

My Afternoon with Jesus

By Juan Alvarado Valdivia

I was alone at my parents' home, walking around in my chonies with a beer bottle in hand. They were at work, slaving away. I had just called my employer and told them I was quitting. I was leaving my security guard gig to take my first real desk job—a profession that was, I supposed, more befitting of the college pedigree I had just earned. A celebration of sorts was in order for this rite of passage into a lifetime of white-collar servitude—that first step on a road that would lead to a house of my own, a widescreen plasma TV, 401(k)s, an orgy of a wedding I could not give one fuck about, and devout reverence for the weekends (TGIF!) To boot, I had moved back to my parents' to save up money, back to my suburban hometown that felt infinitely tragic and dying compared to the pulsing life I left in San Francisco. In short time, one, two, then three bottles of beer fell for this celebration. My buzz was good. It was not even one on a Tuesday afternoon.

The liquor store down the street was calling like a siren. My booze supply needed replenishing. I stepped out in my default summer get-up: shorts, shirt, and flip-flops.

Jesus, a *pandillero* who lived at the end of the street, was pulling his green Chevy El Camino up his parents' driveway. He was wearing red attire as always: a red shirt with white Dickies pants. We went to the same schools since we were kiddos. He was a year younger than me, the same grade as my sister. We exchanged nods as I walked by. His was a bit slower, head cocked back as though he were saying *que onda, vato*. Mine was quicker, less dramatic—more of a *¿qué tal?* or howdy.

Once I made it to the store, I saw the owner's Chevy Blazer in its usual spot by the

dumpster. The sun glared off its black finish. It saddened me to see it. Poor ole' Sam was always working at his store. Since I moved back home two months before—the college dorm-room phase of my life in the rear window—I drove by and saw his Blazer there almost every day, sitting like a dead weight. His business could not have been faring well. Most of the time, night or day, I was the only other person in there with him. (I don't like to refer to myself as a "customer.")

Sam was a tall, imposing, big-bellied pervert with thick-framed glasses and a balding head. His greasy black locks were pasted into a comb-over that could probably weather a hurricane. When I would go up to the register to pay for my booze or self-indulgent cans of Chef Boyardee, he often inquired about all "the tail" he seemed to think—or hoped—that I was "nailing." Sam had a firm, proud handshake that could crush a weaker man's hand.

He started in when I set my six-pack of Bass on the counter.

"My friend, how are you?" he said, shaking my hand, smiling proudly as though he were my grandfather. "Shit, man, you starting already?"

"Yeah. I've already got a few under my belt," I slurred.

"What's going on? You got that girlfriend of yours, the one with pink hair back at your place? You two gettin' some afternoon exercise?"

He reached over the counter and nudged my shoulder.

"Nah, man. Splitsville. Population, me. She was a champ in the sack but she's too crazy. And I'm already crazy enough, so it was no good."

"Ah, well, that's what your hand's for!"

"Good ole' righty!" I said, raising my right hand like a balladeer in the ecstatic throes of a sustained note.

We cackled like hyenas hopped up on nitrous oxide. I dropped some scratch, paid my respects, and strutted out with six-pack in hand. My fuck-it-all desire for fuel was so overwhelming that I opened a bottle with the bottle opener on my keychain once I stepped out. I tossed that sweet bottle back and took a hearty sip.

I sipped the bottle on my way home. Before long, I was craving a cigarette. I considered going back to buy a pack, but then I'd be stuck with all those cigarettes when all I wanted was one for the stroll.

Jesus was standing on the waist-high brick wall that separated the elevated front lawn from the sidewalk. It looked like he was waiting for someone to show up. I came to a stop a few feet from him.

“Hey bro, ya got a smoke I can bum?” I said, peering up at him. “I’ll give ya a beer for one.”

“Sorry bro, I don’t smoke.”

“Oh—you don’t *smoke*, do ya? Cough cough, hee hee,” I said, bringing my hand up to my lips as though I held an invisible joint.

Jesus laughed. I think he could tell I was drunk. He must have thought that was funny. A bit peculiar. From the time we went to grade school together—back when my mom combed my hair to the sides like a good boy and dressed me in outfits that are grisly in retrospect—I’d been antithetical to him. My sister and I got straight A report cards through junior high. (She held true through high school while I slacked off and discovered Nirvana and teenage-zit-ridden angst, my GPA plummeting into the lower 3s) We went off to college while Jesus and his little sister stayed in our hometown, easing into a gangsta life. Not the dumping-bodies-in-the-marina type, but more of the tagging-their-turf-and-dealing-drugs type. Because of this, mayhaps he presumed I

was a Peruvian choirboy of sorts? More at home with a textbook in my lap than a four-foot bong. But he would've been mistaken.

“Of course I toke. Sheeit,” he said.

We were exchanging words!

“By any chance, you got any on ya?” I said. “I’ve been itching for some, but I don’t have a hook-up in this town. I’ve got some cash on me.”

“How much ya want?”

“Oh, just enough for a joint. Or I’ll take an eighth if that’s the least you can sell. Roll one big enough for the both of us. I’ll smoke us out.”

“Aight. C’mon,” Jesus said with a wave of his hand. He headed up the walkway to the front door. I tipped the bottle back, killed it, and set it on the curb. I pumped my fist in excitement. With sixer in hand, I followed Jesus up to the creaky screen door, which was tattered and littered with a few dead moths. We stepped into a hallway.

“C’mon. Let’s smoke in the back so my *viejita* won’t give me shit. Wait here a sec.”

While I waited, he opened the first door on the right. It must have been his bedroom. The door was covered with an autographed poster of a dick-throbbing hot, bikini-clad Raiderette. Once he came out, I followed him into a dim-lit living room that had all the curtains shut. A large portrait of his *familia antigua*—his grandparents, their seven children, all solemn and *serios*—hung over the fireplace. Their ginormous television—the altar of suburbanity—stood at the corner on the opposite wall. The reclining leather chair and sofas faced it like ever-willing witnesses. My feet wanted to stop at their entertainment system, at their shelves full of vinyls, but Jesus opened the sliding door. He held the curtain open, the sunlight knifing through the room.

A flurry of barking startled me as I stepped out into the backyard. His boxer, tall enough to readily chomp out my intestines, was tied to a lemon tree by the side of the house. It scared *la mierda* out of me although it was chained and out of mauling range. The boxer—which had the requisite tough-dawg-spiked collar—lurched and snapped in my direction.

“Don’t trip, I got him tied. He ain’t too friendly to people he doesn’t know,” Jesus told me as though he was explaining how to operate an electric can opener.

“I’m glad you do. That bastard’s as big as my grandmother!”

We walked to the narrow alley between his house and a tall wooden fence. Jesus held a blunt in his hand, a twamp in the other. He handed them to me along with a lighter.

“Aww, man. Thanks a lot,” I said. “How much do I owe ya?”

“Fifteen. This ain’t the best,” he said, nodding at the bag of weed, “but it’ll get the job done.”

“Hey hey, something’s better than nothing most of the time.”

With a flick of the lighter, I took a hit, then passed it back. Jesus took a big rip. When he exhaled, the smoke seemed to roll out of his mouth like a factory chimney. I crossed my arms and chuckled in admiration. He grinned and handed it back. I sucked in a big hit—my attempt to join the big boy league—but I ended up doubled over, coughing like a pack-a-day smoker who’d just run up a flights of stairs. He laughed. After I was done coughing up a lung, I was feeling the sweet giggle.

I paid him before we finished the joint, then walked through the side gate out to the front yard. Our neighborhood—the one I used to play hide-and-seek in—looked new and hazy, vibrant not dead, under that bright afternoon sun. Everything felt a little make-pretend while I stared around with a tee-hee grin. When I turned to Jesus, I saw him standing on a pillar from the brick

wall. He gazed down the street. The branches from the tree in his front lawn curled around him as though they were ready to hug him.

“Who you waiting for?” I asked.

“My homie’s supposed to drop by and show me these new rims he got.”

“For your ride?” I said instead of “car” like I usually would.

“Yeah.”

I stumbled over to his El Camino, ran a finger along the green chrome that glistened as though it was humming with energy. I walked to the back of the car, then took a few steps back to take it all in.

“You got a nice fucking car, man. What kind of engine does it have?”

“A 220 horsepower.”

“Nice,” I said. “I’d like to get my own muscle car someday so I can pull up behind some slow-ass driver on Fairview Boulevard and rev the shit out of that engine!”

“People always drive like shit on that street.”

“They do. Like a bunch of old farts!”

I walked up to his lawn and noticed that my hand felt light.

“Ah shit, my beer!” I said.

“You can go through the gate. It’s open,” Jesus said.

I thanked him, then shuffled over to the side gate. My sixer rested by the fence where we had toked up.

After I picked it up, I noticed the window on the side of the house. A white curtain with a beautiful embroidered floral trim—like the kind on Mexican blouses—was parted halfway. Since no one seemed to be home, I took a peek inside. Resting on the windowsill over the

kitchen sink was a ceramic Olmec head. Beside it, seemingly ready to stiff-arm the Olmec head aside was a sliver and black figurine of Bo Jackson (who, I happened to know, left football with a 5.4 yards per rush average—the highest in NFL history). It pleased me to know that his family were Raiders fans as well. Beyond the windowsill was a round table with four chairs, just like in my parents' kitchen. Like our *cocina*, a morose painting of The Last Supper—the classic guilt-ridden, Latino Catholic touch—lorded over the table. It was then that I wondered if his parents played Trio Los Panchos, sentimental boleros, maybe even Marco Antonio Solis or Ricardo Montoner like my mother would during our family meals. Or did his old man play some oldies like “Suavecito”?

How did Jesus and I turn out so differently?

Out in the front yard, Jesus sat hunched over on the edge of the lawn. His legs hung over the brick wall. It looked like he was mugging for the entire world. I popped a beer open for him along with one for myself.

“*Salud*,” I said, handing him a beer.

“*Salud*,” he said with a clink of our bottles.

After we downed some beer, I stood there on the lawn, unsure of what to do other than just stand there.

“You can sit and chill, brah,” he said, nodding over at a spot next to him.

“Thanks bro,” I said. I took my seat. We stared out past the street corner over to the main drag in the distance. My eyes followed a few cars as they drove down the street, then a bus that appeared to be vacant as usual. After living in the city where people regularly took the buses, it usually saddened me to see those empty buses driving around my hometown like phantoms cursed to circle the same route day after day, night after night. But I grinned and looked away

toward something more pleasant, to the sunlight bending around the tree leaves above me.

Just then, his younger sister came walking down the street. She was a *cholita*. She wore one of those white t-shirts popular con La Raza and gangsta types—the Virgin Mary on the front, the Mexican flag beneath her. Her black hair was long and went straight down her back to her ass. Her baggy black pants—surprisingly not red—obscured what must have been some fine-ass legs.

“Oh shit, it’s your sister,” I said. My hand lurched over to the six-pack by my side. I was ready to hide it behind me.

“She don’t give a shit, don’t trip.”

We continued to look at her as she crossed the street.

“Whaddya think of my sister?” he asked.

I paused, took a chug from my beer and looked over at him. Jesus was staring in his sister’s direction. Although I was giddily inebriated, I had not forgotten who I was speaking with. Jesus was a *cholo* and he knew I wasn’t. My posse—if I had one—hung out at bookstores and cafes, not on the streets. The heat we packed were pens and books, not fisticuffs and gats. Even through high school, when Jesus’ baggy, crimson attire announced that he was a gangbanger of some level, he always struck me as an alright guy. A bit requisite macho, sure, but not fearsome or violent in spirit though I’m sure he’d been in a brawl before, seen the glint of light from a switchblade.

“Whaddya mean?” I asked.

Jesus stared back at me. He made a pfffft sound. His face contorted as though saying: *you-gotta-be-shittin’-me*.

“Come on. Ya know what I mean.”

It'd been years since I'd seen her. Back when we were in junior high, she had chubby cheeks and a thick, semi-butchy figure. Time had tightened those stout features into curves that could make a grown man cry. Maybe it was the black asphalt she walked on, refracting the sunlight around her, but she was bathed in light as though the sun was up to illuminate her at that moment. Her tits, her hips looked godly, deserving of zealous worship. She was not a *chiquita* anymore.

"She's all right," I said. "I mean, I wouldn't be disappointed if I had her in the backseat of my car, ya know what I'm sayin'?"

He laughed, then punched my shoulder.

"Ah bro, I was just fuckin' wit ya. My homies are always tryin' to get with her so I know, *I know*. Sheeit, sometimes I wish she wasn't my sister!"

We busted up. I would have never predicted that Jesus and I would *ever* have a conversation like this, let alone "kick it" in front of his house.

She walked by, staring at us with her brows furrowed. With my arms stretched out behind me on the lawn, I twisted my head around. My eyes zeroed in on her sweet ass as she walked to the front door.

"*Bendito diosito, que rico culito!*" I said, gritting my lips.

Jesus nearly fell off the lawn, doubled over in laughter. To my surprise, she came to a stop. She turned back and shook her head with the faintest grin on her face. Could she have liked the lewd compliment? Could I—a gringoized, bohemian *peruano* who dug Zeppelin, Chopin, Parliament, and Whitesnake—ever score with a *chola* like her? Could that wet dream ever be fulfilled?

Not a minute later, a car pulled up in front of Jesus' house. It was a red '67 Ford

Mustang. The car was unblemished, sparkling as though it had just floated down from the clouds upon a ray of sunshine. Jesus hopped off the lawn and stepped over to the pimp ride. I followed suit and began to walk down the sidewalk with my six-pack in hand.

“I’ll see ya later,” I said.

“Take it easy bro,” Jesus said, trying to slap my hand and fist-punch it in a way I was unfamiliar with, which left me grinning embarrassingly as I fumbled to reciprocate.

“Thanks again, man,” I said, shaking his hand instead.

My desk job isn’t so bad although the button-up shirts I had to buy for work felt uncomfortable—like a costume—the first week. All day I take and input sales orders from our reps while they’re busy and important, driving from customer to customer, sniffing around for some new ones to add to their list of “active clients.” The job beats serving the general public but I know I’ve got to leave this town. For good. Once I save up enough money I’m heading back to the city. There’s no life on the streets here. No one walks around town. And why would they? To hear the drone of cars going from strip mall to strip mall? To see the clusters of charmless, look-alike houses and condominiums that seem to be shat from templates? Life here feels like a slow, quiet descent that no one talks about or notices. Everyone’s too busy flipping from channel to channel. And these towns are like giant pits of quicksand that keep spreading and spreading.

Since that afternoon about a month ago, I’ve passed by Jesus on our street in my dinged-up, turd-brown colored Toyota Corolla. He’s always cruising around in his Chevy El Camino. We nod at each other like we did that afternoon, but that’s it. On occasion, I hit up one of the town’s godforsaken bars just to get out. I even go on Sunday afternoons sometimes. I’m the guy reading the San Francisco Chronicle at the end of the counter. I used to peer up in hopes of

seeing Jesus so we could toss some back, shoot the shit, maybe talk about the music we grew up listening to. But I don't think that's going to happen.

On weeknights, past one or two in the morning, I've heard his car as it rolls down our street. The hum of his car's engine is that distinct—like the modern world's equivalent of a panther on the prowl. Jesus can't be up to any good at that time of night. Not when all the streets are voids of black, pools of yellow-orange street light here and there, the occasional beam of headlights that ride down those roads belonging to drunkards leaving the bars (and who can blame them?), or they're the cops aiming to nab them. He's probably dealing or getting together with his homies to "regulate" their turf, or whatever it is that they must do to do what they do.

Someday, I'm afraid I will stop hearing his car at night. I won't see him standing on his front lawn, decked out in white pants and a slanted red cap, his boxer standing beside him. The same Jesus who I went to elementary school with. It is bound to happen.