knot began swelled on his head, as he rolled over onto his back and stared up at the night sky, laughing as hard and as loud as he could. Maybe, just this once, Yarique had the right idea after all.

Ravolo: señor bicicleta

The men inside were laughing over bottle cap shots of Bacardi and dollar-can Medalla chasers, a roadside store turned bar with a less-than-credible liquor license, a photocopied paper that had long since faded. Not like any cop would ever bother to check, there were more important things to worry about on that side of the mountain.

On the dumpster side of the building, out of view of the men inside, a tape wrapped mountain bike, no lock or chain, just a security guard in the form of a little girl, maybe four, but he never could guess a child's age, entertained herself pressing her feet into the mud and watching it ooze and bubble in the cracks between in her toes. By the look of the mud on her shirt and shorts, the thin layer dried on her arms and knees, she had been at it for quite some time.

One scream and every man in the bar would come charging outside to stomp him half to death. Or worse. That's just the way they handled things in Lares. No, he needed to make her smile.

"What's her name?" He pointed at the mud-covered doll, face down in the puddle beside her.

She stared at her toes, flexing them deeper into the mud. "Masha."

"What kind of a name is Nashta?"

"Not Nashta. Masha."

"Say it again."

"Ma-sha," she laughed at his confused expression. "Like Masha and the bear."

"Ah, I see. I see." He scratched his head and stole a side-eyed glance at the front of the store as the men inside continued to laugh and shout. "Is that like a comic

strip?”

“A cartoon.”

“That’s a weird name for a cartoon.”

“You’ve never heard of Masha and the bear?”

“Can’t say that I have,” His experience with children’s programming could be best described as the color of air in a white room bathed in light. “Wanna see a magic trick?”

The girl squinted against the sun, “You don’t know magic.”

“You think because I don’t know Masha and the…”

“Bear.”

“Masha and the bear that I don’t know much of anything. Huh?” He rubbed his hands together as if trying to keep warm. “Gotta charge up first.”

He clapped, “OK. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

He looked around and picked up a stone, a trick his father had done a thousand times. “Now, this may look like an ordinary pebble to you, and maybe it is. But what if I told you that this pebble wasn’t born on mountain or in valley, but that it came from deep down in the center of the earth, pushed up through miles and miles of molten lava…”

“What’s molty laba?”

“Molten lava. It’s like melted rocks.”

“Then why not just say melted rocks?”

“Fine, miles of melted rocks. Point is, this pebble, right here, this little rock that you wouldn’t give a second glance to on any other day had to fight its way past

all the other thousands of little rocks in the center of the earth until finally, one day, it popped up out of a crack way down on the bottom of the ocean.”

“We’re not on the bottom of the ocean.”

“I know. I’m getting there.”

“This story’s too long.”

“OK, I’ll try to speed up. One day Puerto Rico rose up out of the ocean and brought all the rocks with it, the big ones like mountains and boulders, and even the tiny ones, like this one here.”

“You said there was a magic trick.”

“I’m getting there.”

She looked back down at her toes, squeezing the mud. He was losing her.

“OK, enough of the story, you want the trick?”

She nodded.

“You have to look at me.”

She did, and he tapped the pebble into the center of his hand. “One, two, three,” and it vanished right in front of her eyes.

She lit up, “Wow. Do it again!”

“I don’t know,” he stumbled back and clutched his chest. “I don’t think I can.”

“Why not?”

“That took a lot of my magic power.”

“Make more powder.”

“Power. But…” He rubbed his chin. “Maybe… No, you couldn’t.”

“I can do it. What do you need?”

“How high can you count?”

“A zillion-million high.”

“A zillion-million? Are you sure? You can’t lie to me, because lies drain magic power.”

She rung her hands together and stared at the ground, “A hundred.”

“Hmmm. That just might be enough. But you’ll have to cover your eyes, because peeking drains magic power faster than lies.”

“I won’t peek.”

“You promise?”

She shoved her face into the crook of her elbow and turned to face the wall, “One, two, three, four...”

He squeezed the back brakes to keep the gear change from clicking as he picked up the bike and carried it out toward the road. He climbed on, and as he pushed into the pedals, her voice faded into the distance, “forty-one, forty-two, forty-three.”

jueves, 26 de junio: ascetismo

Ivan: el boxeador y la niña

“Your stomach’s so flat. I can’t even pinch it anymore.”

“That’s the idea.”

“Are you eating enough?”

“I’m eating exactly enough.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I don’t need to be sure, they’re sure, and I trust them. Food is a distraction.”

“Is that what he tells you?”

“He’s right. It’s self-indulgent.”

“We need it to survive.”

“No, we need a combination of calories, vitamins, and minerals to survive.

Food is pleasure, a distraction of taste and smell. I mean think about it, if I offered you a single meal with the perfect balance of everything your body needs to maintain optimal nutrition, would you then eat that meal twice a day for the rest of your life?”

“Maybe.”

“Of course you wouldn’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You can’t eat the same breakfast two days in a row.”

“...”

“We convince ourselves that food is a necessity, but it’s just self-indulgence.”

“What does that make me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, if food is an indulgence we convince ourselves we need to survive then, what is this? Is that why you can’t tell them about me?”

“...”

“What time’s your flight?”

“In six hours.”

“Can I come see you?”

“...”

“Do you like hurting people?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Never mind, forget I said anything.”

“But I can’t, because you’ve already said it. Do I ask why you wanna be a lawyer?”

“No. But you could.”

“Why do you wanna be a lawyer?”

“None of your business.”

“What kind of an answer is that?”

“A lawyerly one.”

“...”

“Mmmm. I like it when you touch me like that.”

“...”

“What’s wrong? Why are you stopping?”

“Nothing. I just want to look at you. I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

“No you don’t.”

“...”

“What if you come back and I’m all fat and waddy? Will you still love me?”

“Of course.”

“What if I’m horribly disfigured in a car accident?”

“Don’t get in a car accident.”

“But what if I am?”

“Can we talk about something happy?”

“This is happy. It’s romantic.”

“It’s morbid.”

“Look at me.”

“Can we have one good night?”

“What do you mean? This is a good night.”

“Fine. I would still love you even were horribly mangled in a ten car pile up, and your face got burned off with acid, and I had to kiss you right on the teeth because your lips and nose were all burned away.”

“Now who’s being morbid?”

“You started it.”

“What if I got fat?”

“No. I wouldn’t love you if you got fat. I’m sorry, but everybody’s got a line and that’s mine.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“Like you’d ever get fat.”

“You don’t know that. I’ve got the genes for it. My mom’s fat. My brother is

too.”

“And that’s exactly why you never would.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Of course I do.”

“You think you do.”

“...”

“What if I got pregnant?”

“That’s not fat.”

“But what if I did?”

“You’d probably be that kind of skinny pregnant, like a celebrities get, all tone and tiny everywhere, but with a perfect round little belly sticking out in front.”

“How do you know I’m not waiting for the chance to let myself go?”

“Like I said, I know you.”

“Well, then I guess we’ll see when you get back.”

“Wait, what are we talking about now?”

“...”

sábado, 12 de julio: noche de lucha

Yarique: un siguiente

“You’d think he’s ashamed of us or something.” Mami slammed the trunk a little too hard. “Yari, help your sister.”

“She’s fine.”

But she was struggling to carry all four folding lawn chairs and dropping everything. “He’s still giving us our own section. It’s not like he’s doing it for anyone else.”

Yarique grabbed two of the chairs. “But we ain’t anyone else. I’m the lone survivor of *The Moca Massacre*, practically a celebrity.”

“Tick-tock, mister-fourteen-fifty-nine.”

“Don’t you have a test to fail?”

She ignored him and ran ahead to catch up with Papi, carrying the cooler, already lost in the crowd that poured down from the surrounding streets to swallow them all.

Their section was ten-by-ten square roped off at the base of the VIP platform. Though he would never admit it to the rest of them, Yarique was more than happy not to be stuck up there, schmoozing with tío Ernesto’s business cohorts. “Probably all sales figures and quarterly reports and some such bullshit. We’re better off down here, in the street with my people.”

“Yeah, you’re people are real street.” Selena rolled her eyes.

“What the fuck you know?”

Mami smacked him in the back of his head. “That’s the last time I’ll tell you,

don't talk to your sister like that.”

Yarique knew better than to say another word.

Papi rubbed his hands together so quick, it looked like his palms might catch fire. “Height and reach go to Rodriguez. Ivan's undefeated, but Rodriguez still has more wins over his career. This is might just come down to the points.”

Perpetually cold, Selena wrapped a sweater over her shoulders. “I thought you hated violence.”

“This isn't violence, it's strategy.”

“It's two men beating each other bloody for money.”

He ignored Mami and leaned over to Selena. “Violence assumes intent to hurt, damage, or kill. And while I'm sure some of us,” his eyes found Mami and then snapped back to Selena. “Might be happy to write this off as a simple contest of brutality. There is the fact that they still keep score. And this tells us what?”

Selena shrugged.

“It tells us that the winner is decided by more than the damage caused to their opponent. Their score is comprised of various technical elements that balance abilities to defend as much as attack.”

Selena smiled. “I never thought about it like that.”

He pinched her chin. “So who's your money on?”

“We taking bets now?” Yarique lit a cigarette.

Mami fanned away his smoke, even though the wind was blowing in the opposite direction. “Can you please not do that near me.”

Yarique ignored her and typed out a message to Jaime, ‘You coming to the

fight?’

Sent.

“I’m gonna go get a drink.”

And the orders flooded in.

“Get me a Medalla.”

“Wine for me.”

“And get me a cranberry juice.”

“Cranberry juice? What are you pregnant?”

“Yarique! Be nice.”

“Let her get her own damn drink, miss women’s liberation.”

Selena adjusted the sweater around her shoulders. “A woman’s greatest skill is her ability to delineate trivial tasks to those of lesser cognitive capacities.”

Papi tried to cover a laugh and failed.

Yarique searched for the right response, but his mind went blank.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Are you getting our drinks?”

“I ain’t gotta put up with this shit from you.” Yarique stomped out his cigarette and sat back down. That’s when he saw him, the old man from the grocery store, standing in the crowd, about twenty feet away, staring him down with those cold, dead eyes.

The PA system burst to life, echoing the last phrases of the commentators before the bell chimed through the plaza, marking the start of the first round.

Everyone clapped.

Those first two rounds went about as expected, Ivan treading circles around Rodriguez, who refused to throw anything more than a few probing jabs, a far cry from the aggression shown in his previous bouts.

Coming into the start of the third, the official threatened to call ‘no contest’ if one of them didn’t make a move. For Rodriguez, a career gatekeeper, ‘no contest’ meant nothing. But the ruling would shut Ivan out of any real contention for at least another two years.

Top of the third, tío Ernesto was pacing and shouting into his cell phone.

Ivan landed a few hard jabs in the fourth and even managed to send Rodriguez onto his heels more than once. But the fire in his gut just wasn’t there, especially not enough to get that Dominican charging out with his signature flurry of hook-cross combos.

Selena and Papi were ignoring all of them, sitting on the edge of their seats, chewing their nails down to cuticle stubs.

Mami kept adjusting her chair, ratcheting the back up and down, standing to close or open it all the way, making a real show of her discomfort.

And in all this time Yarique’s eyes hadn’t left the old man in the crowd, who continued to stare at him just as intently as before, a slight smile spreading across his face. The more he watched the old man, the Yarique began to wonder if he was even real to begin with. No one else had ever paid him the slightest bit of attention, not even Jaime in the grocery store. Sure, he at a burger Sabor Rican, but Yarique never saw a waiter go near him. The thought wormed into his brain, becoming more

plausible with every passing second. The old man was nothing more than figment of his imagination, some self-conscious tendency manifest in physical form. Either that or the lingering effect of some dirty fucking bud. Wouldn't be the first time.

On the bell at the end of the fifth, Papi sat forward and rubbed his face, letting out a breath so long that it seemed as if he had been holding since the start of the round. He rubbed Selena's shoulder. "Good fight huh?"

She nodded without a word.

But it was when he turned to look at Yarique and traced his gaze to the old man in the crowd that Papi's entire demeanor shifted. He stood up and stepped over the velvet rope that separated their section.

"Where are you going?"

Without looking at Mami, "I've gotta check on something."

"Bring me back wine."

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Did you even hear me?"

But Papi kept walking.

Top of the sixth, Ivan came out switch stance, weight shifted back on his heels. He stepped into the center of the ring, and there it was, from Rodriguez, a feint to the left cut short on his right. "El Tiburon" saw it before it started, and connected a hard right to the jaw, tried to follow up with a left haymaker, but Rodriguez got on the inside of the glove. Ivan tried to force him into the corner, but Rodriguez clinched up and shoved back to put some space between them. He opened up a left jab on "El Tiburon's" jaw, and then followed up with a hard right hook to Rodriguez and a

connecting left to the body. But Ivan just shook him off and went back to center ring, cut short by the bell.

Yarique scanned the crowd, but saw neither Papi nor the old man.

The announcers called it first. “If Salmenco tries to go blow-to-blow against Rodriguez, there’s no way he’s coming out of this on top.”

“Absolutely, but I don’t think he’s going there. It’s obvious both men have watched each other’s fights, and he’s gotta know Rodriguez’s reputation. If he gets him worked up, he’ll throw him off his game, and that could mean a title fight for Salmenco next month.”

“I hope you’re right, I really do. But I just don’t see it going that way.”

The bell on the seventh, and Rodriguez came out of like a bull, charging a flurry of hooks. Ivan hinged at the hips, a tight D’Amato slip stance to take off the edge of his hits. He popped up in a clinch that got them spun back around and left “El Tiburon” standing center ring. Rodriguez closed neutral ground, and Ivan landed a hard right hook to his jaw. Without a second to spare, he started in on a five-hit combo that stumbled Rodriguez back against the ropes. A quick series of jabs pinned him in place. His knees buckled, and Ivan stepped back to straighten him out with a hard uppercut. But the ropes kept him upright. Ivan didn’t notice when Rodriguez passed out, lost in technique, counting breaths and tucking hits, continuing a series of hook, hook, body, up, hook, hook, body, up, and by the time the official stepped in to stop the fight, Rodriguez was barely breathing.

Silence hit the plaza as cheers swept the crowd at the Starfield Miami.

Selena wiped the tears from her eyes, but wouldn’t look away from the screen.

Ivan was dazed when the paramedic rushed into the ring and to revive Rodriguez. The official thrust Ivan's hand into the air. The boy was on his way to a title bout.

A fury of celebration swept the plaza.

Still no sign of the old man or Papi.

Jaime: iniciar grande o no se moleste

The arena was an octagon of paint chipped steel tubing and heavy cage doors that could have come from a cell in Oso Blanco. Five rows of metal benches circled the room, in the center of which was a three-foot wall of red vinyl padding, sloped around a smaller octagon of green Astroturf, the only bright color in the room, smeared with streaks of blood, dried brown from earlier fights. That was the cockpit. An elaborate contraption of high-tension pulley systems lowered a Plexiglas case down from the ceiling. Inside the case, two fight cocks waited, face-to-face, in two separate pens. On top, four clock faces, one pointing in each direction for all the men surrounding the pit to keep accurate track of the match.

His phone buzzed, a text from Yarique, “You coming to the fight?”

The case went up.

The buzzer went off.

The clocks started ticking.

And the fight cocks attacked in a fury of color and blood.

The men around the pit screamed and cheered on their bird. But Jaime sat in the top row, watching it all unfold with cold detachment. He hadn’t showered or even changed his clothes in three days by then.

One bird dropped, injured, dying, as the other walked proud circles, strutting around the cockpit. The winner grabbed his bird and loaded it into a holding cage while the loser put down his suffering contender with quick twist of the neck. The next to set of men brought their birds to greet on the sidelines, which in this case meant striking each bird’s head and beak against the other as if trying to spark a flint.

Betting kicked right off as the birds squirmed in their owners' hands, trying to claw each other apart before the fight even began. Random totals traded in coded hand gestures shot across the room from one man to the next.

Jaime couldn't make much sense of it. The whole thing looked more like dads in bleachers of a little league game than any kind of organized system of gambling. But that's only because he was so new to it all.

Cockfights weren't privy to booths or tickets or paper trails, the whole thing ran on an honor system in which every bet was settled at the end of each fight, if there was a dominant hand keeping the rest of them in check, Jaime sure as shit couldn't see it.

He sat there, hour after hour, watching birds get loaded into the Plexiglas case. Breeders rotated out every half hour or so, sometimes less. A couple confident newbies got a little too confident and stuck their birds in higher-odd fights, a chance to cash-in quick, but left, head hung, carrying an empty cage. Still, there were some that stood out among the pack, and one in particular that Jaime just couldn't take his eyes off. He had a team of handlers, three thick-necked men, taking care of every minor task while he lingered on the sidelines chatting with the men that ran the cockpit. If it hadn't been for the intimidating size of his entourage, Jaime probably wouldn't have even noticed the man lingering on the edges. There wasn't really anything about him worth noticing, an old polo shirt, plaid print shorts, and strappy Teva sandals, he looked like a gringo tourist.

His birds didn't win every fight, but they were good enough to offset the odds of the ones they entered. Most of his opponents were newbies, who wouldn't last

more than a week or two on their own, if they were lucky.

And the more Jaime watched him, the more convinced he became. That was the guy.

He sat there the rest of the night, moving down to the pit from time to time, feigning interest in the occasional match or two. But no one ever seemed to notice.

The last fight shut down and the lights kicked on.

Jaime pretended to sleep in the stands, waiting to see which way his target left. But a club official nudged his shoulder with a broom handle, “Go on, sleep it off at home.”

Outside, he slouched down against a palm tree on the far end of the parking lot.

His tank sized handlers loaded the cages into the backs of two vans, both covered in a variety of mismatched panels, rebuilt to serve more function than form. The vans closed up and the parking lot was silent for almost an hour before his target came out and heading for a silver Mercedes, S-Class, parked in a handicap space by the entrance.

As the dome light faded, Jaime saw a lighter flash through the limo tint, the flare of a cigarette. The target just sat there, smoking with windows up, engine and lights off.

Jaime’s phone buzzed, Bebo calling.

The Merc started up. The car took off out the parking lot and disappeared around the corner.

Jaime answered the phone. “Where the fuck you been?”

domingo, 13 de julio: la construcción de la narrativa

Sonia: hacemos las noticias

Alana spun the jog wheel, shuttling through footage at double, triple speed, a blur of sound bites and cacophonous squibbles unrecognizable as anything other than biblical tongues. Stop, freeze-frame, back up, that's it, the one she was looking for, play it out, scrub back, teeter on the first frame, click back, forward, back, forward, locked in. Her finger tapped "i" on the keyboard, in-point, scrub through to the end, repeat the process, and then tap the letter "o," out-point, and drop the clip at the play head in the timeline.

"Now, play it out." Sonia kicked back and crossed her arms, watching the playback monitor.

New graphics splashed across the screen in splatter-gore letters, "Killer On The Loose: The Hunt For Ravolo Soto."

Sonia started tapping her foot in a quick four-four time, "What else do we have?"

"Not much," Mark Brodkins had been her producer for the past three years, a gringo transplant from Chicago turned local after his Puerto Rican mother-in-law was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer, went into recovery, and then refused to loosen her grip on her newborn granddaughter. "Every usable frames been scraped together to make the piece you're looking at. Unless your contacts have word of any Soto sightings since."

"They're scattered, nothing credible, armchair investigators mostly," Sonia tapped a pen back and forth between her fingers, thinking.

“What about the body? The one they found in the garden behind his house.”

“They’re human, but officially, they haven’t found anything yet.”

Mark wiped his face with both hands and sat forward on his elbows, “Do we have footage on it? Forensics setting up in the yard maybe.”

“Checking,” Alana toggled over to the media manager, scanned through clips. “They parked an ambulance in the driveway, blocking it.”

“What do you wanna do?”

Mark sat back in his chair. “Run this, I guess.”

Sonia stopped tapping her pen. “What about the sightings?”

“What about them? They’re bullshit.”

“Are they?”

“We’ve got two in Mayaguez, one in Caguas, shit there’s even one in San Juan.”

“Any violent?”

“Probably. Doesn’t matter, it’s not him.”

“Here me out on this,” she stood up, pacing, chewing her thumb. “We say, police are following up multiple leads in the surrounding areas, piggy back a story about a violent assault, perpetrator unknown and let the audience infer the rest.”

“That’s some pretty liberal ethics you’re dealing with.”

“Is it a violation?”

“Technically, no. If it’s cut right, but it’s really testing boundaries.”

“It’s a public-fucking service,” she tossed her pen on the editing station. “All we’re doing is keeping people interested to ratchet up political pressure.”

“You sound like your prepping testimony.”

Mark spun around in his chair, “What do you think Alana?”

“Get me the footage, I’ll make it happen.”

He spun back around to Sonia, “I’m proofing your copy, and nothing runs without my approval, none of this two-minutes to air bullshit. You hear me?”

lunes, 14 de julio: volver al trabajo

Jaime: Bebo regreso

He woke to the sound of the generator, humming outside, the house, filled with the smell of dark roast coffee, not the instant crystals crap Mama liked to make. Part of him knew it as soon as he climbed out of bed, but another part of him, the dark voice in the back of his brain tried to convince him it was all in his head. Bebo didn't make any promises he couldn't keep, and last time they spoke, his brother only said he'd try to stop by sometime during the week, which was Bebo speak for 'I'll call you and cancel once I figure out a good enough reason.' But there he was, kicked back at the kitchen table, thumbing through Jaime's phone. "Man, you gotta change your password."

He'd gotten more tattoos, a lot more, including three small dots beneath his right eye, a promotion of sorts. There was a bruise on his jaw and a large, square, adhesive bandage on the side of his neck. "You got some hot little girlies floating through there. How you get them to send you all them naked pics? They ain't never do that shit for me."

"Probably cause they've seen your busted-ass face. What the fuck happened to you, man?"

But Bebo just gave him a hug and smacked his back so hard Jaime thought he might have cracked a rib. "You know me. Cut myself shaving," Bebo smiled, showing off a newly cracked tooth.

"You brush your teeth with that same razor?"

He laughed, "Something like that. Look, I just want you to know I ain't forgot

about you. OK?” Bebo put a tight roll of cash on the counter. “Things are gonna be pretty hectic these next few weeks, but that should get you by for now.”

“You’re doing pretty good for yourself.”

“I get by.”

“Need any help? Getting by?”

“No, you keep doing what your doing. Don’t worry about me.” Bebo lit a cigarette and offered one to Jaime who took it.

They stood there smoking in silence for what felt like forever. Jaime focused on his breath, the smoke billowing in plumes from his lips, searching for the space between the end of one and the beginning of the next that moment of frozen time in which the simple happiness of smoking a cigarette with his brother became infinite. But that dark voice in his head and reared up and soon, “You’d tell me if you got in anything really bad, right?”

“Of course I wouldn’t,” Bebo dropped his cigarette in the sink and took off for the backdoor. He stopped, “Oh and don’t go looking for Mama no more. OK? She’s safe where she’s at and that’s all you need to know.”

Jaime nodded, but Bebo knew he was full of shit.

After his brother left, Jaime poured a cup of coffee, sat on the counter, and imagined the hum of a P-51 coursing through his marrow to rattle his teeth and leave a hum in his hands that threatened to rewrite the ridges of his fingerprints and shake the nails loose from his fingers.

Yarique: el otro abuelo

Mami was laughing with a man in the kitchen, but nobody known. His voice was deep, gravely, hammering every consonant with the authority of a blacksmith, and Mami was hanging on his every word.

Yarique peeked out the window. Papi's car was gone. He hadn't said a word the whole drive back from the fight, and once they got home, he locked himself in the back office with a bottle of scotch. He must have left before sunrise.

Whoever it was in the kitchen, Papi probably didn't know they were there. But Yarique had to piss and couldn't stay in bed another minute.

Rounding the corner into the kitchen the last person he expected to find sitting at their table was the strange old man from the fight and grocery store and Sabor Rican. But that's exactly who he was there, sipping coffee almost white with milk.

"Look who decided to get out of bed."

But Yarique just stood there, staring the man down with a sour look on his face.

The old man smiled and held out a hand, half-standing to greet him, "I should introduce myself."

But Mami cut him off, "No, no, no, make him guess. Let's see if he gets it."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

She pounded the table, "Yari."

"No, it's OK. I know how this has to look. You see, I ran into him a couple days at the grocery store, and I was trying to work up the courage to say something to him, but..."

“I don’t need the fucking recap.”

“Sorry. My name is Marco de Santos, I’m your abuelo, on your father’s side.”

“OK, and?”

Mami sighed, “I’m sorry.”

But abuelo Marco just smiled and shook his head, “No. He’s right. I guess to you it doesn’t really mean much of anything. It’s not like we’ve ever met. After all, I’m just a creepy old man trying to make up for nineteen years of absence. But the thing is, I never even knew you existed, you or your sister. See, your father and I, we haven’t exactly been on speaking terms for quite some time now.”

“He never liked to talk about his family,” Mami tipped her cup back to examine the small bit of coffee inside.

“That’s Rafi.”

She smiled. “I call him that too.”

“If he wants to cut me out of his life, fine. I can’t say I like it, but those are his wishes. But I won’t allow him to cut me out of the lives of my grandchildren. Do you know what it’s like to find out you’re a grandfather on the morning news. And then to find out that your only grandson is the sole survivor of The Moca Massacre. I couldn’t even imagine what it’s like to go through something like that.” Abuelo Marco downed the rest of his coffee and slid the empty up to Yarissa, who stood to refill it.

“How was the sugar? Sweet enough?”

“Perfect.”

Yarique still hadn’t moved a step. “Fix me one too.”

“All I want is to get to know you, just for one day. After that, if you don’t want me in your life,” he brushed his hands together just like Papi. “I’m gone.”

“What you got in mind?”

“Lunch,” his eyes moved to Mami.

“On you?”

Abuelo Marco nodded.

“What the hell?” He pulled out a chair at the table, “Let’s do it.”