



REGINA

Today I ate three tunas, one after the other, while I looked out at the snow covering the tops of los Franklins, gleaming like white frosting. I gave a little piece of the cactus fruit to la Tuerta, who was sitting there staring with her one eye. She ate it right up. Sometimes the dog forgets she's a carnivore by nature. Although it's midwinter and all the prickly pear cactus is dormant, I had a stash of peeled tunas in the freezer in a plastic zipper bag for a day like today, when my spirit needed a boost.

I came up with a new idea of how to earn a little extra money. I have a boy to send to college now and that's something to think about. The idea came to me when I started making use of the costal of pecans I collected from under my trees one weekend. First I baked two pies, then three, then the rest of the night I was baking pies. It gave me something to do when I couldn't sleep.

I wrapped a pie and took it to school as my way of thanks for Miguel Mike Mr. Betancourt. I'm not sure what to call him. Everything about my pie was homemade. It had a golden crisp crust y todo. All I know how to bake that always come out right are pies. I entered my pies one year in the county fair. I didn't even get honorable mention. Still, they're pretty good.

"Wow," the teachers in the lounge said, one after the next. I had to let them know it wasn't for them to share but for Betancourt.

"Uh-huh," said Cindy López. She gave a look to Michelle Montoya. They're this year's student teachers. They think no one knows that Michelle dated Betancourt at the beginning of the year. The first week of school those two got together. Before September was over, so were they. What's this vieja fea think she's up to? they must've been saying to each other with their eyes.

I found Miguel out in the teachers' parking lot on his cell phone. He seemed real happy about the pecan pie and stuck a couple of fingers in to taste it right away. "I'm gonna leave it in my car," he said, smiling, meaning he didn't want to share it with no one. It's

winter, which for us means not cold but not hot, so the pie would survive there. "I got more at home," I said. All the pies were lined up as if on display on kitchen win-dowsills and counters. No one was gonna eat them. I don't have the appetite with all my anxieties these days. That's when I got the idea to go into the pie-baking business.

When I had a break, instead of having lunch, I went home, got one of the pies, and took it to the school and set it out in the teachers' lounge. "Wow," the teachers said again.

"Who's *this* pie for?" someone asked, trying with all his might not to help himself to a piece.

"It's for auction," I said. "Bidding starts at two dollars, no tax. Hecho en casa y con aceo."

"That means one hundred percent homemade good. I'll bid two dollars," said Miguel, who had just come in the door so I hadn't seen him. "Regina's pies are to die for!"

That's how the whole enterprise got started. The pie ended up going for five bucks and, since that was set as its market value—as the math teacher explained it—the others would be that price. Pie-baking will keep me from getting too depressed.

"Hey, Regina," Miguel Mike called out to me in the teachers' parking lot the next morning.

At least I don't call him Mr. Betancourt no more. Not when we're one-on-one. "One-on-one" is how the seminar leader talks who comes from the university in Las Cruces every few months to catch us up on how education is progressing in the world. "Why don't you go back and get your degree, Miss Regina?" she always says to me. "You'd make a great teacher." I hear things like that and I think, Who knows—maybe one day I will.

Miguel Mike came over to my truck and helped carry the pies without my asking. I noticed from the other day when we went to El Paso that he was a gentleman, with old-fashioned caballero manners. Except for the part about pushing that coyota around. But what can I say about that? I don't like the idea of any man laying a finger on a woman. There is a very high domestic-violence rate in this area, uf, not to mention Cabuche alone, from what I hear at the PTA, on the news, on the street, and on my shortwave ham radio. (That's what I used to do for entertainment before I got cable—listen to police calls.) How Miguel Mike handled the coyota, however, I don't think falls into that category. My opinion is when you

buy into a life of crime you can only expect to get hurt, and that' s what happened with her. That' s as far as my moralizing went, because the truth was I was in a world of pain over my fears of losing Rafa.

"Call me just Miguel, okay?" he said. "Or Mike. Whichever one."

I decided on Miguel because it reminds me of my favorite archangel. I call upon el arcángel Miguel whenever I need serious help, with this side and the other side. By that I mean here and across the border in México and I mean this life and whatever' s on the Other Side. I was telling him all this when I saw by the smile that he was trying to hide that maybe I was just amusing him, which was not my intention. There' s no end to how people think that everything about old women is ridiculous. Of course, I know I am not that old, but to a guy with a fast red car, yeah, I' m pretty sure I' m old. Also, what I might be revealing and what made me shut up right away was how lonely I could get sometimes that made me just go on and on about things. Then Miguel said, "I was named after the archangel."

"No way," I said, figuring he was pulling my leg.

"No, really," he said. "My mom had a difficult pregnancy." Then he stopped and said, "What I wanted to talk to you about, Regina, is your nephew. I know how much you worry about him. But maybe now, you know, you could adopt him legally. This way he could get his papers in order and he could stay in the States and study later on. You said he' s a good student, right? We could get him a scholarship..."

I was looking down at Miguel' s white tennis and thinking how I' d like to be able to afford a pair of those for Gabo for his birthday because I know he likes to play basketball, while I listened to all that Miguel was saying, words that he meant to sound all happy, like that silver lining around a dark cloud but that just plain did not. I knew that as Gabo' s guardian, I could probably try to adopt him and if I did, he wouldn' t have to go back to México. But what Miguel was leaving out was the fact that we didn' t know whether or not mi hermano was coming back for him. Who said my brother was dead? La Coyota? Like she was a reliable source.

"Gimme the pies," I said, suddenly upset with Miguel because he had already written off my last living known relative, besides Gabo. It wasn' t his fault if my kid brother was dead. But why should I have to accept it with no proof yet?

Then in our struggle, we dropped one of the pies. "Ay!" I said.

"I' ll pay you for it, Regina," Miguel said, looking like he genuinely felt bad.

The sky was full of rain clouds again. Though everywhere there were long slits between them where brilliant light came through.

Sometimes I dream that I live on the other side of the clouds. There I' ve seen my mamá again. I' ve seen my father. I' ve seen my grandfather Metatron. I can' t believe he made it to heaven, but I' d know that bellowing voice anywhere. Even in heaven he' s yelling at everybody. My mother and he, of course, did not get along.

Mamá went to my abuelo Metatron' s rancho when she was only fifteen to work as a cook. That' s who I learned to cook from and to know all about plants and everything about vegetables, my mother. My father fell in love with her. It' s an old story, I know, the son of the patrón in love with the beautiful india servant. But it was their story for real. We lived on the rancho until I was twelve, when my father and my older brother, Gabriel, who was the most perfect brother and son anyone could have ever imagined, were killed together. A bull turned on them and gored them both in almost one motion. It was one of those bulls you could never trust. I know how funny that sounds. But this was truly a mean animal. It was not all that young, neither, but it was still fierce. It came out of nowhere, a ranch hand said, when they were branding the calves. Who let it out, no one knew or would ever admit.

Hell broke loose on my grandfather' s rancho that day. He fired everyone. Then he threw us out—Mamá, Rafa, and me. Rafa was barely six. "I' ve had enough, enough of this life!" My abuelo said things like that in his grief over losing his beloved son and his perfect grandson. In heaven they' re all having it out, I guess.

Mamá took us, with our few belongings, to live with one of her uncles for a few days. She came from very poor people. Then we started crossing over to the States to work the harvests. I had met my future husband not in la pisca but on my abuelo' s rancho in Chihuahua. Junior used to come out there every summer with his familia to visit his own grandparents. His grandfather was my grandfather' s rancho foreman. What did we know about who gave orders to who until my abuelo lost it that day and ran everybody off his land?

We used to play together out there in our carefree days as children. We took care of my

pets. I bottle-fed a pet calf one summer. Throughout my childhood I had a pet burrito, cabritos to watch, two pet box turtles for a long time, and I always got to take care of the baby bunnies we kept in cages. When I was about three or four, when my first pet rabbit was taken from me for an Easter dinner, I learned to let go once they were grown. Junior was a gentle boy, so he preferred my company to that of my brothers. One time, when I was twelve, Junior tried to kiss me. We were collecting eggs in the henhouse when he leaned over. I think he had been calculating for a long time how and when he would make his move. When I saw his puckered lips headed in my direction I stepped back so fast, I fell and dropped all the eggs we had been collecting. My mother gave it to me good that day. Junior didn't try to kiss me again until we grew up. But that's how I knew he was the one for me, that summer day when I was twelve.

My brothers and I had had a private teacher who stayed the whole week with us and went home on weekends. The school was too far away and my abuelo thought it was for common folks anyway. Rafa was showing himself to be one of those math-wizard kids. Our big brother was going to go to study medicine in México City and then my grandfather said he would send him to finish up in Paris. I'm not saying that I'm better than other people who crossed over to this side, risking their lives in the river or through the desert, just because I started learning Latin when I was a girl. But life would have been much different for us if it hadn't been for that bull.

That's where a lot of the "what-ifs" start for me.

"What if I had insisted that Ximena stay with me?" Rafa said one time when he got real down on himself about Ximena's tragic death.

"What if Junior had never gone off to war?" I said right back to him.

Well, then, you just have to keep taking those what-ifs to infinity. What if there had been no war and what if no money could be made on killing undocumented people for their organs? What if this country accepted outright that it needed the cheap labor from the south and opened up the border? And people didn't like drugs so that trying to sell them would be pointless? What if being a brown woman, even one with red hair, didn't set off the antennas of all the authorities around here, signaling that you were born poor and ignorant and would probably die poor and ignorant? That you were as ordinary as a rock, so who cared what you

thought or what you felt?

I was huddled down staring at that splattered pie on the asphalt, just staring, and I could hear Miguel's voice far off, saying, "Leave it, Regina. The birds will eat it up." When I looked up at Miguel he looked so tall, like a poplar tree, so healthy and full of life and vigor and a future and, like some kind of fortune-teller, I felt it would be a glorious future at that, with babies and a house and his pretty wife smiling, so proud to see him when he came home from teaching at the school.

All these visions over a spilled pie and hopes for everyone but yourself. Then Miguel said, helping me up, on my stiff knee joints, "Okay, okay. I get it, Regina. We'll look for your brother."

Since then, I am wondering what Miguel's mother knew about the baby she had just had to give him such a suitable name.



MIGUEL

If I ever write a memoir I'll probably call it *The Too-Late Guy*.

It started when I was born—1969.

At least if I had been born in 1968—the year that rocked the world—I could have felt a part of it. Sometimes I lie and say it anyway. That's why I was a history major in college, to be part of something big.

But in 1968, it was rocking all over—from My Lai to Malcolm, from the Democratic convention in Chicago to Jim Morrison. The civil rights movement. Free Leonard Pelletier, qué viva Anna Mae Aquash and Pine Ridge. Trinidad Sánchez, Jr.—“Why Am I So Brown?” Los Flor y Cantos festivals, poetry and public art. The San Francisco Mime Troop at Dolores Park. I was only ten when my mom and I happened to see them when we were on vacation. They weren't mimes and I heard the message loud and clear. We sat on the grass of San Pancho's rolling hills watching the performance, me a squirt and yet thinking, “I know the CIA's lurking around here someplace.”

That was back when the CIA was considered the people's enemy.

It was the age of hippies, yippies, and LSD. The Beatles were still together imagining an ashram utopia. Santana came down from the sky like Horus blasting “Black Magic Woman.”

Communism was the government's number-one enemy and students, Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement, and anyone else who spoke up, close seconds.

That would've been me, man. Public Enemy Number One of Nixon's administration. I'd been on it, too, writing about this country's “incredible whiteness of being.”

Still, I got plenty to rant about right here in the present.

My book's gonna be called *The Dirty Wars of Latin America: Building Drug Empires*. Or something like that. The research goes back to when I thought I'd get a Ph.D. My thesis was gonna be on the School of the Americas. It was a U.S. Army center located at Fort Benning in

Columbus, Georgia, that trained more than sixty thousand soldiers and police, mostly from Latin America, in counterinsurgency and combat-related skills since 1946. Its graduates became experts in torture, murder, and political repression. Since the word got out on what the School of the Americas was really up to, in 2001 the school officially changed its name to the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. After 9/11 the government felt it could justifiably come out of its covert-training closet.

The School of the Americas and I go way back.

My father used to run the language program. Colonel John Mason III made the army his career. He did two tours of Vietnam. He learned Spanish, Russian, and Czech and taught all three. He was an astute investor and a shrewd spender. Colonel Mason was so proud of himself. “Not bad for a kid from Sunset Heights,” he used to say.

When I was in my third year of high school, captain of the football team, and doing everything I could to get my father's attention (and not necessarily his approval, since I got thrown off the team for smoking pot), he died of a brain aneurysm.

We flew to Georgia and brought his body back to El Paso. He got a military burial at Fort Bliss. I cried no tears over Colonel Mason.

“Maybe a KGB agent ejected some poison from a fake pen into his highball and that's what made his brain implode,” I told my mother.

“Don't disrespect your father,” my mom said, although she had not moved us down to Georgia when he took the post.

After high school I passed on UCLA, which would have been the colonel's choice, and decided to stay in El Paso to go to college. I took my mother's last name. My father left me a trust fund and my mother his pension. Maybe by then she figured her duties as wife and mother were done. She packed up and moved to San Antonio to start a new life. We always keep tabs on each other but she never mixes up in my business and I don't mix up in hers.

I never got to put my findings down on the dirty wars fueled by the School of the Americas alumni. Family life took over. Crucita and I were expecting our daughter, Xochitl, before we finished college. Soon after Xochi, our son, Little Michael, came along.

But I held on to my dream of getting into a doctoral program, so the research kept piling up. As time went by the thesis morphed into

something different. Now it'll be a full-fledged book. I got notes, clippings, magazines, stacks of articles I've been collecting for years. My trailer looks like the forgotten archives of every record on Latin America disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act—from the Reagan administration's intervention in Central America to what some of the School of the Americas's graduates who found themselves unemployed were doing with the highly specialized skills that the narco cartels found so valuable.

Now that I'm divorced and all, maybe I'll be able to get it done.

Crucita and me split up last year—that's when I moved into the trailer. Our kids stay with her. But I'm right across the street from my old house, where they still live. No, I'm not stalking my ex-wife. She and I get along better now than when we were married. Besides that, she's found religion. Jesus is in her life. Jesus and the evangelical minister she got involved with when we were still together.

To be fair, Crucita and I still share some of the ideals around social injustice that we cared about in college. She doesn't only look for potential converts to her church, she volunteers to help women in crisis on both sides of the border. She kind of freelances on that count and goes from one grassroots organization to another, as time allows. Crucita came from a family where the father was one of those *cabrón* types so it irks her to no end to hear of women being abused in their homes. Lucky for me that I respect women. Otherwise, after my ex took a class in self-defense a few years back, I'd have ended up in the hospital.

Anyway, we—Crucita and I—still try to do things with our kids. "It's all about maintaining family values," she says.

"Whatever you say, hon," I'll respond, to avoid the obvious contradiction in statements like that. So keeping up appearances was behind our going up to *Cabuche* last August to the kermis at the church.

And that was when I was struck by the thunderbolt, blindsided, dumbstruck. I'm talking about Regina.

I took a teaching job a couple of years ago up there. It's a colonia that needs good teachers and if nothing else, I'm a good teacher. I dig that sleepy town, although rumors that an Indian-owned casino is being set up there prevail. Other changes are coming, too. What with Las Cruces, New Mexico, expanding south and El Paso, Texas, growing north, the surrounding farmland is getting bought up by developers faster than you can

say, "Poor people, get out."

Crucita was set on turning everyone she could into a born-again, so a bazaar sponsored by the Catholic Church seemed like an ideal place to find converts. At the kermis, which they held in the church parking lot on one of the hottest days that summer, my ex walked around with Little Michael. She's always favored our son, mostly because he's so sickly Xochi had just turned thirteen and Crucita was her new archenemy. My daughter didn't even want to be there but, since I was the lesser of the two evils in her life, she deigned to walk around with me.

There weren't that many people about, being as hot as it was and all. "This is pitiful," Xochi said, typically bored. Everything was boring to her, except hanging out with her friends. But the bazaar actually was kind of pitiful. The booths were the usual church-fair variety—a cakewalk, darts, and shooting balloons with a popgun. The prizes, mostly kids' toys, were used donations. There was no cotton candy or funnel cake but there was a deep-fried-gorditas-and-beer stand. Yeah, the church was selling beer.

I went over and got a beer for myself and a snow cone for Xochi. I looked around for Crucita and my son. They were already busy trying to make converts, or at least she was. That's when I spied the redhead from the middle school. She had a *chamba*. She was managing the ring toss booth. *Mi' ja* and I went and bought a roll of tickets to try our luck. Or try my luck, since my daughter said she'd have no part of such embarrassing displays.

The teens had set up a stage and were dancing to music spun by a DJ. "I'm gonna check out the music, Dad," Xochi said and strolled over to watch. All kinds of old-school music came on—from "I'm Your Puppet" to "Achy Breaky Heart" and everything by Elvis. The most recent song I heard was "Macarena." When it played, all the kids and their moms jumped on the stage to do it. Even for an old guy like me, *Cabuche* was retro.

Back at the booth, the sun drilling down on my head, I had no competitors. The object of the game was to get at least two out of three knitting rings around the necks of any of the two-quart plastic soda bottles set up on the ground. The prize was the bottle you snagged—grape, orange, strawberry, root beer, cream soda, or cola—all generic brands. The roll of tickets I bought actually paid for the sodas I ended up winning. With scarcely a smile, the redhead would reach out and hand me the rings while staying in the shade in the corner of

the booth. Every now and then Redhead would take out a hankie that was tucked inside the front of her white peasant blouse and pat her freckled chest and flushed cheeks. "This heat' s insufferable," I said, trying to start up a conversation to no avail, while I won bottle after bottle. The game was really set up for kids—with short arms.

I scored ten bottles before I finally had the nerve to ask her if she remembered me from school. "I think so," was all she said. Then she looked away.

I' d never had much luck with gorgeous women. Cute ones—like my ex, sure. But not women who not only looked good but who probably rustled steer in their free time. You knew right away you' d better not mess with them.

Well, I had really remembered *her*, all right.

And that' s why I made a fool of myself trying to get her attention.

"Come on, Dad," called Xochitl, who is her dad' s flower princess and has already made me promise to give her the biggest quinceañera Sun-land Park has ever seen. That wouldn' t be hard, I figured, considering how small our town is. Still, Xochi and her mom are already making plans that could do a man' s wallet a lot of damage. Mi' ja, up on the stage, wanted me to go and join the group doing the chicken dance. I knew the chicken dance. She and her brother had taught me at home. At home was one thing but in public was another. "Hey, Dad!" Michael called. He' d seen his sister up there and ran up, too.

I looked at Redhead. I thought I saw her smile. That was all the encouragement I needed. I ran over to the stage and jumped on. I was the tallest chicken shaking his butt up there. She was looking, all right. And she was laughing, covering her mouth with her hand. Shy *and* gorgeous, man, I thought. What a sexy combination. I kept shaking my butt, moving with the crowd and smiling over at her. And she just kept laughing. By then, I couldn' t be stopped. Next, we started doing the electric slide. This time, I saw that Redhead wasn' t laughing anymore. In fact, she looked a little disturbed. That' s when I knew I wasn' t exactly impressing her.

Afterward, to hold on to the little pride I had left, I didn' t bother collecting my sodas.

But Redhead and I were destined, as they say. Five months later, something happened. Something terrible on the one hand. On the other, it turned out to be what changed the life of a guy whose heart needed some serious mending. She was wearing one of her

homemade dresses, made of seersucker or something Mrs. Cleaver-ish. But she could make anything look good. Ms. Redhead came up to me just as I was leaving, to ask for help in a "highly urgent and personal matter."

She took me totally off guard. And before she even explained what it was all about, I blurted out, "Don' t worry, camarada," like I was in the Partido Liberal Mexicano. The party had made its headquarters right in my hometown over a hundred years ago, just before La Revolución. Those guys were among my role models. "You can count on me," I blurted out and all but saluted my new generala.

Whenever I talked like that, all Chicanoed out, using old-school, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* jive, my ex used to say, "You want to be a revolutionary, Mike? Start with me. A social movement begins with one woman and one man at a time."

It was too late for that woman to be Crucita. Standing in front of Redhead so close I could almost count the freckles across her nose and those that splashed down her biceps, I thought, Maybe it isn' t too late for the too-late guy.



GABO

Santo and friend of God, thank you for listening to me,

My saludos to you and to the Lord, my Father in Heaven. Please ask Him to look down kindly on me—I am trying to be good.

Padre Pío, I know you do not measure faith by how much a person dedicates himself to reading scriptures but I want you to know I read not only the Bible but everything. It was no one's recommendation or insistence. Reading just came to me. That was how I learned English. I read it before I could pronounce it. When I first went to school en Los Estados, my tía Regina made them put me in the right year for my age. Because I was un chavito migrante they were ready to stick me in the first grade. I was eight years old. I was so quiet they figured I did not know anything. Two weeks later, they moved me up to the fourth.

By then I had read my papá's old copy of *The Communist Manifesto*. He used to carry it everywhere with him. I was only six years old when I first tried to read it. My father saw how hard I was struggling, so he started helping me.

My tía Regina taught me a little Latin. My bisabuelo Metatron believed in a classical education. Regina first learned to read with a teacher who stayed on the hacienda. She always says, "rancho," but they raised cattle, so I imagine it was more than that. Father Juan Bosco has promised to teach me Latin but so far *nusquam*. I remember my papá would stay up with me, no matter how tired we were, and my mother calling, "Get to bed." He would light una velita if we did not have electricity and when the candle burned out, then it was time to sleep. By sunup we were all out there working in the fields.

My mother never learned to read and did not care about books. My older sister, Karla, was a lot like our mother. She was a hard worker, too, but unlike our mother, she never complained about anything. If my hermana had an extra piece of fruit or gum, she would share it with me. When I was little she was the one who would give me a bath, outside in a tina. Karla

never had any toys, so I was her doll. Then she started getting a bosom. My sister was still a child, twelve or thirteen years old. She would get so embarrassed. She was upset all the time. She did not want to go to school anymore. The other labor-camp niños teased her. I have not seen my hermana in about four years, Santito. Please pray for her.

Mr. Vigil, my English teacher, said a serious young man like me who never smiles would probably appreciate the Russians. So he started me with Dostoyevsky's novels. I read *The Idiot* and *el Gambler. Crime and Punishment* was my favorite.

"Do you think that by Raskolnikov turning himself in, God forgave him?" I asked Mr. Vigil. My English teacher thought for a moment, then he said in that very slow way of talking that he has, like he is thinking of not just one book but all the books he has ever read, "I don't know, Gabriel." He is getting ready to retire soon. I hope our next teacher brings us up to the twentieth century. This is no reflection on the Russians, just on Mr. Vigil, who only likes very long books with a lot of details. I stopped in the middle of *los Brothers Karamazov* because of my papá's disappearance. It is hard for me to concentrate on anything anymore besides that.

In el Padre Juan Bosco's library in his casita all he has are religious books. He said I could help myself to read anything I found interesting. He has a collection of Bibles. One is so old if you try to turn the pages the paper almost disintegrates, like dead moths' wings between your fingers. He keeps it open to the Book of Psalms on a wooden bookstand on his desk. I had never been in a house where people owned their own books. I mean, so many. My tía Regina has a few. They are on the bookshelf next to the fireplace. I have read them all. I can stay up and read un libro entero in one night or at least by daybreak. If they are thick like Dostoyevsky's, then it takes me perhaps three nights. Afterward I must sleep. I sleep and sleep and then I start another book.

After *The Communist Manifesto* I went on to the teachings of Mao Ze-dong. My father also had *Das Kapital* and some writings by Lenin and Engels. Everywhere we went to work, following the harvest, the books came with us. El Subcomandante Marcos was a hero of mi papá for so bravely pointing out to the world that the NAFTA agreement was not going to make things better for the Mayan people but worse. If it were not for my mother who said, "No, señor," he would have gone down to Chiapas

to join los Zapatistas in their battle against the government. I was only about five years old, but I remember them arguing about it. "My mother was an indígena," he'd say. "My own grandfather, who thought he was the last of the great hacendados, threw us off his land because he didn't want us to inherit it."

I remember tanto, San Pío; even if I am not sixteen years old yet, sometimes I feel like I have lived many lifetimes, not just one. And not just my own. I remember my papá's stories. I remember, too, when I was left with my tía Regina when I was very little. I was so upset, being left behind. I was too small to understand how mis padrecitos were trying to spare me from working in los files. I did not think of it in terms of them having so little food or not enough wood for the stove or things like that once they got back to Chihuahua. I got into reading even more because then I would not have to think about when they were coming back for me. My tía Regina was always so good. It wasn't that. I just missed my mamá. I missed my papá, too. Like I missed how he would pick me up and carry me on his back, especially when I would get tired of working out in the pisca. I would cry like el chavalito that I was. My mother complained about everything. So she would say to me, "This is why you have to go to school, mi' jito. So you don't end up living the life of a burra, like your mamá." That made me cry. It hurt to think of my mother as a mule. I cried a lot when my father told me she was not coming back for me. I cannot remember a time when I wasn't crying over something gone forever. But I am a man now almost, and I know that tears are useless.

Mañana I promise, Santo apreciado, no reading, only meditating on virtues of penance.

Your most undeserving discípulo



MIGUEL

We outgrew each other. That's what happened in my marriage. People talk about how a couple is supposed to grow to keep the relationship strong. Well, Crucita grew in her direction and I in mine. I got more involved in grassroots organizing and spent less time at home. She found comfort with a bubba preacher named Prescott from Silver City.

All I gotta say is I hope he does not move into my house.

"It's not your house anymore," my ex says. I may have moved out, but I still think I have something to say about it.

"That's always been your problem, Mike," she says. "You always got something to say about everything."

I shared the rather shameful news of my wife's infidelity with Regina, who somehow has managed to take over most of my life. Actually, she's not that kind of woman. I don't know what kind of woman she is but she's not the clinging type—that's clear. But that's how women do it. They sneak up on you. Before you know it, you're acting like a big tonto over them. Then, they got you hitched. Next thing you know, you're paying taxes on a house you don't even get to live in anymore. As for finding Redhead's brother, I said I'd help. He sounded like a righteous man, so I am sorry to even think it, but for my money, he's been long dead.

My therapist thinks I'm afflicted with a "narcissist personality disorder" —possibly. He didn't actually come out and say it. I snuck a glance at his notes one day during a session. He was getting over a bad cold and ran out of the room in the middle of a coughing fit. I kind of peeked into my file that he left on his chair. Great. So, that's the verdict, I thought, not as sure of myself at that point, as he thought I *might* be, and no longer having all that much confidence in my therapist, either.

It was Crucita's idea that I get counseling.

Maybe I *am* self-absorbed or maybe my affliction is paranoia but I felt I got no pity from Regina regarding my cheating wife. When a man comes out looking duped, women tend to

feel sorry for him. They view him as a potentially good guy. Instead, she looked at me with those deep-set eyes of hers, which she seems to not even be conscious of what they could do to a man, and said, "Come on, Miguel, you know that everyone at the school thinks you're a Casanova. You've gone out with every single woman who's worked there."

Every single woman but her, that was.

Now that I'm a divorced man I feel free to date whomever I please. But a Casanova? Ouch. Every time I start going out with a nice girl, she gets serious on me right away. Crucita was a nice girl. A nice girl who sprung on me she was pregnant just as I was about to apply for grad school.

When I was in college I used to write poems about Zapata, Pancho Villa, Che Guevara—all my revolutionary heroes. "It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees." That's not a quote of mine but of Emiliano Zapata's. My own poetry stunk. Crucita followed me around everywhere. Girls love poets. You say, "I'm a poet," and they say right away, "Write a poem for me," or worse, "Write a poem about me."

Secretly, Crucita wanted me to give up all that "nonsense"—not just calling myself a poet but also my "radicalism." She said I should buy us a big house and join the country club—spend my time golfing, her doing charity work. When I refused to live like that, she settled with living in Sunland Park next door to her folks.

Her family convinced her that my teaching was a "noble profession" and even my involvement in community issues was nothing to snub her nose at. Maybe the kids gave her some satisfaction but I sure didn't. Then she became a born-again and gave her life meaning. That and her part-time crusade to end domestic violence everywhere.

My own activism keeps me going, especially on those days when you question every decision for yourself that you've ever made. I'm one of the few people around here who still calls himself Chicano. A lot of people don't like that word. They don't get it. They think it means gangbanging. It's like one of those outdated labels that most people never understood and now everybody hates and has no use for. Like *feminist*. Half the women I know don't like that word, either, but when you ask them what it means, they say they don't really know.

Things just keep closing in by the minute. One day the two-party system is gonna sound

obsolete and even a bad idea. Mark my words.



GABO

Mi Más Querido Santo,

One of the greatest favors for which I feel so indebted to our Lord is that His Majesty permits me to unburden myself to his servant in heaven. But today, Padre Pío, allow me to tell you about un regalo that He has brought us around here. Father Juan Bosco told me that los Hermanos Franciscanos encourage friendship. For this reason, I am most grateful that we now have others to share our humble vidas with. By we, I mean mi tía and myself.

Sometimes I feel my aunt' s loneliness like un León feroz slowly coming toward us from far away. One day I' ll have to leave her and then who will she have? Everyone needs familia. And when your familia goes away or when they die on you, then a good friend around helps. She always mentions la Señora Uriel, but they never see each other. "Too busy with work and life," is what my tía has said about never seeing her only amiga. But my tía Regina has finally made herself a new friend in el Chongo Man. We know little about the schoolteacher but I sense in my heart he is well-meaning, even if he goes about it clumsily.

My best friend is Jesse Arellano.

(He is *not* well-meaning, Su Reverencia. Pero that is why I consider him such a great gift from Our Lord. He stands in need of God' s consolation. Please keep him in your prayers, Santito.)

"Jesse Arellano as in *the* Arellanos, ese," he said to me when we first met on the basketball court at the Catholic high school in Santa Teresa. Being a private school, it has a very decent basketball court. Santa

Teresa is the town between Cabuche and El Paso. It also shares la frontera with México. The Santa Teresa border isn' t used for a lot except the business of the narcotraficantes. The sheriff' s deputies drive around and harass us sometimes because we are out there playing on what they say is private property. But usually they leave us alone when they see we are only trying to throw a few hoops.

I looked at Jesse like he was talking to me in Greek.

"What up?" he said. "You not from around here or somethin' ? My older brother is El Toro Arellano... . You know, the guy who helped start los Palominos back in the day? He' s doing time over there in La Tuna now... . Are you really that out of it, man, ¿o qué, ese?"

My new friend was not *exactly* claiming he was one of the notorious Arellanos from Nuevo Laredo. Everyone along the borderlands has heard about esos narcos. He just left it open so that you might come to that conclusion yourself. Obviously, los Palominos counted on people being stupid. But one thing seemed obvious, Padre Pío. The Palominos were penny-ante gangbangers compared to los carteles grandes that reign over the borderlands. (*Penny ante*. I read that in *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. It is one of the libros Mr. Vigil passed on to me. But penny ante does not mean the Palominos are not locos.) Jesse forgave my ignorance regarding his status, he said, because I was so good at basketball. (I almost always win.) We have started meeting there now and then when I have time between my job and school and Jesse has time between his penny-ante activities.

He has put aside the fact that I have plans on becoming un hermano of the Church. To him, that makes me a "nerd" or I have a lot of nerve. (He laughed after saying that because he thought it was funny that it rhymed.)

One day, maybe to test out which it was, Jesse slammed the ball right at my face. Blood gushed out of my nose. "It was an acci—" he started to say, sniggering like it was not. Next thing I knew, Santito, he was pleading for me to let go when I had his neck locked between my thighs. (I learned that movida at school, trying to get on the wrestling team.) After that, there were no more accidental slam balls from my new best friend.

Another time he said, "More than anything, I' m in awe of a guy who is voluntarily gonna be without a woman his whole life. Never. Not even once. Do you have to be a virgin before you go in?" he asked, tossing the ball from one of his boxy hands to the other. " ' Cause if you don' t, you better get you some before you do." When my face went red Jesse really cracked up.

I am not sure what the big deal is about sex, Padre Pío. I know I might be saying that because I do not have experience, but that is not the point. When you give yourself to Our Lord, desires of the flesh must be sacrificed. (... *And be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch*

not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. Corinthians Two, Chapter Six, Verse Seventeen.)
"Not just sex," I told mi amigo, "but you must keep away from alcohol, drugs, parties, all kinds of loud music, and cars with fancy hydraulics like yours and which you are so proud of. And while I am at it, you will not have use for sinful pride, either. You will have God to fulfill you." I tried to explain it like that to Jesse with all the conviction I carry in my heart, Santo.

Afterward, he just stared at me, like he does a lot. One of his eyes wanders, so it is not easy to tell if he is giving you a hard look or someone else. Then he spits out a big wad of phlegm and you move back anyway. "Man," he said finally, "you are really weird."

As long as he does not try to get me in the gang. All we do is shoot hoops. And talk or "chill," as he calls it. He tells me all about his "cool" world. "Sex and drugs, man. That's what counts, vato," he says; and then he spits.

Jesse himself knew a girl, in the biblical sense, when he was only eleven and was brought into los Palominos. He said his brother, El Toro, had been his sponsor. "You need someone to vouch for you," he said. Not just anyone could join the gang. "You gotta have what it takes," he says all the time. What it takes, from what he has told me, Padre Pio, is a wish for a life in prison or worse.

When a chava gets brought into the gang it is truly a tragic fate cast upon a female. Except in the Old Testament I had never heard of such barbarism, Su Reverencia. He did not say rape. But that is what it is. What he said was that a girl throws a pair of dice and whatever number comes up, that is the number of guys who will have sex with her that night. Some of the girls are barely thirteen years old when they join. They also have to get "jumped in," which meant that their future "sisters" all beat la chavita up together. I walked away from the ball court and leaned against the fence. I wanted to vomit.

What kind of mother and father are at home, I kept thinking all that night, who wouldn't ask what happened to their hija when she returned home half the chava she was when she left? Beaten up and raped by kids who told you that they were going to be your "familia" from now on. What kind of family does that?

In my English class there is una chava who is in los Palominos. She can hardly read. (They pass failing students at my school just to get rid of them, Padre Pio.) Everything comes hard to her, all the subjects, I mean. Tiny Tears already has a baby. I asked her one day if she was planning on getting married once she finished

high school. She stared at me with almost a scowl, as if she resented my question. I wanted to ask if she even knew who the father was but I decided to leave her alone. Tiny Tears hardly ever speaks. But behind all the makeup I fear is a very scary girl.

Su Reverencia, at night, as usted already knows, I devote prayers to Jesse and his brother in prison and to all of los Palominos, for God's light to enter their demented souls. Even if they do not have mothers and fathers who care, I beseech God y todos los santos that they find a way to forgive themselves. Jesse likes to tell me he forgives me for being such a nerd. He says he hopes he never hears of me on the news that I only joined the Church to molest altarboys. Then he laughs that loud cackling laugh that reminds me of a hyena's.

I used to hear hyenas when we crossed over through el desierto toward California when I was un chavito. They frightened me for sure—laughing all together, somewhere in the dark, getting closer. They travel only in packs. That's how they can be so vicious—the fact that there are many of them, they can get hold of a man and just tear him to pieces. They could eat a man vivo and afterward, laugh, todos juntos.

San Pío, thank el Señor for me, por favor, for all His blessings and considerations of His imperfect servant, but most especially for sending me this boy who is a mirror to my own spiritual shortcomings.

Su servidor, undeserving as I am