



REGINA

It was raining all night hard and heavy, making the land shiver—all the bare ocotillo and all the prickly pear. In the morning we found a tall yucca collapsed in the front yard. Everything is wet and gray so the day has not made itself known yet. It is something in between. As usual, I' m anxious. Behind the fog are los Franklins. Behind those mountains is my brother. Waiting. On this side we' re waiting, too, my fifteen-year-old nephew, Gabo, and his dog, la Winnie.

Winnie has one eye now. She got it stuck by a staghorn cactus that pulled it right out. Blood everywhere that day. By the time Gabo got home from his after-school bagger' s job at el Shur Sav, I was back from the vet' s with Winnie, rocking her like a baby. You couldn' t blame the dog for being upset, losing her eye and all.

I kept Gabo this time around because I want him to finish high school. I don' t care what the authorities say about his legal status. We' ll work it out, I say to Gabo, who, when he was barely walking I changed his diapers, which I also tell him. He' s still embarrassed to be seen in his boxers. That' s okay. I' m embarrassed to be seen in mine, too. Thirty years of being widowed, you better believe I dress for comfort.

“Stop all this mourning,” my mamá used to say. “You were only married six months. The guy was a drug addict, por Dios!” She actually would say that and repeat it even though Junior died fighting for his country. That' s why we got married. He was being shipped off to Vietnam. If the coroner suggested he had needle tracks, well, I don' t know about that.

Mamá always had a way of turning things around for me, to see them in the worst light possible. It' s probably not a nice thing to say you are glad your mother' s dead. But I am glad she' s not around. Can I say that and not worry about a stretch in purgatory? Then I' ll say that.

We' ve been waiting a week, me and Gabo—for his dad to come back. He' s been back and forth across that desert, dodging the Border Patrol so many times, you' d think he wouldn' t even need a coyote no more. The

problem is the coyotes and narcos own the desert now. You look out there, you see thorny cactus, tumbleweed, and sand soil forever and you think, No, there' s nothing out there. But you know what? They' re out there—los meromero cabrones. The drug traffickers and body traffickers. Which are worse? I can' t say.

So the problem is Rafa, my brother, can' t just come across without paying somebody. Eight days ago we got a call. It was a woman' s voice. She said in Spanish that Rafa was all right and that he was coming in a few days so we had better have the balance of the money ready. Who did those people think they were, I asked myself. That woman on the phone acted so damn cocky. I swear, if I knew who she was, I' d report her to the authorities, lock her up for five years. How dare she treat people like that? Take advantage of their poverty and laws that force people to crawl on their bellies for a chance to make it.

Truth is Rafa should have just stayed here last time he came to work the pecans. That' s when he finally let me keep his son. Someone in the family' s got to finish high school, I said to him. Poor Rafa, all alone like that now, going back and forth, even though I think he has a new wife down in Chihuahua. He won' t say nothing out of respect for Gabo' s dead mother. Just the mention of Ximena and the boy falls apart. It' s been almost seven years now but Gabo was just a child. His mind sort of got stuck in that time when his mother didn' t make it. He was here with me that winter, too. When Rafa and Ximena were returning they got separated. The coyotes said no, the women had to go in another truck. Three days later the bodies of four women were found out there in that heat by the Border Patrol. All four had been mutilated for their organs. One of them was Ximena. It was in all the news.

I' ve been fighting to keep my sobrino since then but my brother gets terco about it and keeps insisting on taking him back to the other side. What for? I tell him. Because he' s Mexican, Rafa says. As if I' m not, because I choose to live on this side. He' s got to know his grandparents— meaning Ximena' s folks. He' s not gonna become a gringo and forget who he is, my brother says of his only son, as if getting an education would erase the picture the boy keeps in his head of how his mother died.

I stayed and worked here in Cabuche, first in the pecans and cotton. Because of marrying Junior, I got his army benefits. I could stay and not hide in the shadows no more. This meant no more picking, no more peeling chiles, and no more canning. Instead, I got up my courage

one year and signed up for night classes at the community college. I did pretty good in my classes. I really liked being in a classroom. I liked the desks, the smell of the chalk and erasers, the bulletin boards with messages about holidays like Valentine's Day and Martin Luther King Day. So later I got more courage and applied for a job as a teacher's aide in the middle school. That's how I bought my casita, here on the mesa, where I can't see los Franklins this morning. But I know they are out there, playing with me. Like giants, they take the sun and play with people's eyes, changing colors. Like shape-shifters, they change the way they look, too. They let the devoted climb up along their spines to crown them with white crosses and flowers and mementos. They give themselves that way, those guardians between the two countries.

I do not know what Rafa is talking about his son becoming a gringo. These lands, this unmerciful desert—it belonged to us first, the Mexicans. Before that it belonged to los Apaches. Los Apaches were mean, too. They knew how to defend themselves. And they're still not too happy about losing everything, despite the casinos up by their land. "Keep right on going," they'll tell tourists when they try to pull over on the highway that cuts across it during dry season.

Ha. I wish I could say that out here whenever some stupid hunter wanders near my property. It's just me and the barbed-wire fence between the hunter and government land where he can do what he pleases, all dressed up like if he was in the National Guard.

One day we heard some shots. It wasn't even dawn yet, that Sunday. Winnie went nuts—the way heelers do at the sign of something amiss. Gabo got up—pulling up his jeans, tripping on the hems of them, barefoot. "What was that, Tía?" he said, all apurado and the dog, meanwhile, barking, barking. This was before the accident, when she could practically see in the dark. I let her go out, and la Winnie ran toward the fence that divides my property and BLM land. "HEY, HEY!" was all my poor nephew called out. He always freezes up. I think he remembers his mother.

Over in El Paso people have asked me if I'm not afraid of the coyotes and rattlers living right next to the wide-open spaces kept by the Bureau of Land Management. The worse snakes and coyotes, I always say, are the ones on two legs. People think that's funny.

"Hey-Hey," Gabo called out again in the dark of the new day out there, with a little less conviction the second time. But la Winnie kept

right on barking-barking. I went in the house and got my rifle. When I came out I went up to the fence and pointed the rifle somewhere I couldn't see. What were they shooting anyway? We don't got any deer around here.

"YOU ARE WAY TOO CLOSE TO MY LAND!" I yelled like I was Barbara Stanwyck or Doña Bárbara or somebody and I took a shot that rang out like a 30-30. It must've woken up la gente all the way in town. A little while after that I heard Jeeps taking off.

We couldn't go back to sleep after that so I made us some atole and put on the TV. I needed to fold up the laundry I'd left in the dryer anyway. Winnie didn't come in like she would have normally, ready to be fed. She stayed outside roaming the grounds.

"Your father will come back," I said to Gabo that morning at the table about my kid brother who you'd think was way older than me, his mind full of the beliefs of another time, another era, belonging to the Communist Party and all that. He's so proud of it, too.

Gabo's older sister ran off a long time ago with a guy over there in Chihuahua and no one's heard from her since then. So all Gabo has to count on is his father.

And me, of course, his tía Regina.

But he's lost way too much already in his short life to know that for sure. So that's what I'm doing right now, trying to do something good—for my brother and Gabo but for me, too—to see that my sobrinito gets a chance. One day I'm gonna take him to Washington, D.C.

"What the hell for?" Rafa asked me when I mentioned it.

"To see where the Devil makes his deals," I said.

One day I'm gonna take my nephew to New York, too, where I've never been but it's on my list—my very long list—of places to see in this life. I may even take him to Florence, Italy, to see the David. Well, actually I'm the one that wants to see the statue of David but it won't hurt for Gabo to know a little something about great art. What? Why not? All our lives we have to be stuck to the ground like desert centipedes? My nephew doesn't show any signs of interest in the arts. He don't talk about girls. He goes to Mass every Sunday down in Cabuche. If I don't drive him or let him take my truck, he walks. He observes all the holy days of obligation. My biggest fear is he's gonna become a priest. Wait 'til Rafa hears about it. He'll be so disappointed.

...

The truth is when I fired that weapon I was trying to show my sobrino not to be afraid. I wanted to show him that if a middle-aged woman like me could confront things that went bump in the night, he could do it, too, that he could face anything.

Actually, I had used my .22-caliber rifle only once before in the ten years I owned it. It was when a coyote was getting at my chickens. For a while I had it in my mind that I was gonna get rich selling fresh eggs. Everyone started asking me for eggs, all the neighbors, the teachers at the school, but no one really wanted to pay for them. Then I started feeling for the poor familias I worked with at the school and I gave them free eggs. The coyote ate three of my hens before I caught up with it. After that, I said, What do I need all this for? And I sold the rooster and the hens I had left.

I' ve never been very good at get-rich-quick schemes anyway. But it don' t stop me from trying. The only thing I will not do is gamble, go down to Sunland Park or up to Ruidoso and throw my money away in the casinos the way some of the ladies in town do. Oh sure, now and then they win a couple of hundred bucks. They get all excited. They forget how much they lost to begin with. They forget the dinner or the motel and gas money they put out to be there. And I surely will not play the lottery. Millions and millions in the pot some weeks. So I figure, what are the chances?

Instead I take that dollar and buy two avocados if they' re on sale. Avocados, the food of the gods, are the only things I can' t grow on my land— too arid; avocado trees don' t grow in sand. Another thing I' ve done with one dollar is send a fax to the White House on that number they give out to people in case you got a complaint about how things are being run up there. I tried to send the fax out of the school office but Mrs. Martínez, the head secretary, said no, nothing doing. Plus, she voted for the president. So I took my letter of complaint to the place on the corner of Main Street and Washington in Cabuche where you can send out faxes, buy phone cards, or have your taxes done. It took five minutes and one dollar and I felt much better afterward. I know I am nobody; no one has to tell me that. But I still vote like everyone else. So if I feel like sending a fax and complaining about the president' s latest pick for a Supreme Court judge, that' s my prerogative.

That' s a word I use with the students all the time: *prerogative*, as in, "It' s a lady' s prerogative to change her mind." The boys say they know all about that—about girls changing

their minds. You cannot get a gallon of gas for a dollar these days. You might still get yourself something you don' t need, like a thirty-two-ounce can of beer at the package liquors across the street from the "business" tienda where I send out my official faxes. Sometimes I have actually sat and thought out what you can and cannot buy with a dollar no more and it' s very interesting—because you think you can' t buy much, but in reality, if you think about it, it all depends on your priorities.

That' s another good word I' ve given the students and my nephew. "What are your priorities in life, anyway? Go to jail or go to college? Get drunk with your friends or get a job and make a little money to get ahead?" Things like that. You would be very surprised at how little thought any of them have given those choices until I start telling them about priorities. Gabo' s priorities are very clear and I am very proud of him for it.

He says he is going to college. That is, if the government lets him. If he can' t get residency he won' t be going nowhere but back to México. They don' t give scholarships to migrant kids without papers.

We do the dollar game sometimes. I used to do it by myself, but now that my Gabo is with me we do it together. He' s come home with a big bottle of shampoo for one dollar. Of course, you can get a whole lot of stuff at the Dollar General for a dollar or what shouldn' t cost more than a dollar; it' s so cheap and falls apart so quick. But this was the champú bueno that Gabo bought at el Shur Sav with his employee' s discount. Shampoo is just a small example of how our dollar game works. We' ve gotten all kinds of things for a dollar.

What we won' t get and what we' d never do with our dollars, we have agreed, because we got our priorities straight, I tell him, is nothing that would be harmful to our bodies or our souls. That' s why I made him take back the pound of chorizo he bought for us one time. He felt so bad and I felt so bad because the truth was that we both love our chorizo with eggs for breakfast. But we know that spicy, greasy sausage is no good for your health, and what' s bad for your arteries cannot be good for your mental well-being neither.

Gabo and I are figuring these things out—he, with his suspicious signs of priest potential and me, a woman who has been living alone so long I may as well become beatified. Santa Lucia, who cares for blind dogs. Santa Barbara, whose father locked her in a tower because he desired her so much. When I' ve thought of the martyrs and saints, I told Padre Juan Bosco

down at the church one time when he reprimanded me for hardly going to Mass no more, it seems it would be very, very hard to become one these days. It isn't because we don't have diehard virgins, but because these days the pope is not about to proclaim every girl who fights a rapist a saint. As for the martyrs—you don't get thrown in the den of lions for refusing to renounce your faith as in early Christian times. I wonder why I always think of things like that—imagining myself tied to a stake, scalped, Roman soldiers demanding I give up on God. Mamá used to come and slap me on the head when she'd catch me daydreaming.

"Maybe you used to be a martyr or a saint in another life," Gabo said when I talked out loud about these ponderings.

"According to the Church, there is only one life and this is it," I told him.

My sobrino looked very disturbed by this reminder. The rest of that day he kept to himself, listening to his John Denver cassette in his room.

He got it for a dollar at the flea market.

* * *

Gabo found a hawk. It was young, you could tell. It was the most beautiful thing you ever saw, brown and near-white with dashes of black on the wings. Nature is so geometrically precise. If you look real close at birds and fish, too, you see how everything—every feather, fin, wing, gill, is colored just so.

Somewhere I heard that baby hawks have a high mortality rate. This one didn't make it. It must've been trying to take flight when it got hit on the road. Its neck was broken but otherwise it looked like it was sleeping, as they say about people when they're in their coffins. (Except for Mamá. The mortician had painted on such bright orange lipstick and powder too light for her complexion she looked dead for sure.)

"What are you going to do with it?" I asked my nephew. He looked so sad. You'd think he had killed the hawk himself. He'd found it on the road. He was driving my truck back from work. I let him take the truck since he comes home after dark. When he saw it, he pulled over and put it on the passenger seat. "I'm going to bury it, Tía," Gabo replied solemnly, the way he speaks most of the time, "with your permission."

My nephew is so polite to the point of being antiquated. True, humble Mexican kids have better manners than American Mexican kids,

but Gabo sounds like a page out of Lope de Vega. Lope de Vega, the prince of Spain's Golden Age. I haven't read anything of his; I heard the Spanish teacher at the school talking to the students about him. But Spain's Golden Age of literature is on my list of things to read—my very long list. I've done some reading on my own, García Márquez, for example. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was assigned in one of the classes I took at the community college and then I looked for other books of his, like the story of Eréndira and her wicked grandmother, that, in some ways, reminded me of my own life with Mamá in the desert. I read the newspaper every day. But now with Gabo here I have become more conscious of the importance of broadening the mind through reading. The next book fair the school has I'm going to buy us everything we see that we think we'll like. We'll treat it like a candy store. I'll have to assure my considerate nephew, who behaves as if he may be overstaying his visit—the way he tiptoes around and hardly eats, although I'm not sure why; it's not because of anything I've said or done, I hope—that I have saved up for such a splurge. Otherwise, he'll hesitate to get anything, even if he sees something he really wants.

The hawk was on Gabo's dresser. He brought home a white veladora. He got it for a dollar with his discount at work. It took exactly seven days to burn through. When the candle was done, Gabo said he would bury the hawk. Every night he prayed over it. "You look like some kind of shaman," I told him when I peeked in to say good night and there he was, standing in the glow of the flame, head bowed, hands suspended just above the dead bird. It looked as if he were trying to resurrect it, although I'm sure that's not what he was trying to do.

When the candle had burned out I found it in the trash. Where was the bird, I asked Gabo. Had he buried it already? Where? When? I thought we were going to hold a funeral for it. I felt a little left out of his ceremonies.

"Yes," he said.

Later that day, I saw a hawk perched on the fence post by the gate. The front gate is about an eighth of a mile from the front door. It was brown with near-white feathers, black dashes on the wings. It looked a lot like our dead hawk. Maybe it was its mother or some other relation.

"Where did you say you buried that bird?" I asked Gabo when he came to the kitchen to make a sandwich for his school lunch. He refuses the money I offer so that he can eat in

the cafeteria or go out with some of the kids. He saves his work money, spends only on what he needs. He offered his whole check to me at the beginning, but I looked at him as if he were crazy and told him to use it on himself. His sandwiches are very frugal, too—one slice of meat between two slices of ninety-nine-cent whole wheat bread.

"I didn' t," Gabo replied.

"You didn' t what?" I asked. "You didn' t say or you didn' t bury it?"

"No," was all he said.

"Maybe that bird was carrying that virus, Gabo," I said. "How much did you handle it anyway?"

"Do not worry yourself so much, Tía," he said.

As far as teenagers go, from what I hear at the school and from the students' parents, Gabo could get a lot worse on my nerves.

This is not why I am so anxious all the time—having a teenager to look out for now. It was not even part of the Change, like the doctor down in Juárez told me last year. The anxiety is just part of me. On any given day, a person can find several reasons to be anxious. If you don' t find it in your own life at that moment, all you have to do is pick up a newspaper and read the headlines. Being a fifty-plus-year-old woman alone for so long, widowed thirty years, that could be cause enough. Every paycheck covers the bills to the penny—when I' m lucky.

Every three months or so I come up with another get-rich-quick idea that ends up not making me much money and sometimes ends up costing me some. I' ve delivered groceries for people out here in the boonies who can' t or don' t want to drive into town every week. I' ve taken orders for curtains and sewed quite a few up. Over the years, I' ve dog-sat, old people-sat, house-sat. I sold Amway, Avon, and Mary Kay products, even though I am allergic to most anything with a chemical scent. I had Tupperware parties. I sold red candy apples and pecan bread in the parking lot of el Shur Sav. For a time, I had a little business out of my troca selling pizzas. I' d buy them wholesale down the road at a place across from the police station. Then I' d drive them to an empty lot on Main Street and put out my sign. People didn' t really want to bother ordering a pizza ahead of time. Just drive up and I hand them one into their car or troca or maybe they were on foot. On weekends I' d make a killing. Then a guy started doing it, right next to me, out of his car. He gave away free Cokes, so he ran me out of business. A long time ago I went door to door selling bibles, the King James version.

Then my mother found out and told Padre Juan Bosco and he had one of his talks with me, so I felt morally inclined to quit. All these jobs I had in addition to whatever other full-time work I was putting in somewhere. And all of it caused me anxiety.

I keep almost nothing from my nephew now, except what I might look like in a swimsuit, but why he would care to see his fat old aunt half naked I wouldn' t know, but nearly everything in my heart or that crosses my mind I share with him. He' s been God-sent that way, I think. I had no idea how lonely I was until one day I found myself at my Singer stitching up his jeans, talking my head off, and he, so patiently, sitting nearby listening to it all. Or at least he looked like he was listening.

One thing I won' t tell Gabo about is my money worries. He' d run off so as not to be another burden on me. The other topic I cannot bring myself to approach is the fact that we haven' t heard from his papá yet. It isn' t as if Gabo himself hasn' t noticed. I heard him crying into his pillow one night. He probably envisions his father being killed by a coyote and left in the desert like what happened to his mother. It isn' t like Rafa not to get word to me somehow, but then again, I wouldn' t be terribly surprised if he changed his mind about coming. That coyote woman on the phone was horrid—he may not have wanted to pay them all that they wanted. The fact is, all Gabo and I can do is wait.

In the meantime I discovered where he buried the hawk. It was right near the fallen yucca. La one-eyed Winnie, or Tuerta, as I am calling her now, dug it up. My Mescalero Apache friend, Uriel, told me over the phone that Gabo' s finding the hawk was very good luck for him. She said the hawk is good protection medicine. I wonder if finding where it was buried and digging it up was good luck for la Tuerta. Poor little hawk— with so many now trying to benefit from its death. I reburied it this time between two huge chollas, where I don' t think the dog will go, seeing that she' s cautious now about getting too near anything with thorns.

I' d rather be pricked by a thousand thorns than have to think about what my little brother may have endured. The fact is, however, that I don' t know what exactly he had to endure. Sometimes I like to think he is back in Chihuahua with a pregnant wife and that we just never heard from him because he became too selfish and didn' t care about Gabo no

more or his past life with Ximena.

Another week went by when a foco went on in my head and I realized that the phone number of that nasty coyote woman that called me might be on the caller-ID box. We don't get many calls. All the numbers of anyone who has ever called since I put in the caller ID right around the time Rafa left my nephew here were still on there. We never erased them. Most of the time we didn't even pay attention to it. Without saying nothing to Gabo, I checked and, sure enough, there was a call from El Paso the very same day la coyota had called me.

"Bueno," she answered when I tried it. I knew it was her. It was a voice full of intriga and bad tidings.

I went on to tell her who I was and that we were still waiting for Rafa. "I don't know what you are talking about," she said and hung up on me, proving all the more that she very well did.

My heart started breaking with the sound of the dial tone on the other end and I knew that my brother had been done some awful wrong. Still, without mentioning my concern to my nephew, the next day I took someone into my confidence at the school. I consider most of the teachers much more intelligent than me, with their college education and all. One of them could give me some advice, I thought, but it would have to be someone I could trust, since my brother trying to cross without papers was obviously against the law. Most of the teachers at the school are Mexican or at least of Mexican heritage although half of them call themselves "Hispanic," which means they don't want to be considered Mexican. Or at least that is how Rafa and I feel about the word. It is one of the few political points we agree on.

Mr. Betancourt, the history teacher, calls himself "Chicano." He wears a long ponytail and while he obliges the system with a nice shirt and tie, he always has on jeans. All this about Betancourt told me I could trust him with my fears about Rafa, so I pulled him aside the very next day and told him what I thought.

"We might be able to find an address for that phone number," Betancourt told me. He said there was a phone number that you could call where, if the number you had was listed, you'd get a name and maybe an address. I thought I would try it when I got home, but he took out a cell phone from inside his jean jacket and, to my surprise, within ten minutes had obtained the woman's information for me.

"Will you go to her house?" he asked me.

Betancourt is about thirty-five but most of his hair has gone white. He looks old and young at

the same time. I remember when I was in my thirties, I felt like that—old and young at the same time. Now I'm middle-aged and I feel old and really old at the same time. Yes, I told him that I would, that I would have gotten in my truck and gone right then and there but that my nephew would need it for work in an hour. Betancourt nodded. He looked at his watch and then he said, "Let me move some things around. I can meet you somewhere in an hour or I can go pick you up at your house. I'll take you. It's probably not wise for you to go there alone."

Miguel. That's his name. He told me to call him Miguel or Mike but to please not call him Mr. Betancourt no more. I never called him just plain Betancourt to his face but that's how the teachers called him in the lounge. Especially a couple of the young women teachers said it like they meant something more by it. Sometimes a single man is as likely to be the object of a lot of unprofessional interest as a single woman, in particular the attractive ones, of which, at the school, I can count only four. I look around, too. I may not say nothing, being a fifty-plus-year-old widow, but I still look.

Miguel was handsome in his own way but more important, for the purposes of our errand, tall and very strong-looking. When he showed up at my house he was still wearing his tie. He decided to keep it on, he said, because it made him look like he might be someone of authority. "I mean, I'm not gonna say I'm with La Migra or anything but it wouldn't hurt if they think we have some pull."

The woman's house was very close to the customs bridge going into Juárez. It was a little house like others on that block, nothing special about it, and if my brother was in there, if they were holding him for ransom, never in a million years would I have guessed it would have been in such an ordinary place and right there in the middle of everything. The woman herself opened the door. She looked us up and down, especially Miguel, who did start to look like some kind of agent all of a sudden, with his Serpico long hair and bigotes.

At first she denied knowing anything, even the fact that she was the one who had called. Then Miguel took me by surprise. He pushed her, and next thing I knew, we were all in the house, in a dark, tiny, crowded living room with a dirty beige couch and two little kids, one in Pampers, in a playpen. "Listen," he said right in her face, "you are going to tell us what happened to this woman's brother or you are going right to jail—today. Do you understand? Do you understand?" He pushed her again so that she went reeling back until she hit a wall.

She started crying. She might've been around thirty or so, with a bulging midriff from babies, and her breasts already sagging. The house smelled of stale cigarette smoke. The TV was blaring a Spanish channel. I felt sorry for the babies who looked startled but hadn't started to cry. It was funny that they didn't cry when the mother was crying. Then she got hold of herself and looked me up and down. "What would I know about your brother?" she said to me with that same sneer I imagined that time she had called me. "Have you tried calling your family back in México? He's probably there."

Before I could even say nothing, Miguel took her by the shoulders and shook her so hard her head went back and forth like it was on a spring. "I'm only going to ask you one more time," he said. And before he asked again, she looked at me and with spittle coming out of the corners of her mouth and with more hate than I have ever felt from a human being, she seemed even glad to tell me, "Your brother must be dead, stupid. Why else do you think you never heard anything again? Do you think they come and tell *me* what goes on out there? I only know about the ones who make it. They come here until their people pay what they owe. Your brother? What do I know of him? They most likely left him to rot out in the desert because he was a tonto or maybe for being a pendejo he got himself killed. What do I know? Now get out of here before I tell my husband you were here and you'll both be sorry you came."

It was like a movie. In movies about drug traficantes they have women like that, in their nightgowns in daytime in gloomy rooms and living an obscure existence. And they have guys like the one who drove up just as we were leaving, wearing a big anchor on a chain around his neck and a diamond earring in one ear. They—everything, even their frightened little kids who wouldn't cry—looked like they were right out of a bad drug video.

El coyote looked at Miguel as we left as if he was memorizing him, taking a mental photograph in case he ever saw him again. But neither said a word to the other.

I turned around and took a last glance at the woman, who stayed inside in the shadows. She knew something about my brother's fate. I felt it in my heart. She could have given me some piece of information, however small, a gold nugget to take back to Gabo so that the poor boy would somehow, someday, find closure.

I wanted to go back in and shake her myself. Shake her until her stupid head fell off. Until her neck snapped and we'd carry her lifeless

body to Gabo so that he could pray over it for seven days. Then he'd find a place to bury it even though his father had gotten no such consideration. And when la Tuerta Winnie sniffed up the corpse and started digging, fine; she could dig all she wanted. I'd let her dig up that estúpida's body so that all the coyotes that wanted to come on my little bit of land that I protected so well could feed off of her stupid flesh and lick her stupid bones clean. And then we'd all, me and Winnie and Gabo and Miguel, too, if he wanted, and even the coyotes with four feet, could go out to the BLM land and scatter the bones out there to dry in the sun, for sands and wind to wash over. And Rafa, wherever they had left him, would no longer be alone out there.

Then I felt Miguel take my hand. He had to pull me with him. "Come on," he muttered close to my ear. "We'd better get the hell out of here while we can."



GABO

Su Reverencia, el Santo Franciscano, Padre Pío:

Venerado Santo, gracias for permitting me this great honor to write to you in heaven. If there is one reason alone why your most humblest of servants is given the privilege of not being un analfabeto and not knowing how to read or write like my mamá or mis abuelos, I believe it was for this purpose. Because you are at God' s feet perhaps He bothers Himself to converse with you about what is going on when you don' t hear from me. If not, I will relate what has happened now, as best as I am able to express myself como siempre, Santito.

On that day walking up the dirt road after school, I saw my tía Regina coming down in a car with a man I did not know. I knew it had to do with mi papá. She smiled and gave that little wave that people give out here when they pass each other on the road. My tía Regina' s wave is like that of the Queen of England. She waved and smiled that very sad smile of hers, her fading red hair flying in the wind of the hombre' s old Mustang convertible. We did not know anyone like that, my tía and I. Most of the people on the mesa and out around these parts drive trucks. Old ones, mostly. One neighbor rides a Harley but only on weekends, with his bikers' club.

Tía Regina smiled with her little squinting eyes that make her look like a china poblana and then they passed me. I stayed on the side of the road watching them. As the Mustang turned the corner, a flock of blackbirds with long patas, feeding on a rich wet patch of worms, all together lifted their wings. For a moment all the birds hung in the air, shiny wings out. As soon as the car passed, all together they gently went back down to feed, not one losing sight of the feast below.

I watched until the car was no more than a small, fast-moving object surrounded by fields of green alfalfa, swaying right, then down, until it became a red speck and there was nothing left to think about anymore. I swung around and kept going up the sandy hill lined with

cholla y sprawling nopales. Dogs barked aquí y allá, letting my Winnie know that I was coming.

At my tía Regina' s I got ready to go to work. "El Estockboy" is what my manager calls me. I pack groceries and keep the shelves stocked with inventory. I know that God gives us drudgery to keep us from being idle, Padrecito. As I unpack cans of string beans y garbanzos to line the shelves, it is a meditation of our Lord. Sweeping is my favorite quehacer, Santito, because then I am free to contemplate God' s eternal love. Sometimes the manager sends me out to wash the windows. He says I am the best estockboy he' s ever had and whenever I want, I can work for him full-time.

The money I earn I put away. My tía has refused it. When mi papá comes, I will give it to him. He would never ask it of me. He will make good use of it to help my abuelos or toward building the house there. As for me, I have no need of dinero or material comforts. (But, on this subject, Your Reverence, I must ask you to help me, especially when my blanket feels so rico over my body, tan cansado. I find it difficult to get up in the mornings.)

When I return from work, after my shower, I do my homework in my cuarto, so my tía' s sleep is not disturbed. I go to school. I go to work. I go to church. Meanwhile we wait for my father. He will decide if I stay or not but for now I want to stay.

My aunt had left the truck keys on the kitchen table. Truck keys and one aguacate. My aunt is good at rationing even while she knows we are not starving; although we have our share of arroz y papas all week. And of course, every day, beans, every which way you want to have them— first in the pot like soup; that' s the best. You sprinkle a little diced onions and with a rolled-up corn tortilla—a man could not ask for much more in life. We can' t add chorizo to them anymore because my tía says one day it will give her a heart attack.

Avocados are just about the only thing my tía doesn' t grow in the garden that we can' t live without. She has one of those green thumbs.

We get all kinds of chiles, tomatoes, yellow, red, and green for salsa, three varieties of squash, a patch of watermelon, and corn.

Mis padres thought my tía Regina had won the lottery with this property All summer, from harvest to harvest, Mami kept badgering my father, "Why don' t we settle down like your sister? Why can' t you get us something like that? Por favor, Rafael—your sister did it by herself Why can' t we?" My poor mother; she was never happy Who could have been, working in la pisca like we did, pulling up

tomatoes, artichokes, cotton, grapes ... pues, todo, pues, Santo querido.

That day in my tía Regina's kitchen, which is dark even in the daytime but from the window over the sink you can see the mountains, I decided to eat only the avocado. I picked out two corn tortillas, the hardest ones. Little sacrificios prepare me daily for the course I have chosen. I added a hot salsa of chile árbol that my tía makes so delicious, but that was all. (I tried not to enjoy it too much.) I ate the whole avocado because no matter what I try, once you cut one open, the leftover portion will turn black and go to waste. I've heard all kinds of trucos as to how to prevent that—cellophane, aluminum foil, cut the pit out, leave it in, Tupperware. My tío Osvaldo in California swore that the only sure way to keep an open avocado from spoiling was to place the open part flat down on a piece of cardboard. My mother's brother, he had picked avocados in California all his life so I accepted his word. Until I tried it. It did not work. But back then, when Tío Osvaldo was still alive, I was just a little boy. What did I know of life then?

One day my mother got word that Tío Osvaldo was dying of pneumonia. He had been working for a flower rancher near Fresno, allá in California. We were working the garlic pisca near Watsonville when the message came. Mami took me with her to see him. Tío Osvaldo was laying there in un jacalito. It was typical of the ones we migrantes were assigned in the labor camps. Since my earliest memory such a shack would be called home. There wasn't electricity in that one.

How does someone die of pneumonia picking flowers, Santo? You could die of heat exhaustion and overall fatigue. This everyone knew. My uncle was only twenty-nine years old. He was very strong and had never been sick. When we found him, he was trembling to death under a blanket another migrant had lent him. It was one of those soft colchas depicting whole scenes—an adobe house in front of a big yellow moon, a tiger looking at you, the Seven Dwarves dancing. This one had la Virgen de Guadalupe with a white face. The owner of the blanket did not want it anymore with the smell of death on it, so my mother let me keep it.

Before we left, a woman told my mother that my uncle died because the men were forced to stand all night in a shallow lake on the property. The rancher did not want them running away. The story sounded almost unbelievable but Mami said almost was not good enough. She wept real hard over her brother but she said she was also weeping over the things in life that we had to put up with.

That night of the red car y el hombre with the ponytail, after el Shur Sav closed and I went directly home, all the luces were off, even el portal light. La Winnie Tuerta, as my tía was now calling her, was lying quietly outside the door. The winds were blowing dust, knocking cans and chairs down and tools around. Inside, there were no potatoes and eggs on the stove kept warm for me. There was the owl I'd been hearing for the last week.

I knocked on my tía's bedroom door. She was in bed, covers to her chin, la eerie luz of the portable TV next to her bed illuminating her face and the volume turned down. She tried to smile. "I was thinking we might want to go to the city tonight and have dinner out," she said.

"Go out?" I couldn't imagine doing something like that without it being an occasion.

"Yes, like a celebration," she said.

"What are we celebrating?" I asked. (I do try to avoid such extravagances, Su Reverencia.)

"Your birthday, of course, mi' jo," my tía said. My birthday was not until March—a month and a half away.

It was the first time she called me "her son." It should not have been a big deal so that I noticed—even teachers at school called me "mi' jo"—but suddenly I felt hypersensitive. I looked around my tía's room. There was a draft. Algo, I reminded her that my birthday was a ways off. "Your good grades, then," she said next. Exams were not for another week.

"We could go to Applebee's or Chili's, if you like," she said, "or to the Taco Tote. You like that place, don't you, hijo? We're celebrating the trip we're going to take to the capital as soon as you graduate—how about that?"

My hands had turned cold and then my ears. If only she would have gotten on with it, just said what she knew. I had never been all the way in my tía Regina's bedroom before. It was smaller than my own. There was the dresser that had belonged to my grandmother, back from her days. It looked antique. The headboard matched. Over the headboard was a small plaque of la Virgen de Guadalupe. There was a color picture of a young soldier on the nightstand. The nightstand did not match; it was modern, of unfinished pine. I was looking around, feeling my body grow cold, first my arms, then down my legs, remembering again for the second time that day how my tío Osvaldo had died. I fought the hunger so familiar en mis entrañas and waited to hear

what my tía had to say whenever she got the courage to say it. I started staring at a mancha in the corner on the ceiling. "Does the roof need repairing there?" I asked. She did not answer.

My palms hurt. Sometimes I wake at night and they throb as if they have been punctured. I look but there is nothing unusual about them. (You know how long I have prayed for that grace.) I brought my right palm up and scrutinized it. "What's wrong with your hand?" Tía Regina asked. "Did you hurt it at work?" I shook my head and put the hand behind my back. (I do not doubt, Padre Pío, that she knows about my affinities with my Savior.) El Cura Juan Bosco said I had to wait until I finished high school. The days do not pass fast enough. I have already chosen los Hermanos Franciscanos.

My dad and my tía are a lot alike when it comes to not trusting the Church. "Millions," they each say, like they had been saying it all their lives, "millions of mexicanos among the faithful, living in poverty. And the Church—so rich." "Religion is the opium of the masses." Mi papá liked to quote Marx. At my age, he joined guerrilleros to fight the government.

My tía is a good woman, Su Reverencia. She does not know that I know, but she was a virgin widow. I heard my mamá tell my father about it when I was a child. They both laughed. Maybe they had no use for aires of purity. But nothing about the room I found myself in that night or the news we were both preparing for—one to pronounce and the other to accept—was more than what it was. It was just our lives. My father was gone forever. Like crumbs of bread, bits of his soul had been leaving traces for days. A bit had landed on la Winnie la Tuerta's eye and taken it. Another had hummed the young hawk to sleep on the road. Still another piece was now in the owl's throat outside the door at that very moment. And my father's soul was causing la Winnie to howl like she had never howled before. The howling of a dog is an announcement of death. We could not possibly go to a restaurant pretending cheerfulness to ease the ache that my father's soul had dispersed all around us like motes in a ray of light.

Tía Regina, she is so simple. (Am I simple, too, Padre Pío?)

Slowly I made my way to her bed that night, crawling like a little cat to one side and put my head on the pillow next to hers that smelled of lilacs or jasmine. The scent of flowers in the desert, even from potpourri, was always disorienting. I was dizzy and closed my eyes. I

felt Tía Regina breathing hard until her sobbing began. And while I cried like that later, in my room, many times, that night I went to sleep to the sound of her copious weeping.

Copious.

It is one of the many beautiful words I learned from reading your most venerated teachings. Yes, I know what it means. *Copious* as in "And yet there will be more."

As always, your devotee tan desmerecido