

## The Parable of the Brown Sheep

By Christopher González

Once I nearly drowned in a sewer the size of an average in-ground swimming pool only twenty yards behind our trailer house.

But this happened before that. Pretty Boy was already on the barbecue pit by the time Chuy was drinking the bottle of Mad Dog, the one he'd later throw at me—empty, of course. My brother was in full crying mode by then, telling the same tired stories he always regurgitated when he had cheap drink in his diabetic bloodstream. I think cheap booze has a sort of power over some people. Broke, down-on-their-luck kind of people. I can't imagine that elitist bastards who talk like Gordon Gekko all day long with their "Greed is good" bluster, arguing over Romalian typefaces on magnificent businesscards, whining about another mil lost as they smooth their Pat Riley hair, actually get all weepy and sloppy after drinking loads of Don Pérignon or twelve-year old scotch. Then again, maybe they do. But I do know this: take a pobrecito down on his luck and give him a bottle of Mad Dog or some other bum wine, and man, watch the tragedies coalesce into full-scale narrative misery. I'm convinced bum wine has alchemical properties, because it makes stupid shit sound like wisdom faster than the fabled philosopher's stone.

I was thinking of this undervalued potency of bum wine when Chuy, fat and disgusting Chuy, well-lubricated by Mad Dog and who knew what other chemical enhancements he was able to get his hands on, began his well-practiced shit-from-shinola story. About how he could have been so great if he'd only done this or bought that. About how he'd missed his chance at true love with the only woman who had truly understood him—a daytime stripper named Loretta, who was married and thought that going to night school to earn a GED would somehow improve her relationship with her roustabout husband. About how he was going to win it all back someday. But Chuy was a born loser who had never had anything to begin with. So how could he win back anything?

Nearby, the liquid shit from our sewer bubbled, reminding us that it needed to be drained if we wanted to continue to use the toilet and not have it back up into the trailer. That fucking thing spoke to us in its own way, just as a dairy cow full of milk nags a farmer when her udders are near bursting. It would gurgle softly, a soft belch every now and again just to let us know it

was there. I mean, we knew it was there. How could we not? It gladly accepted our deposits of piss and shit, and in returned it only asked that we drain it every now and again. Thus there was a healthy dose of mutual respect between us.

See, we had a pump that had been fashioned from parts of a dozen other machines. Chuy might have engineered it, but mostly likely Bugs gave it to him. Anyway, we ran a long orange extension cord out to it that made it go. No on/off switch. Just plug that bitch in and BAM! It would suck the liquid shit out like nobody's business. The sewage would pour out about ten yards from the pit, where it slowly seeped into the ground. Who knows how long it would take the sewage to reach the aquifer or if it would at all. We didn't think about that when drinking water from the garden hose. The whole process was a disgusting menace, but back then we could get away with not giving it much more than a second thought. Plus, I nearly drowned in that shit, as I've already said. And I'm not talking about a septic tank, either. This was a big hole in the earth filled with raw sewage, with sheets of corrugated tin and metal fencing laid over the top of it as if that made it safe. As a little kid I would run across the thin metal covering just to see if I could. Later, for some reason I can't remember, the sheets were mostly removed, exposing the nastiness for all to see. And the liquid was as black as it was fetid. My greatest fear, always, was that I would slip and fall into it, unable to climb back out. But that didn't keep me from finding myself near its precipice more often than not, the way deadly things always seem to call out for the innocent and the ignorant.

So the shit bubbled as if it wanted to add its two cents to Chuy's own bullshit. Meanwhile, as parts of Pretty Boy were sizzling over the glowing coals, Chuy sat in a chair rusted by years of morning dew, blasted by pale sand and a New Mexico sun. If you've been in the southeastern part of the state, then you know what I'm talking about. It's pure alkali out there, and car paint gets stripped before you've paid the damned thing off. Mostly, there is prairie grass, yucca, and mesquite that keeps the dirt in its place. The story goes that the Spanish explorer Coronado was the first European to stumble on this area and called it the Llano Estacado. Later, no one but the Comanches or a character from a Cormac McCarthy novel would be caught dead trying to cross it. It is, as Coronado described, a sea of grass, and not much else. And I'm not talking about that sweet grass Walt Whitman imagined himself and his reader loafing on—perhaps lush and green in your own imagination like the 18<sup>th</sup> hole at Augusta. If you

were dropped in the middle of the Llano Estacado without modern conveniences, it would kill you before you could make it out.

Sometimes huge dust storms would create otherworldly skies, pink in hue that seemed more appropriate for Mars, and the dust and sand seemed to force its way into all things no matter how stern your resolve. When the wind whipped the sand around I was always quick to find shelter in the trailer and refused to go out in it. But the stinging sand never fazed Chuy. I think he liked it. Maybe it reminded him that he was alive or some other poetic nonsense. And he didn't even shield his face or turn his head at just the right angle in order to avoid the brunt of the wind. Instead, he'd just stick his chin out like he was inviting a first punch. That epitomized the difference between us. He could take it, and I couldn't. And not only could he take it, he sought it...whatever it was.

Anyway, he just sat there while tears rolled down his slippery brown face as the light drained from the sky. It was nearly evening, the sunset looking like a postcard you'd find in a gift shop, sort of picturesque, only you could smell three weeks' worth of flushed toilets that had been left to fester in a hole in the ground, which is what you don't get when someone sends you a postcard. But the wind was easy that early evening and only gently lifted the smells and aromas of our surroundings. If I had tried I could have distinguished all sorts of qualia that I took for granted on a daily basis. But that was exactly the type of stuff I usually tried to block out. I enjoyed imagining what places like Seattle and Bangor and Prince Edward Island were like. The latter I had my mother and her unholy devotion to the Anne of Green Gables books to thank for placing into my file of places to visit someday. She loved that stuff.

As Chuy wept I glimpsed his brown hands, covered with scars and puncture wound from cruel steel gaffs. In a cockfight, when a ref cries, "Handle that!" you go to separate the two gallitos because the gaffs are stuck deep inside. Such moments require the handler to be lightning quick. The longer the gaff is stuck inside the gallito's body, the greater the potential for immediate damage. Permanent damage you don't care about. How many cockfighters have I seen happy as a panzón before the Christmas tamale table, preparing to count their money as they toss the half-dead gallito in the barrica? And hell, even a dead bird can win. I've seen it happen. So you want to get the gaff out fast, yet with the precision of a surgeon. You don't want to fuck shit up, because you're pulling the other dude's gaffs out of your own gallito. But sometimes, just as you're moving in to take the cruel steel out of the gallito, the gaffs suddenly

become free. “Holy fuck, watch that!” the ref might shout, but by then it’s too late. The gallito is still trying to kick ass, see? Shuffling his cyborg spurs like it was all he was born to do. And what if your hands just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? Next time you’re around a nailgun, put your hand in the way and see what happens. Well, then you just got yourself a few puncture wounds for your troubles, pendejo! Something to write home about! I have a few of those scars on my own hands, but nothing to the extent of what Chuy had. Chuy was a born handler even if he had to be rolled into the palenque. He was hell in overalls and a black felt cowboy hat. Preternaturally quick. Yet even he caught a bad shuffle every now and again. It’s part of the cockfighting game. When the gaff hits you, you try to be all macho and act like you can shake it off. But everyone in the audience knows how that feels—because they’re galleros, too—and so their compassion goes out to you. A collective *Oooohh!* for your troubles. Maybe some nice old viuda might say a little prayer for you and light a San Juditas candle to help ease your pain. I don’t know if that helped. What I knew was that if Chuy lived to old age his hands would be useless. But now, despite his scars, his hands had the strength of a stonemason. He clutched that fresh bottle of Mad Dog with those scarred hands tenderly, like it was a baby. But just try taking it from him. It was tragic, no shitting. He looked like the Latino version of Hank Williams Jr., only fatter and with far less musical talent. He could have been the Mexican Bocephus, the dude who wrote the song about how a country boy can survive. Man, that’s just ridiculous. Chuy’d been nowhere near Dixie, unless you count the Rio Grande Valley as the South people keep talking about that’s going to rise again.

Before Chuy had started to drink, I’d just had it with being starved. I’d had it with him, to tell the truth. That’s why I put Pretty Boy on the grill in the first place. I mean, there was never enough to eat in our house anyway. This had gone on for as long as my mother had been gone. Most times there was little choice in what to eat, but at least there was something. At that point, though, I remember we had been without food for at least three days, which is to say I had been out of food for three days. Chuy had resources I didn’t have. And why was this happening at all? Maybe Chuy was trying to teach me a lesson. Maybe he thought I was the reason our mother wasn’t around anymore. Maybe he was trying to toughen me up like one of his gallitos. Was I a sarcastic little shit? Yes. Was I a lazy bastard who waited until the last minute to do everything? Yes. Did I deserve to be starved? Fuck no. Now picture me and Chuy in the middle of nowhere in New Mexico. No car. No neighbors that gave two shits about us. The closest of those who

might care was miles away, anyway. He was a county sheriff, so we damned sure weren't going to ask him for any help—unless we were ready to get busted. Chuy usually had some amount of mota on him, and anyway you could smell it on him from pretty far away. It was like we were on an island in the desert on Coronado's sea of grass, ten acres of sandy land riddled with bone white caliche rocks the size of human skulls protruding from the ground. Easy to twist an ankle or knee if you weren't careful. And tethered at strategic distances from one another on our tiny island, thirty-three roosters bred for fighting. Some reds, some greys, and a few spangled. Beyond that there was little else. I mean, that's all we had, as well as each other. Since I was about ten, Chuy was the only parent I had. That would have made him twenty-two when he was forced to become a parent.

Leading up to those days of starvation, we managed by eating on the last of our canned food; the refrigerator no longer held anything beyond mustard and barbecue sauce. Not even some bread to dip into the barbecue sauce. A can of potato soup made me so sick I puked for twenty-four hours nonstop. I should have known better. What the fuck would we have a can of potato soup in the trailer for? I suppose the can was dented or some shit. Botulism. Never saw puke so yellow. It made me think of scrambled eggs, and that sent my hunger soaring again. I retched so hard I must've pulled up intestinal matter that was without question closer to the exit than the entrance, I'm sure. It was foul. When I felt better, Chuy made a cake from an old mix he found in the pantry. It tasted like buttered flour with the tiniest little creeps you ever saw. Chuy called them "weebles." At that point I didn't even care. I could have been eating tiramisu in Italy for all I knew.

The shit was desperate, for real. I want to convey that sense of desperation. I think you can only feel that way if you sense that your time might really be up. I've felt that a few times in my life, unfortunately, and this was the first one. I thought for sure that I was going to starve to death. And I didn't know how to read Chuy's lack of concern or interest. He just went about his day, trying to fix broken fishing reels. Oiling up old saddles. Rebuilding the carburetor to the Chevy pickup that hadn't started in years. I was used to going to sleep with a rumbling belly. I was a thin kid anyway, but this was becoming positively third-world. I say that now, but at the time I phrased it in my mind as, "This is frightening." Such a strange word for me. It's so WASPish. So Victorian. Only a Brit could have topped me by saying it was "positively" frightening, and then adding the word "mate" at the end. Perhaps it is more accurate that I

associated the word fright with the British gothic. Was that crazed chava Mary Shelley working in my unconscious? Did I expect to be starved then ghoulishly restored to life by fucking galvanic means? It sounds crazy now, but all sorts of locuras were being conjured by who knows what areas and regions of my brain. Yet through it all I had anger. Puro coraje. Plus, I wasn't a fat güey like Chuy. And that pissed me off, too. How was it that Chuy was so damned fat? It angered me while highlighting our power dynamic. Anyway, I knew the situation was dire, and I hoped I wouldn't die. I recognized that no one would find me unless they had a reason to look for me. And even if they knew I was there Chuy could just throw me into the sewer pit and say that I had run off or got married. That scared me so much that I prayed long prayers deep into the night. The thumping of my heart was like a dynamo powering these one-way messages to God. I'd been to church when Mom was still around, but I'd forgotten just about everything I might have learned. I tried not to complain to Chuy, for I imagined he might get me in my sleep. Throw a plastic bag over my head and choke my ass out until I was done flopping around. Then he'd weigh me down with scrap iron to make sure I wouldn't float to the top of the sewer. Or there was the huge motorized grinder that we used to run corn, milo, and other grains through to make it easier for the pollitos to eat. Chuy had put this thing together, and it was completely over the top. The motor was far too powerful for the grinder, which was actually a meat grinder—the kind that is used in aid of preparing the meat for tamales. The result was an abomination. Sometimes you had to push the grain down the opening a little because it would get stuck. Lying inert, it would lull you into thinking you needed to poke around in it, usually with your fingers. Then it would suddenly roar to life. It wasn't made for grain. It was made for meat. Like the sewer pump, there was no on/off switch for the grinder—you just plugged it in. Plus, the loud whine of the motor always unnerved me. It was easy for me to imagine how Chuy could put that monstrosity to good use. A mezcla of me to feed the birds, tuppence a bag! Other potential fates, ones more horrible, I simply forced myself to block out of my mind as I worked to fall asleep each evening. Waking up was the hardest part of my day, but I was grateful that I had another day no matter how shitty my existence was. Like Victor's creation, I enjoyed being alive very much.

Chuy was really the lucky one. He had Bugs—a sycophant suck ass if you ever saw one—to lug him around. Bugs wasn't his name. His name was Eusebio or Eliseo or something like that. I'd dubbed him Bugs because he had the most ludicrous bug-eyes I'd ever seen. I guess

he thought he could learn something about the cockfighting game by sticking to Chuy's hip. I'm not sure Chuy gave two shits about Bugs, but he used him when and where he could. He didn't speak much English, and so I called him Bugs with impunity, the sorry fuck. So, Chuy had Bugs; I didn't have shit. I cursed myself for not planning ahead and stocking up on a few people who I could lean on in a pinch.

A few months before I had dated a Mormon with big tits who let me feel her up, but when her family came with the conversion blitz package, I called an audible at the line of scrimmage and ran like my balls were en fuego. One minute I was invited to dinner, the next I was fighting for my eternal soul in the arena of high-pressure sales. Two "elders" scarcely three years older than me pushed me around with the *Book of Mormon* like agents in *The Matrix*. These vatos were relentless, and so I unfurled a litany of my own comprised of the harshest maldiciones that I could muster. Kim was nice enough to drive me all the way home, urging me to reconsider. I wanted to, for access to her body if nothing else. Cuerpas like hers don't fall out of trees. I ended up telling her Moroni and his gold plates couldn't drag me back as I tried to sex her up.

She hated me after that, which was fine by me at the time. It's probable that I hated her because I had realized she was more concerned with proselytizing than her interests in me. And that hurt, because I craved her company. She listened to me, allowing me to talk about whatever was on my mind. Kim liked to listen to me talk in Spanish, even if she didn't know what I was saying. She looked like the kind of girl you'd see in a college brochure—the kind with the knowing smile that says "I'm confident enough in my body to wear thong panties, but I'm not whore enough to show you." Next to her pic in the brochure there might be a short testimonial about how amazing the college experience is. She was pretty in a nerdish way with a tennis player's body, but beneath all that attractiveness lay a singular purpose. Maybe she wanted to convert me before the Jehovah's Witnesses got to me. Or the Baptists. Or maybe she got credits in the afterlife for bringing lost brown sheep into the shepherd's pen. I don't know. What I do know is that she wasn't really interested in me, and maybe that was okay, because I didn't really see myself with her long term. It also didn't help that, for some reason, my hunger constantly turned my thoughts to my blond Mormon. But I didn't know that at the time of my near conversion. So, like an idiot, I had dumped her months before. In desperation, one night I called

her. See how absurd this is? We had a phone, but we didn't even have potted meat and saltine crackers. After four rings, her older sister named Maggie answered.

She sounded like customer service. "Hello?" Silence. "Yes?"

I stammered, managing only a muted grunt.

"Who is this?"

I cleared my throat. "Is Kimberly there?"

Silence. Then, the rasping sound of a hand covering the receiver. Muffled voices that might have been on the other side of a wall. A bit of giggling. A shriek, followed by what was undeniably laughter.

"Um, yeah. She's in Utah for the summer. May I take a message?"

I swallowed. "Yeah. Tell her that the twelve kids she's gonna have someday are gonna leave her twat the size of Bryce Canyon." And then, "You, too, you fucking brutal cunt."

Click!

My fury taken out on the phone was so fake, even I wanted to make fun of myself. Still, I would have begged for forgiveness, may have even considered becoming a brown sheep for the Mormon religion, saved from the onslaught to come, if Kim had only taken the phone and whispered, all breathless and panting with worry, "Are you okay? Can I come pick you up?" Instead, I had verbally abused her and her sister. I was as good as dead.

But even then I couldn't stop thinking about Kim. The worse my situation got, the more I fantasized that she would somehow come to my rescue. She has a car, I kept telling myself. Surely she'll want to come see me. I'd insulted her, her sister, and her religion. Wasn't it possible that she would get in her car, drive the twenty minutes to my place, and tell me what the fuck time it was? She would drive up in the nice, sensible Toyota Corolla her parents bought for her and honk the horn.

"Get out here, motherfucker!" she'd scream as she slammed the car door, advancing toward the trailer house. Then she'd see me. See that I was fucked up and weak, starving. Then she'd understand.

But that wasn't right. Kim wouldn't say that. She wouldn't use such language. Despite letting my hands have their way with her figure, she couldn't condescend to utter foul language. Her utterance of motherfucker! was me channeling me through Kim. Maybe that's not what she'd say, but she'd be mad. Angry. Furious to the point of tears. It would be more accurate to

think she would say something like “How dare you!” She would scold me, perhaps point an accusing finger, not like Uncle Sam but rather like those classical images of the God-sent Nathan exposing King David for his hypocrisy and crying out to the murdering king, “*You* are the man!” Yes, David had blown it, and so had I. Kim would point at me indignantly, and I would hate her and fall in love with her, too. I’d fall to my knees, desperate for her to take me somewhere, anywhere from that place. All my pride a mere prelude to this disgrace and potential sweet redemption. How would my ancestors feel about this? De rodillas in front of the white proselytizer. Accounted as the brown sheep before the slaughter. At that point, who cared? The ancestors weren’t filling my belly, were they? They didn’t know how I was starving, nor did they ever know the touch of such a white woman. Plus, what if she didn’t want to slaughter the brown sheep? What if she was Bo-fucking-Peep?

“But why did you say those terrible things to me and Margaret?” This girl didn’t even use contractions! Her voice would quaver, her pouty lip tremble ever so slightly—like a luscious fruit just waiting to be picked. Such a terrible cliché, I know. But it was like I wanted to eat her—in a sexual sense, in a literal sense. I imagined myself like an Aztecan nosferatu licking every drop of her precious lifeblood from her ivory skin, and in *Re-Animator* fashion, I’d resurrect her and do it all over again to please my personal god of lust. In that moment I was a postapocalyptic zombie with only one beautiful blond Mormon left on the menu that could sate my desire. I never knew such a hunger.

She would turn her head and gaze into the sun, giving me her best profile. Her arms would be folded as if she were cold, despite the shimmering heat. “Why do you have a problem with Moroni?” she’d ask as she tucked some of her fragrant blond hair behind one ear.

“I don’t!” Here I’d genuflect and bow my head, on the verge of tears. “Dear God, just take me somewhere to eat! We’ll talk about Moroni after I’m stuffed!”

It was absurd. Ridiculous imaginings that signaled my desperation, and perhaps, my descent into oblivion.

I gave up on my fantasy conversations with Kim and focused on survival. I had found some packs of old Ramen noodle seasoning to make a sorry ass broth out of, but what the hell’s there to complain about when you’re starving? And at the height of my awful hunger, Chuy left with his compadre Bugs to get high, stopped at the Burger Busters to tank up on double cheeseburgers and extra large cokes, and came back smelling like all the good food he ate.

When he returned with nothing but excuses and empty hands, I thought of what Robert Oppenheimer said when they detonated Fat Man and Little Boy a few hours away a few decades ago: *Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.* I had worlds of my own to destroy. If I had had a third eye I would have opened it right then and there. I mean, I wanted to actually murder Chuy, to obliterate everything in my sight. Drop some bombs of my own. But though he was crude and insensitive, Chuy was dangerous. If I went too far without going all the way, he'd kill me. And I knew it.

"They weren't even that good, pelado," he complained, as if that would make everything all right and quash the hole in my gut. "Buns were stale and the coke was flat." When I made a noise that was a sort of pathetic whine, he started laughing his high-pitched laugh that sounded like an asthmatic running the mile in three minutes flat. "It's Bugs's fault! That güey knew I shouldn't have smoked today. I always get so hungry when I smoke!" He collapsed in front of the swamp cooler and stuck his face in all that cold air, preparing for sleep like he was Rip Van Winkle in the Catskills high on weed. I was jealous of him and his huge gut full of hamburger meat and cheese. I wanted to rip the motherfucker open and scoop him out like a melón.

"Next time I'll get you something, pelado" he assured me as he began to doze off. "Don't you worry about a thing."

For the first time in my life I wanted to spill some serious blood. But I was a young punk, right? Plus, what if I didn't do it right and Chuy got the best of me? He may have been fat, but he was strong as fuck. I'll admit, I was all for the ultraviolence. I was aware of this, but I was too scared to try something against Chuy. I felt an overwhelming bloodlust. I bet it's like how some pregnant women supposedly eat all kinds of weird shit if they are lacking certain minerals in their diet. I mean, they'll eat dirt or whatever they are compelled to eat by whatever they lack in their body chemistry. It was like that. My body needed to smell warm blood. I needed to have it on my hands.

At this point I was no longer thinking, like I was in some sort of fugue state. It was simply instinct. I went straight to the loud rooster that always bit the fuck out of me when I had to hold him for Chuy to inject him or tie gaffs to his spurs. He called him Pretty Boy but I hated that damned bird. I opened the door and entered the jaula, forcing him into a rincón. I grabbed him with impunity. "Eh, cabrón? Not so fucking tough now." I thumped him on his boney face once or twice, letting him bite me for old time's sake. Oh, he would leave a bruise on my arm

that I wouldn't soon forget, but my future plans didn't involve him. His head felt so good in my hand when I cranked him like an old time car. If he had been an accordion, I would have played him like I was Ramón Ayala singing about Los Hermanos del Fierro. I knew exactly the moment Pretty Boy was dead, but I kept winding him up, spinning him around as I thought of Chuy the entire time. His head popped clean off, and there Pretty Boy's body was bouncing around like he'd won the lottery with me still holding his pinche cara. I'm sure he never saw that coming, but I didn't feel a thing at the time except overwhelming elation. Now, I see that I did wrong. I shouldn't have killed him like that. If nothing else, it was disgraceful. But I'm not sorry I killed him.

I went over and threw his head in the sewer like someone skimming rocks in a pond. His head bounced around a few times until that unspeakable blackness consumed him. I admire that, through it all, Pretty Boy never closed his eyes. Chingón to the end.

I was halfway plucking the rooster's feathers when Chuy roused himself, appearing with a bottle of Mad Dog. To tell you the truth I thought he was going to finally lose it for all time when he laid eyes on me, denuding his Pretty Boy. See, that bird cost a lot of money, and on top of that he was a good fighter. Years of tortuous breeding and crossbreeding had finally reached its pinnacle in this bird. He'd won dozens of times—a feat unheard of in a game of razor-sharp steel. I saw Chuy and thought, This is it. He's going to kill me for sure, perhaps throw me in the shit-pit which I now felt dangerously close. He'd probably take the bottle he was holding and smash my head in, maybe use the shards to carve my eyes out and then really go to work on me. But in true Chuy form, he just shrugged and laughed a little giggle and walked over to the mesquite pile to start a fire. By the time the barbecue pit was roaring hot, I was done gutting Pretty Boy.

The sewer smell worked on my gag reflexes. It would need to be pumped before long. I could hear the foul mixture lap softly against the banks. What was Pretty Boy thinking now in the darkness of that horror? No matter. In no time his carcass smelled good, and my belly ached to eat every bite.

And there was Chuy, half-high and half-drunk, now crying his eyes out behind his Ronnie Millsap glasses.

"I've been in love before, pelado. Be glad you don't know the taste of heartbreak."

He said it like it really meant something to him.

"I nearly married her," he sobbed. "Did you know that?"

"But she was married already."

"Fuck that!" he roared. "We were in love!"

My anger surged suddenly. I'd reached that point, you know? Everything about my life disgusted me—New Mexico, Coronado's fucking Llano Estacado, cockfighting, the sewer, myself, but my brother especially. "Chuy," I sneered. "You're a fucking waste. She may have been tall and blonde, but she was never seriously going to leave her husband. You think so? For what? You? The vast fortune to be made in fighting roosters? Your glorious empire to be? You met her in a strip club, and you fucked her a few times. Of course she let you. You were giving her our money," I spat. "That ain't love, Chuy. It only means you're a pendejo for letting her take your heart. Textbook case."

The reality was that I could empathize with Chuy. Didn't I pray that my own curvaceous blond savior might take me away from this shitty nightmare? How much of Joseph Smith's bullshit would I swallow just to call my little rubia my own? Could I accept being a little lost brown sheep? How long would it take me to become a pathetic baboso like Chuy, whining about how true love had slipped through my fingers? But the damage was done. I'd spoken the obvious, and not even San Juditas himself couldn't save the brown sheep now.

He was silent for a moment, no doubt stunned. He stopped crying. I'd never talked like that to him before. Then he murmured, "And what does that make you, puto? I'm all you got in all this world." He leaned forward in the rusted chair. "You remember that, you fucking runt."

I kept my face relaxed and forced a laugh like those bravos who allow themselves to be blindfolded before the firing squad as they puff a cigarette all the while. "You're going to die here, you know. Living your days smoking mota and fighting roosters for pennies. Save yourself the time and just give our money away at the derby. At least that way it would be easier."

"Our money? Hmph." He drained the bottle. "You ain't got shit, mi'jito."

"That's true. I don't. Got nothing here that's mine. And what do you think of that?"

He didn't answer. Perhaps he'd never realized it until now, or at least he'd never wanted to face up to it. Could he see that though I may not have been able to take him, I was more than capable of getting the fuck out of there? That I wasn't bound by anything? That I was still young enough to make something of myself? I pressed my advantage.

"I can't wait to leave your ass in this place." It felt good to say it. "Die here in a dead state, bitch. You're perfect for each other. Bolillos will never understand why you do what it is that you do. To them, you don't belong here. It's *New Mexico* for a reason. You're barbaric for doing something that has been in your family since before the Mayflower. You fight roosters, but that shit's dead. The animal cruelty people have taken care of that, and everyone else thinks you're all third-world and shit. And yet they'll lick their fingers clean of the grease they use to fry chickens who never even had a fucking chance to go out fighting. Finger-lickin' good, right? Poor chickens who lived their entire lives in tiny cages, never seeing the light of day." I swept my hand in a grand gesture. "They're going to outlaw all of this someday. You won't be able to own any of this. And when they do, they've outlawed you, get it? You and me, we're not wanted, if this is what we're going to bring to this country. Our traditions are not wanted. We've got to do something else, something different if we're going to make it. Don't you get it? You can do what you want. Stay here and waste your life. Me? I'm leaving soon. And I don't even think you'll cross my mind when I'm gone."

Of course he did more than cross my mind. But that came much later.

"Nobody gives a damn what you think" he growled. Chuy threw the bottle at me, but I dodged it easily. It crashed against a huge hunk of caliche, transformed into a brilliant shower of glimmering glass like fallen stars. He rocked on his feet as if the earth had suddenly shifted beneath him, catching him off guard. But the earth had not moved for either of us. In that moment, I understood what needed to be done at last. Whether I managed to leave or not, I was determined to make sure that Chuy and I were on opposite sides of a great gulf from here on, with the chance of bringing our sides together again an impossibility worth putting money on. This was our final Pangaea moment. Seismic forces were about to rip us apart. And good riddance, motherfucker! The continental drift of a billion years would flash in a second! From that moment on, the equivalent of the Marianas Trench—the deepest wound in *todo el mundo*—would forever separate us.

Far off I could hear the low rumbling of Bugs's truck slowing to make the turn down to our place. I hated him now more than ever. For knowing my own brother better than I did. For having his confidence and trust. Maybe they even loved each other for all I knew.

"Listen to me very carefully, mi'jito," Chuy said in a low voice, barely audible above the nearing truck. "You're gonna hurt for this. You thought you suffered because of a little rumble in your gut?" He laughed and turned to leave me. "Well that ain't shit."

"Why are you going now?" I took a step toward him and stopped. "Nuh-uh! No!" Bugs had gotten out of the truck, eager to know what we must be doing. I eyed him and gave him the best chinga tu madre look I could muster. To Chuy: "Hey! What the fuck did I ever do to you? Why do you hate me so much?"

That was hard to say, and tears glazed my eyes. Hell, I feel them coming on right now. You think that's easy to admit? I didn't hate Chuy. I loved him in spite of his growing indifference toward me. He was like my dad, the dad I never had. And no matter what you hear people say, nobody wants to be hated. I mean to be truly hated. And when, at last, you've got no one else to turn to, when the only people who felt some sort of obligation to you have either abandoned you or resigned themselves to despise your presence, to treat you like a disgusting thing that slithers near the ground under the protection of darkness, you don't ever want to vocalize it. You don't want to admit it. Por favor, believe that. Oh, you can be aware of it, perhaps shout it out from the mountaintops of your mind. But once you give it even the tiniest bit of life with the weakest whisper you can manage, it has the power to destroy your life. But I had said it. Admitted that I was hated and hoped that I would be spared the consequences, though I had no hope of it. Where were my green pastures? Where were my tranquil waters? I looked around and realized I was staring at the valley of death. But the Lord had refused to prepare a seat for me at Chuy's table, for whatever reason. Some sheep are only good for chops, I guess.

"Todo se paga," was all he said, raising one finger at me. Why would I expect anything more from Chuy at this point, anyway? He spit in my direction, then he and Bugs walked toward the truck, whose engine was idling as if annoyed. I didn't say another word to him. I watched the truck become two taillights in the distance, then a glowing red ember quickly fading, until it vanished into the consuming darkness.

Like a ghoul contemplating his next move in the solitary night, I thought about what Chuy said. I knew what he had meant. He meant that he was going to get his payback—that all sales were final. But I felt I had not earned Chuy's ire nor his thirst for wanting to snuff me out. There was something unspoken between us, and I felt that he was the only one of us who could start the conversation. I may have insulted his station in life, but I hadn't threatened to kill him. I

wondered if this wasn't part of his game, if you could call it that. Did he see me as one of his gallitos that he toyed with? Was he toughening me up for a greater fight later in life? Chuy was all that I had, and if he really hated me that much, I decided to give him an excellent reason for doing so. It just made things easier to accept. My first task would be to prepare my own table. Thus, I ate Pretty Boy alone, deliberately, in silence. He was tough and not at all your flavorful piece of the Colonel's extra crispy, but by then I couldn't care less what it tasted like. I just gorged and gorged until I was beyond repleto.

But the thing is that I wasn't satisfied. I was far from done. I needed to earn the hate Chuy felt for me. When Pretty Boy was nothing more than bones, my thoughts turned again to Chuy's last words before he left. Todo se paga. In other words, karma, motherfucker. Nothing was going to stop me from earning that hate the best way I knew how. Every time I carried a rooster to the sewer, I was ensuring that goodness and mercy should not follow me all the days of my life. But at least there would be a reason for the misery to come. As for Chuy's precious gallitos, I was saving them from the inevitable, too, wasn't I? In that black New Mexico night, the stars, seemingly close enough to pluck from the sky, served as witnesses to my conviction. They watched, perhaps even approved, as I took every rooster, and each in his turn, carefully drowned them in our putrid pool of shit. It was a terrible way to go, but hey, those gallitos probably had a good laugh when later, I, too, was pushed face first towards that dark surface by murderous scarred hands. He came back later that night. And with my sleepy body working so hard to digest the proteins of Pretty Boy, I was knocked unconscious before I even had a chance to wake up. But he had told me, hadn't he? Todo se paga. With Bugs to help him, I didn't stand a chance. He didn't exchange words with me. He didn't tell me that he hated me or that he loved me or that he wished I had never been born. That would have been too much for him. Now that he had something worth telling, an actual story that might save us all, he was resolutely silent. He didn't say one word. He didn't have to. The pile of shit-drowned gallitos told us all we needed to know.

I came to just in time to shake off my disorientation long enough to realize what the fuck was going on. In the darkness Chuy dragged me over the bruising hardscrabble and unforgiving caliche, until at last I could smell my exact location. I couldn't see Bugs, and that sent my heartrate soaring. What was he doing? I was, as they say, positively frightened. As I struggled to stay conscious in the wake of those punishing hands, I wondered whether I was a sheep or a

gallito, and I wondered if it mattered at all. When I was only a few feet away, I snapped my eyes open in spite of the pain coursing through my body. There it was. Starlight shimmered on the iridescent surface of the sewage. Chuy was handling the last of his gallitos for the final time. But a dead bird can win the fight, I reassured myself, just as sacrificial sheep can be spared even after being placed upon the altar. A god-awful noise rang out. And I wasn't certain, as he forced me inexorably closer to that pool of human waste, whether the deafening sound I was hearing was the clarion voice of my blond Mormon calling out for her lost brown sheep, or the high whine of Chuy's monstrous grinder.