



**THE  
MADONNAS  
OF  
ECHO PARK**

A NOVEL



**BRANDO  
SKYHORSE**



**Pick of the Week, *The Boston Globe***

“This first novel tells the intertwining stories of three Mexican-American families in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, from the 1980s to today. ... As the narrators pass the story backward and forward in time, the characters unknowingly bounce off one another like particles in the Large Hadron Collider.”

— *The New York Times*

“A revelation ... the summer’s most original read ... extraordinary. ... The novel is richly detailed offering varying perspectives that collide into a singular narrative from an evolving neighborhood in the shadow of downtown L.A. (Think Gabriel García Márquez fused with Junot Díaz.) ... The immigrant experience may very well be the defining narrative of the United States in the 21st century. When juxtaposed against its literary rival, the self-confession, the results can be breathtakingly exhibited by Skyhorse’s startling author’s note at the start of the book. ... Powerful.”

— [Examiner.com](#)

“Gritty ... a bittersweet love letter to the neighborhood [of Echo Park].”

— *Los Angeles magazine*

“A literary glimpse into the often unseen world of Mexican Americans trying to make it as Americans.”

— *USA Today*

“The work of a significant new voice, full and rich and richly subtle... . ‘Rules of the Road’ is filled with so much texture and detail and humanity and the kind of weirdness that seems utterly true and believable [and] the rest of the [book is] filled with the same qualities. ... Also, for a man, Skyhorse has an amazing eye and ear for the way women talk, look, behave—and think and feel... . Brandon Skyhorse’s first book is the real deal.”

—Chauncey Mabe, *Open Page*, Florida Center for the Literary Arts

“Skyhorse’s control and capability as a storyteller make the story clear, compelling, and meaningful... . Above all, *The Madonnas of Echo Park* is about people trying to understand why their world is changing... . There is much to marvel at, beginning with Skyhorse’s excellent writing. ... Its structure of repeated descriptions, interlocked plot elements, even that metafictional “Author’s Note,” all work to do the most important thing fiction can do: create a complex world in which readers can practice empathy.”

— *The Rump*

“Wonderful ... moving, lyrical ... a complex, multifaceted portrait of the community [of Echo Park].”

— *Washington City Paper*

“I really loved this book. Skyhorse successfully finds the voice of such vastly different people and it all brought together with lyrical beauty, even when he writes about the gritty side of life.”

— *Latina-i*

“Social fiction meant to shine a light on the lives of Mexican immigrants and illegals. ... The story is bright with description, and dialogue so well-written you can hear it.”

— *Winnipeg Free Press*

“Told in a series of vignettes so strong and well-written they could be stand-alone stories, *The Madonnas of Echo Park* centers around the life of one young woman, Aurora Esperanza, as told by the men and women of her east L.A. community. It addresses the issues of immigration and assimilation of being Mexican and American, and of staying true to who you are and where you come from. Skyhorse has written such a beautiful, poignant and well-crafted novel that I feel compelled to encourage everyone to pick it up and immerse themselves in Echo Park.”

— *Inkwood Books Newsletter*

“Skyhorse gives life to people on the peripheries of Los Angeles who are often invisible.”

— *New York Journal of Books*

“Skyhorse devotes a chapter each to a panoply of quirky characters who people the streets, and connects to a girl caught in the gang wars that ravage the area.”

— *Asbury Park Press*

“Brilliant. Go buy this book right now.”

— [Sewtransformed.blogspot.com](http://Sewtransformed.blogspot.com)

“To embrace a community, to capture its fabric, to syncopate its rhythms, lives, views and experiences is a difficult feat. But Brando Skyhorse manages to do just that with his breathtaking and, at times, soul-churning novel. ... Skyhorse [finds] breadth and diversity in Echo Park. ... Stories zigzag through the book, introducing lives unique and full, bisecting one another at times, standing at solitary edges at others. ... [W]e are carried away by this intricately crafted tale. Taken together, the tales spin around the axis of a few streets yet splinter off into infinite dimensions.”

— *Chattanooga Times Free Press*

“Vivid... . These are the people we pass every day and never give much thought. Now Skyhorse demands our attention as he deftly humanizes their stories. ... Eye-opening and haunting, Skyhorse's novel will jolt readers out of their complacency.”

— *Booklist*

“Vivid. ... Skyhorse excels at building a vibrant community and presenting several perspectives on what it means to be Mexican in America, from those who wonder ‘how can you lose something that never belonged to you?’ to those who miraculously find it.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“First-time novelist Skyhorse offers a poignant yet unsentimental homage to Echo Park, a working-class neighborhood in east Los Angeles where everyone struggled to blend in with American society but remains tied to the traditions of Mexico. ... Essential for fans of Sherman Alexie or Sandra Cisneros but with universal appeal for readers who favor in-depth character-centered stories, this is enthusiastically recommended.”

— *Library Journal* (starred review)

“Brando Skyhorse brings a chronically invisible community to sizzling, beguiling life. . . . With this debut novel, Skyhorse has earned comparison to Sherman Alexie, Junot Diaz and Sandra Cisneros. . . . And like those writers, there's little danger Skyhorse will be pigeonholed as an ethnic writer: his work is simply too good. . . . In *The Madonnas of Echo Park*, Skyhorse claims the disparate elements of his life and spins them into gold.”

— *The Oregonian*

“There are a few reasons you should read Brando Skyhorse's *The Madonnas of Echo Park* this year . . .

a fresh ... and authentic ... writer to shake ... controversy through the discerning scrim of first-person fiction. ... ~~If timeliness and social relevance don't sell you on the book, then read it for its beautiful imperfect characters, the wise certainty of its prose, its satisfying emotional heft—the basic things we hope for when we pick up a novel ... elegantly written. ... The book cleverly expresses the tangled nature of multicultural identity and the physical geography of off-the-grid Echo Park. ... The thing about tortuous roads and confusing intersections is that we often find ourselves returning to the place where we started, even when we think we've left it forever. And while many of us might see this as a lack of progress or hapless water-treading, Skyhorse celebrates it as a kind of hopeful recovery.~~

— *The Brooklyn Reader*

“[A] potential best-seller. ... [Skyhorse] has a way with fiction, as he demonstrates in this lovely debut novel about Mexican-Americans in LA. The engaging storytelling, informed by a keen understanding of contemporary immigrant life, is reminiscent of Junot Díaz and Chang Rae-Lee.”

— *Vanity Fair*

“Brando Skyhorse writes with great compassion and wit (and a touch of magic) about the lives of people who are often treated as if they are invisible. The stories that make up this novel weave together to create a complex and vivid portrait of a Los Angeles we seldom see in literature or film. *The Madonnas of Echo Park* is a memorable literary debut.”

—Dan Chaon, author of *Await Your Reply*

“In its depiction of what amounts to a parallel social universe *The Madonnas of Echo Park* provides a master class in nonlinear narrative, written with imaginative generosity and emotional precision—poignant, brutal, and refreshingly unsentimental. Brando Skyhorse has what can't be faked: talent. His book is an understated triumph.”

—Glen Duncan, author of *Death of an Ordinary Man* and *I, Lucifer*

“In this gorgeous and suspenseful book, the admirably talented Brando Skyhorse takes his readers to a kingdom that he has made very much his own—Echo Park, California. I loved reading about his richly imagined characters, both Mexican and American, and how their lives intersect with our much more familiar versions of Los Angeles.”

—Margot Livesey, author of *The House on Fortune Street* and *Eva Moves the Furniture*

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Free Press

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY



Free Press

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

[www.SimonandSchuster.com](http://www.SimonandSchuster.com)

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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First Free Press trade paperback edition February 2011

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Skyhorse, Brando.

The Madonnas of Echo Park : a novel / Brando Skyhorse.

p. cm.

1. Mexican Americans—Fiction. 2. Echo Park (Los Angeles, Calif.)—

Fiction. 3. Domestic fiction. I. Title.

PS3619.K947A44 2010

813'.6-dc22 2009034403

ISBN 978-1-4391-7080-9

ISBN 978-1-4391-7084-7 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-4391-7085-4 (ebook)

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*Here. I want you to have this.  
It's an opening, and you're welcome.  
It's a city, and in the palm of the city  
is a lake. In the heart of the lake is a wing.  
All the people, all the exhaust & sprawl:  
it's perfect. Let them sleep in you  
when you sleep. And wake with you,  
that you might know them and their streets,  
and the light that makes them fall in love,  
the light that has always been your light.*

—JEFF G. LYTTLE

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They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am.

—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

I wish I was born Mexican, but it's too late for that now.

—Morrissey

It's no fun to pick on Mexicans. You guys got a country.

—Richard Pryor

## Author's Note

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This book was written because of a twelve-year-old girl named Aurora Esperanza. In the 1980s, before I knew I was Mexican, Aurora and I were in a sixth-grade class of American-born Mexican and first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, both groups segregating themselves into clusters on opposite sides of the room. This was an awkward arrangement for me, because though I felt I belonged to neither group, my Mexican-ness would peek out every so often from under the shadow of my stepfather's last name when I rolled a vowel too long in my mouth, or grew coarse tufts of premature facial hair. Emphasizing my "in between" status, a desk chair shortage placed me alone at an oversized table with an obstructed view of the chalkboard and my back to the American flag.

There was a constant tension in the classroom, each group suspicious of the other for conspiratorial hushes peppered with strange, foreign-sounding words that shared jokes, kept secrets, plotted insurrections. We were, however, still kids, and our hunger for the latest fads led us to break ethnic ranks and whisper in a common language of desire. We wanted Garbage Pail Kids and Pac-Man sticker trading cards, packaged with sticks of bone-hard bubble gum you could rub against the pavement to write out your name in pink zigzagged letters, a scent of hot caramelized sugar lingering on the concrete. We wanted futuristic digital watches that blinked out the time in a blood-red neon LCD phosphorescence, as bright as a sparkler strapped to your wrist.

And, of course, *we wanted our MTV.*

It was the rare child in Echo Park whose family could afford something as frivolous as cable television. Most families had one or two parents working a spread of jobs to support both their kids and their in-laws living under one roof. My family had a different arrangement, but I was astonished as any of my friends would have been when one afternoon I found MTV installed on my very own television in my room, a present for getting a part-time job as an after-school ESL tutor. I sat twelve inches away from the screen, transfixed for the next seven hours, leaving it on when I went to bed with the sound off like a night-light. The next morning, I spread its legend in Ms. O'Neill's class, watching the tale jump from Mexican to Vietnamese and from boy to girl, just as difficult a bridge to cross at our ages. You could watch music on television? Yes, and every song has a story, and every story has a happy ending. You could watch Michael Jackson dance whenever you wanted? Yes, and when he walks, each step he takes lights up the sidewalk. Here was a way you could see how the music on our cheap transistor radios *looked*, these popular songs that throbbed with glamour, desire, and plastic gratification—a reimagining of the American Dream in bright pastels. Our parents didn't comprehend the words and were fearful that the songs *they* had fallen in love with growing up would be attached to a language we'd never speak and a country we'd never see.

Right before lunch, Ms. O'Neill intercepted a note I'd written to a table of Mexican boys outlining everything on MTV the night before: girls in short skirts dancing down a street in a conga line; girls with shorter skirts dressed as cheerleaders forming a bright Day-Glo pyramid; girls in bikinis dancing by an open fire hydrant. Ms. O'Neill asked how many of us thought MTV was "cool," and thanks to my classroom gospel, everyone's hand shot up. MTV was now our mutual language.

The next day, Ms. O'Neill announced plans for an "MTV Dance Party" in our classroom on the Friday before spring break. There would be those expensive Soft Batch cookies that got gummy and elastic like rubber bands if you left them out for more than a day (making them an impractical purchase for most of us because junk food had to *last* in our houses), two-liter bottles of Coke and

Pepsi (not the generic, white-label, noncarbonated sludge with SODA stamped on its side that we drank at home), and Domino's pizza. In a neighborhood where takeout was considered extravagant, this was the equivalent of a Roman bacchanal. There would also be music. Each of us was to bring in a record and play it. A number of hands shot up in confusion. What if we didn't have any records of our own? Borrow them from your brothers, sisters, or parents, Ms. O'Neill said. What if they didn't have records either? Buy a record you'd want to play. What if we can't afford to buy one? Buy a single, she suggested, they cost the same as two packs of those gross Garbage Pail sticker cards you're so fond of. All but one hand went down. Aurora Esperanza's pink fingernails sparkled as her white cotton blouse sleeve fell back down her arm and curled up against her bare shoulder.

"Will we be allowed to dance in the classroom?" she asked. "Will there be dancing?"

"It's a dance party," Ms. O'Neill said. "Yes, there will be dancing."

Dancing? The boys didn't like the sound of this. Were we expected to dance with *girls*? And were Mexican boys to dance with Vietnamese girls? What about Vietnamese boys—would they dance with Mexican girls? Then a more terrifying thought arose: Who would *I* dance with? By the end of class, I had formed a pact with two Vietnamese boys I had never spoken to before, not to dance with any girls even if we were asked. There were many other treaties of convenience made that day, as boys and girls who had segregated themselves by race and language throughout the year became unexpected allies in an effort to outsmart our teacher, who was white. Who, we wondered, would *she* dance with?

\* \* \*

In the short weeks between the announcement and the party, every classmate had seen or at least stolen a peek of MTV. Was this because I did the charitable thing and invited friends over to my house to watch? Hell, no. Part of the fun of being a kid comes from having things other kids don't have and lordling it over them. On the playground, I recounted the videos' story lines with such relish, anyone overhearing me would have thought these on-screen adventures were my own experiences, and in that way, I felt they were. What I hadn't counted on was my classmates' determination to see these videos for themselves, no matter the cost or inconvenience. Distant and more prosperous Vietnamese relatives, who lived in actual houses (not one-room box apartments) as far away as El Monte, had their remote controls hijacked. Mexican girls took the bus together to the Valley, racing through the Glendale Galleria to the electronics section of JCPenney. With each passing Monday, the MTV circle widened, and with it my reign as the "MTV King" diminished until the day of the party, when the two poorest boys in the class, twin brothers who alternated their clothes in an effort to project a large wardrobe (the stains gave them away) were what remained of my empire.

The bare turntable wobbled in slow circles like a drunk uncle at a *quinceañera* in search of a young girl's ass to grope. Hands rustled in peeling vinyl backpacks, plastic supermarket bags, and cheap store-brand three-ring binders, a *shassh* of ripped-open Velcro fasteners as 45 records poked out from snug butterfly folders. While I had agreed not to dance, I didn't want to fail an assignment, so I bought Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. Its \$9.99 price tag embarrassed me, the large record sitting on my desk like an arrogant boast; many of the other students had brought ninety-nine-cent, seven-inch singles from *Thriller*, each priced with a distinctive blue El Tocado sticker. El Tocado was a local discount *barateria* that sold Spanish music but reserved a small section at the front of the store for American pop stars. (It had occurred to no one to bring in a Menudo album, or any other kind of music. There was a tacit understanding among Mexican and Vietnamese kids alike that MTV music meant *American* music, and American music meant English men with keyboards, white women with big hair, or Michael Jackson.) *Thriller* had been out for over a year, but kids here didn't have a lot of disposable income, meaning pop culture filtered through in spurts. Our teacher grimaced as she

collected copies of “Beat It” and “Billie Jean.” The boys nodded to each other in smug conspiracy—there would be no dancing today.

When Ms. O’Neill asked Aurora where her record was, she pulled from a torn grocery store bag a rainbow-sequined vinyl record case. A velvet sash strung around a plastic rose clasped the top of the box, which flipped open to reveal an alphabetized selection of 45 singles. Ms. O’Neill unsheathed each record from its wax paper sleeve with delicate fingertips, the girls ooohhing and aaahhing over the case’s delicate satin lining and the number of singles the case contained. Ms. O’Neill counted over fifty, plenty for an afternoon dance party. She asked the class to give Aurora a round of applause for sharing with us something so important to her. Girls both Mexican and Vietnamese burst into squealing chant-cheers, something you’d hear on the playground before a fight, while the boys smacked their hands together like we were trying to smother fires in our palms.

“Aurora,” Ms. O’Neill said, “why don’t you pick the first song?”

She walked across the room in an outfit that matched her record case—a tight red fringe blouse with poet’s sleeves and a tie-string bow across her budding chest along with tapered black jeans that hugged her curved thighs (up to that point, girls had been stick figures, straight lines wrapped in corduroy) and matching black platform sandals. Her face had a thin dusting of powdered-donut-white foundation to cover her chicken pox scars; her eyelashes were etched into her face like fiery black sunsets. I was attracted to her, though I didn’t know what attraction was yet, and because I could think of nothing we shared in common—not one friend on the playground, not a single family acquaintance who shopped or did laundry with an acquaintance of her family’s—I hated this feeling.

When she approached the record player, the boys fire-drill sprang out of their chairs. The girls, sensing some sort of new, significant moment, skirted the edges of the classroom and formed a rigid semicircle, cutting off any chance of escape. My two coconspirators had sandwiched themselves with about ten other boys into a far corner, leaving nowhere for me to stand but right in front of a firing squad of giggling twelve-year-old girls.

Aurora slid a 45 out of her case and in one graceful motion popped a plastic yellow “spider” in the center of the record and threaded it onto the turntable’s spindle. When you play a record, there’s that brief anxious moment of silence when the needle crackles but the music hasn’t started. This was that kind of silence you could tear apart by making an obscene noise, setting off a laughing seizure so uproarious that Ms. O’Neill would lose control of the class, or by doing something catastrophic like wetting your pants, but that meant you’d risk being the object of a ritualized humiliation so vicious that moving to the next grade level wouldn’t stop it. The boys waited in anticipation of who would be brave enough to make that fart noise or trickle “fear piss” down his legs.

Madonna’s “Borderline” began to play. This was a *new* song, Aurora bragged, which, along with her opulent record case, meant that her parents must have been as “rich” as my parents. (There was a real low bar for “rich” in Echo Park.) I recognized the song from MTV. Part of the video for the song had been filmed in the neighborhood, and because of its story line (Mexican break-dancers, Latin boyfriend, Madonna’s girlfriends dressed in retro *chola* girl outfits complete with drape coats, baggy pants, and hairnet caps), I believed Madonna was a Mexican.

The girls swayed their hips to the soft, synthesized tinkle that opens the song, then nodded their heads an inch to the left, an inch to the right (the way the Muppets dance on TV) to the syncopated beat, before singing along with the chorus. The circle on the girls’ side tightened in anticipation of the first dance. Ms. O’Neill leaned down to Aurora, and after a quick consultation both nodded their heads in agreement. Aurora strode across the circle and placed her hand on my shoulder.

“This is Madonna,” she said. “Come and dance with me, Brando.”

There was an audible gasp as her fingers traced a line down my shirtsleeve and clasped my hand. Was it too late for me to make an obscene noise or wet my pants? The girls leered with confidence.

Aurora's boldness had made them aware for the first time how powerful a girl their own age could be. So much change was possible in so short a time. I looked to the boys for some sort of help, an intervention, one good idea to get me out of this. They stared back hypnotized in defeat, the way men look when they have played their last, failed excuse. I could sense the walls of the room sliding together, two sides of a V closing shut, our bodies interlocking, our differences now irrelevant. It was simple as following Aurora's lead.

I shrugged her hands off me.

"I can't dance with you," I said. "You're a Mexican." It was a moment I'd rehearsed with my mother, but the word *Mexican* caught on the roof of my mouth like a stutter. It was the hard x—the same consonant that degrades the word *sex*.

"What do you mean?" She laughed, her shy smile saying, *You cannot be serious*.

"You are a Mexican," I said, loud enough for the entire class this time. "I can't dance with you."

Aurora kept smiling, but her eyes focused on the chalkboard, evaporating me in a glance.

Madonna continued to play. Ms. O'Neill lunged at Aurora and pulled her into the circle. While they danced, the crowd relaxed and bunched into the segregated clusters we knew so well. My two useless cohorts emerged from the corner and patted me on the back. A couple of Vietnamese girls came with them, their satisfied smiles making me blush. They couldn't tell for sure whether Aurora, with her excellent command of English and British band names etched in ballpoint onto the cover of her denim blue three-ring binder, was a "real" Mexican (real as in a *chola*), but they were sure that Aurora's best friend, named Duchess, was. While we talked, a group of Mexican boys teased me in a singsong mock-Chinese. The boldest of the bunch asked Aurora to dance with him, which she did. I watched them in silent fury, like a lost man watches the horizon.

The school bell ended the party. Ms. O'Neill called me over to her desk and asked Aurora to stay after class. She was on the other side of the room, shoulders hunched, putting her records away as fast as she could.

"You did a terrible, terrible thing today, Brando," Ms. O'Neill said. "Why would you say something like that?"

"I don't know," I lied.

"Well, I think you owe Aurora an apology."

"Okay," I said.

We turned to see a door slamming the way it does in a vacuum. Ms. O'Neill raced out of the classroom, shouting "Aurora! Aurora!" until her voice cracked.

When Ms. O'Neill returned, she said, "You'll apologize first thing after break."

I spent vacation in my hot, airless bedroom in self-imposed exile, not leaving my house for fear of seeing Aurora at the bus stop or on my way to the supermarket or, worse, running into Duchess, who I believed was on the lookout to beat me to a bloody pulp (this being, at the time, the worst thing I thought a gang member could do to you). Playing on an endless loop on my bedroom television was MTV. I saw the "Borderline" video several times a day for a week. At some point in the video, there was a close-up of Madonna's face that would melt, time-lapsed, into Aurora's face, staring at me with that same hollow look I saw when I rejected her, betraying an emotion beyond disgust or contempt—was a look that said I didn't exist. I'd recognize this look more and more as I grew older, in places both private and public, for reasons both explicit and unspoken, and once you've been *seen through* this way—once you have been made *transparent*—no amount of physical pain matches the weight of invisibility.

When we returned from break, I told Ms. O'Neill that I hadn't forgotten about what I'd done at the dance and was ready to apologize to Aurora, even if I had to in front of the class. She said that wasn't necessary but was proud of how determined I seemed. The bell rang, and we took our seats in the

castes we had arranged for ourselves and felt comfortable with. Aurora's chair was empty. Ms. O'Neill asked if anyone had seen her during the break. No one had.

A week later, her name was no longer called in roll. I asked Ms. O'Neill what had happened to her.

"Aurora won't be coming back," she said.

"Then how am I going to apologize?"

"You'll have to find another way to do it."

Twenty-five years later, I think I have found my way, in the book you're reading now. This is the story of Aurora Esperanza and why she disappeared, told through the people of Echo Park who ultimately led me back to her. And while I've changed some details to protect those who drifted in and through this project over the duration of its writing, these are their real voices. I want to add that everyone in this book insisted he or she was a proud American *first*, an American who happened to be Mexican, not the other way around. No one emphasized this more than Aurora. I *am* a Mexican, she said when I caught up with her, but *a Mexican is not all that I am*. To my surprise there were no hard feelings, and as we joked about that day ("I shouldn't have picked a Madonna song!"), she was gracious enough to ask about my mother's attempts to raise me as someone other than a Mexican in a curious rather than an accusatory way.

"I don't blame her," she said. "I must confess—and I guess this *is* a confession—why would anyone want to be a Mexican in *this* country at a time like this?" I understood what she meant. When writing this book, originally called *Amexicans*, there was such a vitriolic fever against illegal immigration (translation: Mexicans) that it made me grateful I had an Indian last name, and ashamed that I felt grateful.

Aurora, if you are reading this (it wasn't clear during our talk that you would), I have a confession of my own: I'm ready to dance with you. I'm ready to lace my still too-small-for-a-man fingers around your waist, ready to smell cotton-candy-scented shampoo in your long, black, curly hair as we sway our close but not touching hips to the beat of a song decades out of time. I won't offer an apology, because you didn't want one then, and I'm sure you have no need for one now.

I'm ready to dance with you, Aurora. I hope you understand why I need to say that to you here, in this way: because a work of fiction is an excellent place for a confession.

—B.S.

## *Bienvenidos*

We slipped into this country like thieves, onto the land that once was ours. Those who'd never been here before could at last see the Promised Land in the darkness; those who'd been deported and come back, only a shadow of that promise. Before the sun rises on this famished desert, stretching from the fiercest undertow in the Pacific to the steepest flint-tipped crest in the San Gabriel Mountains, the temperature drops to an icy chill, the border disappears, and in a finger snap of a blink of an eye, we are running,

carried on the breath of a morning frost into hot kitchens to cook your food, waltzing across miles of tile floor to clean your houses, settling like dew on shaggy front lawns to cut your grass. We run into this American dream with a determination to shed everything we know and love that weighs us down if we have any hope of survival. This is how we learn to navigate the terrain.

I measure the land not by what I have but by what I have lost, because the more you lose, the more American you can become. In the rolling jade valleys of Elysian Park, my family lost their home to Chavez Ravine to the cheers of *gringos* rooting for a baseball team they stole from another town. Down the hill in Echo Park, I lost my wife—and the woman I left her for—when I ran out of excuses and they ran out of forgiveness. Across town, in Hollywood, I lost my job of eighteen years when the restaurant that catered to fashion and fame found its last customers were those who had neither. And my daughters, they are both lost to me, somewhere in the blinding California sunshine.

What I thought I could not lose was my place in this country. How can you lose something that never belonged to you?

“*Bienvenidos!* You are all welcome here,” announces David Tenant from the flatbed of his mushroom-brown GMC pickup truck in the parking lot of the Do-It-Yourself Hardware store on Sunset Boulevard in Echo Park. He says this to the regulars, and to those who won't be back because the work is too hard or the pay too small or they will have been deported or they will have moved on, to Salinas, San Diego, Phoenix. There are hundreds of parking lots in Los Angeles like this one, and thousands of men like me standing in them, waiting for a good day's wages. That day doesn't come around too often now because construction jobs are in short supply, but today, the first dry, chilly morning to break through a week of rain, Tenant's looking for men, and if I'm lucky, I could make a hundred dollars for a ten-hour day.

A restless crowd of thirty to forty men undulate around Tenant's truck, our hunger for work a octopus's tentacles swallowing the vehicle into our mass of bodies. The younger men, punching buttons on their ancient cell phones, swarm the front, while the grandfathers are hunched over in devotion or exhaustion in the rear. Tenant leaps up on a set of crates, raises his arms as a conductor readies his orchestra to begin a symphony, and cocks a boot atop the tailgate.

“Who's here to work?” he shouts.

We raise our hands and yell, “Me, *señor!*”

He scythes the air with his palms, casting a line in the direction he wants men from and pulling them from the crowd into the flatbed. The chosen men stride past us, hoisting themselves into the pickup in ascension. Any man who fakes being picked is tossed back into the sea; any man who

refuses to leave the flatbed has to deal with Tenant's son Adam, a squat, muscular former security guard and current aspiring actor who sits in the cab shouting into his cell phone until he's needed. He's been an extra in a number of horror films with Roman numerals in their titles and comes to help his father after the late-night shoots wired on meth and coming down on coffee, his thick biceps coated with what he says is real Hollywood movie blood.

Men materialize in the parking lot as fast as they disappear into the back of Tenant's truck. They come from a nearby alley, where they smoke weed and piss against the wall, or from the liquor store fresh from checking their lottery numbers, or with forty-ouncers. Preachers have been here before to save us, but most of these men want the sermon that comes out of a bottle.

Tenant waves his arms in front of himself with a magician's swipe, his quota satisfied. "No más," he shouts. "But we'll be back." The pickup jerks the dozen laughing and singing men in the back like bobble-head dolls as it speeds out of the parking lot and turns onto Sunset Boulevard.

We are left with our bodies coiled, smoldering, cursing our luck, waiting for the next pickup truck to approach, which could be anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. It's an erratic schedule better suited to a younger man, but when a boss like Tenant, who is in the business of supplying *trabajadores* to job sites throughout the city, says he's coming back, it's worth it to wait.

When I started as *un trabajador*, the bosses could tell I'd never done any outdoor work. And knowing English on top of that? I was lucky to last a day. They liked men fresh from the border, not a forty-plus-year-old man who'd worked most of his life in a restaurant but whose opportunities for a living wage had vanished, undercut by busboys pooled from the very men I now jostled alongside. They could mold these young *mojados*, push them harder and pay them cheaper. When the jobs dried up, though, my demeanor and reliability became assets.

The sun disappears behind a swath of clouds, darkening the street, when Diego arrives wearing a black Dodgers cap, smoking a cigarette, and holding a cup of coffee. He's many gray hairs away from forty, but we've been drawn together because he likes to talk and there's nothing else to do while waiting for a job except brag or listen. He drifted here from Mobile after a spree of murders targeting Mexicans in trailer parks. The murderers used baseball bats and, in some cases, machetes. Police blamed Colombians, though Diego insisted it was a meth-dealing white supremacist gang, and for that insistence he had to leave town fast. He sent his wife and four kids money working his way west, but by Albuquerque there was nothing left to send home. His expenses include smokes, whiskey, and underground taxi dancing bars where you can dance with women in lingerie or bikinis for ten bucks, grind on them against a wall for twenty, get a hand job for fifty, or take them home for three hundred (the term *women* is misleading; the girls at the bars we frequent in East L.A. are either teenagers with developing chests and acne dotting their cheekbones or haggard *abuelitas* with rubber tread marks around their flaccid bellies and breasts).

I never question the holes in Diego's story because he's honest company. He doesn't wolf-whistle, grope, or lunge at the Catholic schoolgirls when they walk by, doesn't brown-bag forties for breakfast, doesn't sell his drugs in front of me, and most important, he doesn't push, shove, or jostle to get chosen for a job. There's a civilized, dignified air in his approach to being *un trabajador*, and while he mentions no plans to change his day-to-day life, this is a condition he says—most of us say—temporary. Ask any man why he's here, and you'll get the same answer: *What else can I do?*

An SUV with tinted windows creeps into the parking lot. Its stop-start approach marks them as first-timers. Nobody wants to take a job from a new boss. All the young men—those who have a choice—know it's not worthwhile. The pay's miserable (six or seven dollars an hour instead of the usual ten), and they think they've rented a slave instead of hired a housepainter. During the day they're the ones ordered around. Out here, they get a taste of being in charge and get drunk on it. If you're not careful, a simple driveway paving job can turn into a landscaping job, a garbage collection



job, a disposing of paint cans job, or a “suck my dick, *maricón*” job, and you’d better do it for the same fee you negotiated for one job because, really, who are you going to complain to? That’s what you need to be smart about whose truck you get into. Get into the wrong one and you’re broke, deported, or dead.

If you don’t have a choice, like these men out here in their sixties who still wear cowboy-style straw hats with brims instead of baseball caps and long, dark dress slacks coupled with funeral dress shoes instead of jeans and sneakers, you risk what’s left of your body. You know it’s not worth much to a white man who needs a roofer, but it may be worth something to a Chinese lady who needs her lawn weeded. Slow and feeble, “*los hombres del país viejo*” can’t be picky.

“Tenant pick up his first crew?” Diego asks.

“About a half hour ago.”

“First sunny day we’ve had in a while.”

“He said he’d be back.”

“Man of his word,” Diego says. “Bad trait in a *gringo*.”

“I don’t mind a man who’s honest.”

“Hate honest bosses. Honest men are bullies.” He motions to the old men hunched around the SUV with his coffee. “Look at that,” he says. “Why do they still come out here?”

“They’re not that much older than I am,” I say.

“You look young, though. You can lie about your age.”

“Too many lies. I can’t keep track.”

“I’m lying less these days,” Diego says, “but I don’t want to make it a habit. When was the last time you got something for telling the truth?”

Tenant’s pickup truck rattles into the parking lot. Diego taps my shoulder, and we walk (never running, Diego says, and never look too eager or out of breath) over to the gathering crowd, twice as large as before.

“Who’s here to work?” Tenant shouts.

“Me, *señor!*” we shout back. It’s a revival out here, and we let the spirit of potential employment move through us. The young men bounce up and down pogo-stick style while the older men wave their arms back and forth in the air, swooning as each man is chosen. Diego and I move to the front. Tenant picks his men. Both of us are careful not to jostle or ram up against the younger men, twenty-year-olds who will punch an old man in his remaining teeth if they think a boss will see them better nor do we huddle with the older men, who cluster together to protect themselves from the more aggressive guys. Tenant picks Diego, and as I try to follow into the flatbed behind him, Tenant waves his arms and shouts, “*No más!*” As we shamle away, one of the twelve men in the pickup starts coughing. Diego mouths for me to wait. The man throws up on himself, coating his jeans and his shirt with a sticky pool of undigested alcohol and tendrils of bloody vomit.

Tenant leans over and pats him on the shoulder. “Can you stand up? Adam, come here and help the man out.”

Adam hefts him out of the pickup. Tenant looks at the greasy pool and then down at me. “If you don’t mind sitting in vomit . . .”

The site is a teardown in Angelino Heights, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and overlooks Echo Park Lake. Rows of three- and four-story Victorian-era homes, restored to turn-of-the-century condition, have been selling for a couple million dollars each, while those houses that are too far gone are torn down and rebuilt from scratch to resemble “old” houses using a mix of new materials and relics salvaged from other gutted teardowns. Three historic Victorian mansions that could have fed thirty homeless families have been demolished for a new modern, Victorian-style house, a potential

several months of steady work if the bank's financing doesn't fall through. Diego gathers the information for us piecemeal. Any of the men on the site could have passed on all the information, but no one here wants anyone else to know too much about a job site out of fear it could give them an advantage in getting attached as a regular.

Some of these men resent me sliding into another man's spot, though that spot's covered in vomit if they shift away or don't look at me. A couple of young boys who tell us they're from Jalisco say that they've never seen anyone get picked for a job like that before. It's a bad sign, and one of the men crosses his chest, saying either the Virgin Mary or the Devil must be looking out for me. "*¿Tiene que ser la Virgen María!*" Diego shouts, "*Pucha, ¿qué hace sentado en su mierda?*" The rest of the men laugh until Adam's fist on the glass divider shuts us up.

We're ordered out of the truck at the dead end of a street that fetal-curls into a construction lot next to a large Victorian house on the opposite corner, which will be dwarfed when, or if, this new house is finished. The lot pours onto a jagged hillside that men are excavating with pickaxes and shovels. Tenant talks to his black foreman, Adam lays out the tools, and we spend more time standing around waiting for others to make up their minds about where they want us, and for how long. Debris from the old houses has been hauled away, and we're sent to different parts of the new house's foundation outlines—prepping plywood, digging trench for pipes, mixing concrete—to begin.

I'm given rolls of nine-gauge chain-link fence to enclose the job site. I take some measurements and then gouge deep holes into the ground with a posthole digger, a mixture of what Tenant calls "soft" and "hard" work that allows me to float between Tenant's men and the *trabajadores*, earning me the nickname *malinchista*—traitor. Diego leads off some teasing ("Mexicans are supposed to cut through fences, not build them!") that helps the men feel more comfortable about me being trusted with such a specialized (no heavy lifting) and suspicious job. It's a tricky thing to build a fence around a site of *trabajadores*; I make my calculations away from the other men—they hate anyone who uses pencils and clipboards—and when I set down the marking stakes and line posts, I stand on the inside of where the galvanized fence will be. It's more difficult this way, but I do it to demonstrate that we're working on the same side of the land.

The posthole digger slides in and out of the softened ground with ease. Diego, who's cutting sheets of plywood, jokes for me not to get a hard-on. The men laugh, and as Adam hovers around the different areas, tossing us tools like fastballs or rolling the command "*Rápido, mojados!*" off his tongue, we find the rhythms of an unusually cool summer's day. It's slower than restaurant work but much more exhausting, because the tasks here are repetitive without requiring the same sense of timing or orchestration with other men. A man working with you today could be arrested or deported or move on tomorrow. We work independent of each other, careful not to move too fast or too slow because no matter what our level of speed or competency, the wage is the same at the end of the day. Bosses like Tenant love a square deal, as long as all four sides of the square are theirs. If he has a deadline to meet, Tenant may bargain on a task-by-task basis. Finish off this stack of plywood before you leave and you get an extra ten dollars. Stay here until 8:00 P.M. and you get a twenty-dollar bribe. There's a rumor that as a bonus Tenant takes the occasional man out to many rounds of drinks followed by a hearty dinner in a sit-down "American-style" restaurant where the plates are as big as hubcaps, but neither Diego nor I has had what Diego would call a "*una trampa de maricón.*"

During the lunch break, Tenant calls me aside to do some additional calculations for a temporary path we're building up to the house's entrance. It's off-the-clock time, but I'm relieved for the task because I can't make a great lunch on my hot plate. That means I rely on whatever takeout's nearby—the "roach coaches" that troll job sites, Mexicans serving subgrade meat in slapped together tacos and burritos. I could cook meals in these trucks that would put these grill slappers (I won't call them cooks) to shame, but where would I get the money to buy a catering truck? How could I file for

license, permits, and insurance when I don't have a green card? And how could I apply for a green card without being deported? Or ask for help getting a green card without being scammed?——

I don't know where to begin. What else can I do?

When I get to where I think the front door will be, I'm turned around at an awkward angle, away from the street, and I don't know whether I'm going in or coming out of the house. There are muddy paw prints on the ground, tufts of brown and white fur dancing with the wind, and a strong, musty dog odor. It makes my eyes water, a sour pungency that thrived in my first American apartment, where I decided to cheat on my wife and abandon my child.

She was the fourth prettiest Mexican girl in Echo Park, behind Silvia Morales, Liz Chacon, and Marisol Soto, but she was the only one you had a guarantee of seeing every day. All it'd cost you was a quart of milk. Or a stick of butter. Or a sack of flour. If you were a married man, you'd time your trips to Pilgrim's Supermarket so she'd be the first thing you'd see before breakfast and the last thing you'd see after dinner. Her winter's morning sky blue smock with a lace tie string cradled her breasts like newborns. Her black bob and ivory mestizo skin, her high cheekbones and pillowy Popsicle lips, and those fine patches of blond arm hair were such an attraction men would fistfight each other to climb in her line. And forget about buying ice cream—it'd be a sticky puddle by the time she rang you up.

Cristina Alarcon was a twenty-five-year-old checker when we met in 1972. I was eighteen, living with my wife, Felicia, our baby girl, Aurora, and Felicia's dog in a one-room apartment with no furniture except a used bed and a folding card table from the church where we ate our meals, changed diapers, and kept our television set and her Bible. Cristina complimented me on being the real husband ("So young and already a real man!") who accompanied his wife shopping and paid for the groceries while she told Felicia her secret for stretching a bushel of bananas when they changed color.

When we came home, I could hear the babysitter, our nine-year-old neighbor whose parents were never home, cooing words to our daughter, who screamed whenever the front door opened. Then the dog scent hit me. It was nauseating, oppressive. How could I be a "real man" if my life wouldn't have any more surprises or new opportunities, only a swelling of what was in front of me—more kids, more bills, more fat on Felicia's body? I'd memorized every stretch mark and lumpy ass-dimple. My life would be a series of a thousand more trips to the grocery store watching other pathetic husbands leer at Cristina and seeing the pictures forming in their heads: having wild sex (wild for a Mexican man) with a woman on top) in an open field of white dandelions; seeing her breasts pop out of her bra for the first time. Then I got those pictures in *my* head. Before I'd finished putting away the groceries, I knew I was going to cheat on my wife.

I asked Felicia to change Aurora, then went back to the grocery store with a lightness that had vanished the day Felicia told me in church that she was pregnant. (She'd underlined a verse in her Bible and shoved it in my ribs: "If a man comes upon a maiden that is not betrothed, takes her and has relations with her, and their deed is discovered, the man who had relations with her shall pay the girl's father fifty silver shekels and take her as his wife, because he has deflowered her. Moreover, he may not divorce her as long as he lives"—Deuteronomy 22:28–29.)

In line with a cold beer I wasn't old enough to drink, I made a long list of reasons (call them lies) why what I was about to do was okay. When a man cheats on someone he's made a vow to love, honor, and obey for the rest of his life, that list protects him, gives him courage, helps him reach the one lie that makes all deceit possible: I *deserve* this. In bed with that new woman, you feel your head, and the sensation dangling between your legs, swell. This lasts until morning, when your sensation is the size of a flea and your only possessions are the lies you told to get into bed. You guard those lies with your life, because to admit the truth is to admit how weak you really are.

"You're not old enough to buy this beer," Cristina said.

“I have a wife and a child. Why can’t I have a beer?”

“Don’t be such a typical man.”

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“The beer’s ruined. It got warm waiting in line. Now will you sell it to me?”

Cristina laughed. “Where’s your wife?” she asked.

“I lost her,” I said. Cristina smiled and nodded her head. “Have *you* lost something, too?” I asked.

“A fearless brown-skinned man,” she said. “What I wouldn’t give to have that back again for while.” She looked at the warm beer on the conveyor belt. “My icebox doesn’t work. Can you fix it?”

We drank warm beer and made love on balmy Sunday mornings when I skipped church and long afternoons when Felicia took Aurora out in her stroller. Cristina’s apartment was a young woman’s home, full of mystery, thrift, and unblemished promise. We had bedspread picnics on cornflower china purchased with books of Blue Chip stamps. She taught me the names of famous people from a collection of black-and-white photos that hung on the walls in cheap frames, including someone named Louise Brooks whom Cristina modeled her hair on. “These are my saints,” she whispered before we climbed into bed. “I pray to them to get me out of this shitty neighborhood.” It was Cristina’s idea for me to try my hand as a busboy or a back waiter in a fancy restaurant, perhaps in Hollywood, she said. “Maybe you’ll return Ryan O’Neal’s lost wallet for a reward or serve Robert Redford a meal he finds so wonderful he leaves a thousand-dollar tip.”

Then came a pregnancy scare. It was time to go home to my own family, not start another one. Felicia begged Felicia to take me back, thinking her silence over my blatant adultery meant a brief exile. For me, there was the practical matter of citizenship. Felicia was a citizen and I wasn’t. You needed to be married to a citizen for two years before you could apply for residency; we hadn’t reached our first anniversary. Felicia wouldn’t dream of seeing me, the father of her child, deported, but what a man doesn’t understand is that a woman has an infinite capacity for love and generosity no matter how long she’s been debased and abused—until she decides she is out of love.

That’s what happened with Felicia; I saw it in her eyes easier than she must have seen the lies in mine. I gave Felicia a list of the ways I’d change, and waited for her answer. And then the days without her answer kept coming, like leaves falling off a tree, too many to count in the strong breeze of our busy lives.

A gust of wind blows my marking sheet from my clipboard, across the skeleton of the foundation and over to the site’s edge. I retrieve it and hand it to Tenant, who instructs me to finish the fence. The dog stench, which I smell everywhere, and an empty stomach leave me light-headed, but I grab my mallet and hammer in the final support posts. The light-headedness sways me back to a sense of satisfaction at a task completed and a day’s wages earned. No matter how bad your job is, there is one brief moment when you are content—a joke someone makes at the site before the most grueling routine set in; the way sunshine streaks across your face at a particular time of day; the satisfaction of unloading the last of a batch of heavy boxes; and for the young men here, the cleverness at finding out how little they can do and still avoid being scolded. We are at our best when we are at work.

I’m installing the fittings and tension bands on the final two fence posts at the far edge of the site when I hear a loud, gurgling hiccup. No one’s around. I think it’s a dog that’s broken its legs falling into one of the excavation pits, a common sight. A mound juts out over the cliff a few yards from where I’m working. I peer over the edge, and there’s a sound like someone punching a wad of dough. The Heights make me sick, but I step out onto the mound to see what’s making the sound.

My vision’s hazy from the view and not eating lunch, but I think I see Adam swinging a bright yellow-handled sledgehammer down on a hairy pumpkin lodged behind a mound of dirt. There’s nobody else on the cliff. I edge out a couple inches farther, loosening some rain-dampened dirt close under my feet. There is a man on the ground, the receiving end of Adam’s sledgehammer. Next to him

is a black Dodgers cap. The ground, a blood-orange clay, shifts and swallows the head, which makes a trilling, gasping sound, as if it's being deflated. Where is Diego? When I step back, several large clumps of dirt give way, rolling down the hill. Adam sees me before I run back to the fence.

The chain-link mesh is loose in several places and curls up, leaving a large hole someone could crawl or slide through. I struggle to attach the tension bands, but they fall from my shivering fingers. Behind me, heavy footsteps attack the hill and climb up over the ledge. Another pair of footsteps runs over to greet them. Somebody's fleshy face gets slapped, again and again. Work across the site stops in a rolling wave as everyone except me watches the exchange. Tenant shouts in an exasperated voice, "We've had an accident. The ground's too soft. I'm gonna let you go home a couple hours early, but you're gettin' paid for a full day. Thank the Virgin Mary for me tonight before you go to bed."

The men cheer and line up in front of Tenant to receive handfuls of twenty-dollar bills. I drop my tools, leaving the fence unfinished, and try to mingle with the last of the workers clearing off the job site. I decide to skip out on my money—a hundred dollars I need to pay off *last* month's rent, with still no idea how to pay *this* month's rent.

"Hang on a sec, Hector," Tenant says. "Let me buy you supper."

He offers me Adam's seat in the cab up front while Adam, who's holding a shovel, stays behind to clean up the site to "clean up." It's dusk by the time we're loaded and ready to go. Tenant's uncomfortable as he drives, and I can tell he's distracted, sweating and muttering to himself, taking turns too fast, not looking in his mirrors as he changes lanes. Not paying attention to the traffic, Tenant runs a red light and almost collides with a fast-moving MTA bus that has to swerve out of our way. We both sigh with relief when we reach Taix on Sunset, a French restaurant that's been in Echo Park since the sixties. It's seen the whites leave, the Mexicans come, the Mexicans go, and now the whites come back.

There are no windows in the restaurant, no way to keep track of the time passing outside. The light in here is thick and dark like rye bread. We're seated at a booth and given oversize menus with gold tassels and the prices written in pen.

"Want a drink?" Tenant asks.

"No thank you, sir."

"Service can be a little slow in here," he says and walks to the bar. It's a short distance between the booth and the front door. If I were twenty years younger, I could run. I *would* run. Felicia said I made a pretty good life by running away. I could try my luck at a different parking lot, or another town, and leave this life behind. But where would I go? How would I get there? What else can I do?

A pair of brown hands sets a large basket of cold sourdough slices on the table, making me jump. I'm amazed because I didn't see the man approach, and because of how dark it is, I don't see his face.

These are my hands, asking a guest with a simple gesture whether he is done with his meal. The hands stack the silverware and the bread plate atop the congealed demi-glace and uneaten vegetables on her dish, whisking them away with the swift, unobtrusive movements learned through years of steady repetition. These hands have bused tables of famous actors and actresses, producers and directors, mayors and councilmen, diplomats, and a former President of the United States. The hands collect fat wineglasses, red plastic drink stirrers, cocktail napkins with the restaurant's logo emblazoned in gold type, and produce a silver bread-crumble comb that with no more than four broad sweeps across a laundered tablecloth collects any remaining food—in under thirty seconds (the hands have been timed with a stopwatch). Then these hands disappear, leaving time for coffee, dessert, liqueur, or a relaxed after-dinner conversation, creating an illusion that the table was bused on its own by a set of unseen hands, invisible hands that mother a city of infants.

The Option was one of Hollywood's oldest and most prestigious eateries. I brought Aurora there once

the bus every Christmas Day when she was a child. She hated that my hands smelled like offal and wasn't impressed with the grand, oak-and-glass-paneled front entrance where pen-and-ink caricatures of famous celebrities (my favorite was Rita Hayworth's) looked down at customers from either side of a long, haunted corridor that appeared to expand as you walked along it.

How I wished I could have eaten at a fancy American restaurant when I was a boy! The upholstered booths were as big as a Cadillac's backseat. The prime seating tables had thousand-dollar centerpieces, some of which, when their bloom and scent faded, I'd set outside Felicia's apartment then, as the years passed and our separation grew longer and longer, on the front porch of the small house she bought with money she made as a cleaning lady. And the meal itself: big American-sized portions of steak, potatoes, creamed spinach, and the house specialty, macaroni and cheese, an "off the menu" dish made one late evening a hundred seasons ago for a famished Humphrey Bogart and available to those "in the know" enough to ask for it (except those "in the know" had stopped coming years ago).

Did my daughter imagine that every staff member was granted special privileges? How could she know that the holiday dinner (which took place in two separate dining rooms—one near the bar for aging celebrities, friends, and relatives of the head staff, and a second for the Mexican junior staff in a musty storage area) was a perk for those management considered important men, men with responsibilities who were valued and appreciated, and whose input was sought and respected?

Aurora learned her lack of enthusiasm for my work from her mother. We had separated, but I'd hoped my dedication to a single job instead of a string of temporary, trashy new ones would impress her ("Your penis could learn a thing or two from your work ethic," Felicia said). I wanted Felicia to marvel at how my peers in the restaurant respected and admired me, yet she cared nothing for my job. I thought nothing of me clearing drinks from the mayor of Los Angeles Tom Bradley's table, where he'd enjoyed the house's signature martini ("A real Mexican would have spit in it," she said). She had not one word of praise when I was promoted to head busboy because Aurora told her busboys and waiters to be addressed by their first names, while waiters and senior staff are addressed with an honorific Mexican title. Aurora, who was tending to her own simmering cauldron of anger, didn't understand busboy was one step away from waiter, though The Option had never hired (and with its closing, never would) a Mexican waiter. How could I explain to someone who never worked in a restaurant that this fixed hierarchy was not a symptom of prejudice? From how I described my workday, Aurora found a hundred perceived slights a week I didn't have the pride to correct.

Rarer still were Felicia's visits to the restaurant. I made sure the busboys who reported to me were on their toes and showed me respect. She felt I mistook their obedience for loyalty, their briskness for a sense of purpose or direction ("I see where you get that from," she said). These men and my boss, she said, were conspiring against me, ridiculing my imperceptible accent, shortchanging my fair share of tips, and loading my sommelier's tests (one could not become a waiter without passing one) with obscure European wines the restaurant didn't serve, relegating me to the restaurant's bottom caste. Of course she'd never *heard* anything terrible; neither had I. Whispers were extinguished whenever I turned a corner into the kitchen. But she believed the taste of some offensive conversation lingered in the air, dangling on the edge of a testy comment I recounted about the junior staff not "understanding clear instructions" or how any requests to amend a work schedule had to be made "in writing and in English." Her life, in which she had always believed in the transcendence of fury, set an example for her daughter to turn against her father, excommunicating me to a nether region of the living dead, a place where the deceased form new families, creating and inventing new histories and biographies while the ones left behind announce their demise with the ripping of mailbox labels and pictures of two.

Then the building craze came and The Option lost its lease. The land was to be razed for

multimillion-dollar apartment complex and parking garage that was never built after the craze found its senses. Aurora, now a beautiful, angry young girl of nineteen, accepted my invite to our closing night party. My special job was to help garnish slices of a five-tier cake with caviar, costing seventeen thousand dollars. Our self-anointed sous chef (he received neither the title nor the money), Felix, had brought from home a boom box and set it in the kitchen. A wiry Central Valley-born Mexican, he turned it to a Spanish station for the Mexican junior staff, who weren't invited into the main dining room for the restaurant's senior-staff finale celebration.

The head sommelier came to supervise while I bent over the cake like a sinner doing penance. He asked the waiter and sous chef to lean close so he could share something with them. I couldn't make out most of their conversation, save the ending, where the sommelier said aloud, "Guess what his nickname is?" The group exploded in laughter, repeating that odd punch line as if they were speaking their own language in a room of foreigners. I was unperturbed, my hands placing spoonfuls of caviar in gentle dollops along the cake's ridges.

"They're talking about you," Aurora said. She was standing against a wall, arms folded, looking severe and disappointed—an identical image of her mother.

"I didn't hear anything," I said.

"You never do. Excuse me," she asked, "what is his nickname?"

The three men either ignored her or couldn't hear her over the radio, so she repeated her question.

"What are you asking?" the sommelier said.

"His nickname," she said. "My father. What is his nickname?"

"Oh, we weren't talking about him," the sommelier said.

"It was a restaurant joke, *chica*," Felix said. "You wouldn't understand."

"What is his nickname?" she asked again, louder.

"We don't have time for this," the waiter said. "They're waiting for the cake."

"Aurora," I said. "Don't."

"What is his nickname!" she demanded.

My hand felt the slap on her face before my brain did. The waiter rushed to wheel the cake out to the kitchen, followed by the sommelier, his head bent down in shame. Felix turned back to his station.

Aurora said nothing. She picked up the radio and carried it out of the kitchen. I watched her walk away, mesmerized, the boisterous *ranchera* music echoing through the tight corridors that led to the dining room.

Atop an unused bus station, amid a maze of tables garnished with fine silver and crystal, the rows of extravagant buffet trays and carving stations, the hundreds of guests (many of whose youthful faces and now almost unrecognizable caricatures graced the front entrance) talking, laughing, and reminiscing in various states of drunkenness, sat around the boom box, playing *ranchera* music at top volume. Aurora was cutting through the crowd to the front door, the curls of her long black hair cascading down her back like steam. That was the last time I saw her.

Felix raced to turn off the music, yet the crush of revelers made a short trip across the room a series of complicated dips, elbowings, and double-backs. The Mexican staff filed out to watch him juggle his limbs through the dining room. Some of them laughed, craning their necks, but continued working in the kitchen. Others were bolder, wading out into the room as if they were entering the deep end of a pool.

I straddled some invisible line between the two. I debated whether to rush in and tackle the boom box or retreat into the kitchen, humiliated, and leave out the back door before I could be scolded and denied a reference for another restaurant. A decision had to be made. I stood fixed in my spot, paralyzed, and clasped my coarse hands together, wondering if they were strong enough for outdoor work. I hadn't noticed one of the busboys tapping me on the shoulder, asking, "*¿Porqué esto*

orando?" (Why are you praying?)

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Tenant sits down with a loud *plumph* and slides into the booth with a drink.

"Tough work out there today, wasn't it?" he says, not waiting for my answer. He drains his glass in two gulps. His face has deep but smooth crevasses, scrubbed free from guilt, fear, or shame. "You know that behind every American worker are a couple of Mexicans doing his job? Course, you can't see them because they're so goddamned short."

Tenant clinks the ice in his drink, eyeing me to see whether it's okay to laugh. It's strange he needs this permission.

"I'm sorry. That's a bad joke." He chuckles. "Came out an insult. You Mexicans are the new niggers in this country, which is a real shame 'cause nobody in this damn country realizes how hard all you guys work. No offense meant. I like you. I like you because I can trust you. In fact, I want to give you something."

He pulls five one-hundred-dollar bills from his wallet. "That's for today. That's for you."

"I get eighty-five dollars for the time I worked," I say.

"No, that's the pay for the other men. You're more of a manager. This is *manager* pay."

"I'm not a manager," I say.

"Sure you are. See, a work site is a dangerous place. Accidents happen every day. We almost had one on the way over here with that bus, right? That's why we need someone to manage things for us. You know what a manager does, don't you? He makes sure everything runs smooth, and if there's a problem, he takes care of it. We have a problem, and because I trust you, I want you to take care of it."

Adam walks into the restaurant and heads straight to our booth. He's changed clothes, and his arms and hands have been scrubbed with soap; there's not a sliver of dirt under his fingernails.

"Hec here's going to help 'manage' the problem you created earlier this afternoon," Tenant says.

"Fine with me," Adam says and motions a waiter I don't see for a drink. "As long as he knows how to keep his fucking spic mouth shut. One call to La Migra and he's headed back to Mexico."

I know this, and it terrifies me. It terrifies me because Mexico doesn't exist for me. I have no memory of it. I was a few months old when my mother brought us to Los Angeles from my birth home in Guanajuato. We settled in a Mexican neighborhood called Chavez Ravine but were evicted when the city took back the land to build Dodger Stadium. Mexico is as foreign to me as Mars, Paris, or Florida. I have no heartbreaking story of the journey here; the heartbreaking story *is* here, in this small couple of square miles of land called Echo Park. Running through the desert, trying to stay ahead of the border patrol or the Minutemen or the coyotes or the rats isn't the story. It isn't the *getting* here; it's the *staying* here.

"Accidents happen every day, don't they, Hector?" Tenant asks, sliding the money over to me. "Now let's have a few drinks, a nice meal, then you'll manage our problem and that will be the deal. Okay?" I pocket the money while Tenant and Adam discuss the Victorian job.

It's night outside when we're done eating. Tenant opens up one of the side compartments on the pickup truck.

"Your first managerial duty is to get rid of this thing," he says, looking at me from the corner of his eye. "The lake's right down the road. I'll leave the details up to you."

The sledgehammer lies atop a thick sheet of black tarp. Small clumps of black hair are matted to the hammer's tip with blood and a hardened, gelatinous membrane that looks like skin.

"Go ahead," Adam says. "Pick it up." I reach for the hammer and then pull my hands away.

"Do you have gloves?" I ask.

"Fuck you," Adam says. "Wipe it down before you ditch it."

While I tie the sledgehammer in the tarp with some frayed twine, Tenant whispers something in



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