

Cinco de Mayo

I know this looks bad, me being late and all, but let me explain. Maybe you'll understand, maybe help me understand too.

I seen her for the first time at the Cinco de Mayo parade in Compton. I was standing at the corner of Long Beach Blvd. and Rosecrans in a Pic N' Save parking lot, leaning on my car as she rode by on a horse. The horse was all brown and the girl was dressed in every color you've ever seen on a serape. She had on a dress with a puffy skirt and puffy sleeves; her hair was braided with red and white ribbons into one long braid down the center of her back. She turned her head once, tilted that big-ass sombrero up and looked past the crowd to where I stood. The sequins on the sombrero didn't distract me; the horse hopped sideways, a nearby man circled his horse's body with a spinning lasso, but I watched her eyes - darker than the horse she rode, as dark as her hair - and she was looking at me.

It's funny, because all I could think about was how you told me what you learned in class. How the professor said something about how Cinco de Mayo didn't even matter to real Mexicans. And I kept wondering if that's what this girl was, or what she wanted, and if I could make the cut.

I drove the length of the parade route glancing out the passenger window to watch the parade as I crossed intersections and lost it again behind liquor stores, bars. A bright pink house with signs in its windows advertising bail bonds. I always wondered why they were pink too. I learned from my uncle's wild nights that the bail bond houses are pink because it's always hoodrats that be going there to get bail for their broke-ass boyfriends.

At the end of the parade I waited in my car and watched an old man with a big mustache lead horses into a few trailers along the closed off section of the street. She stepped out of the back of an RV dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, the make-up still caked on her face to make her cheeks red and her lips redder. She approached the old man as he patted a horse on the ass, the horse stepped into the trailer and he raised the gate behind it.

I left my car, crossed the street and ducked beneath the caution tape streaming from the yellow plastic poles. The old man disappeared around back of the trailer.

"Hey," I said.

She turned.

"My name's Toro. I saw you in the parade."

She had smirked at my name. "I saw you too." Now she laughed.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"Toro's my dog's name."

I looked at the horse switching its tail side to side in the trailer. I didn't know what to say, and I thought I'd lost her already.

"Do you like your dog?" I asked.

"I love him."

"See, it's a sign," I said. Then I said, "I always wanted to learn how to ride one of those," pointing to the horse as it swatted flies with its tail. "You give lessons?"

"Is that your car?" She asked.

I followed her eyes to where her gaze stopped on my Impala. The car was inches from the ground and shining; it looked like it had been installed there by the city like the statues they put up in the parks for their beautification programs.

I nodded. "I bet you always wanted to learn how to ride in one of those," I said.

"It's just, it looks like it's worth so much more than it is." There was a challenge in her voice and she watched me with her head tilted to one side, her eyes on the car as if she expected me to be insulted and drive back to whatever hood I'd come from.

"How much is one of them horses worth?" I said.

"Depends. My godfather's horse is worth fifty grand. But we use him to stud."

"Must be good at it," I said. "But let me take you cruising down Whittier, and when everyone's watching us you'll feel like a million bucks. At least."

"Everyone already watched me today."

I said, "I watched you." She finally broke. She looked at her boots where the toes met, and I could tell she was hiding a smile. I said, "Why don't you give me your number?"

I was waiting for someone to open that huge front door. It reminded me of the doors at La Iglesia del Virgen on Paramount Blvd, and how I had to be there for the wedding rehearsal the next day and I hadn't been there in years. I was dressed proper. I had on brand new kicks, the dark jeans. I even had a matching jacket over a t-shirt that was fresh out the package. My fade was clean, square on the neck. There was mariachi music playing inside the

house but I couldn't see into the windows because from the patio rosebushes blocked my view. The roses were white and as big as my fist. When the door finally opened it was a woman standing in the doorway and drying her hands with a dishtowel.

"Hola," she said. "¿Quien es?"

"Hi. I'm Toro."

She smiled and stepped aside for me to come in.

There was no wall between the livingroom and the kitchen, just a bar, and I could see that the kitchen was full of people, all of the men with bushy mustaches and bottles of beer in their hands, all of the women in bright-colored flowy dresses. There was the smell of coffee and cilantro and spices that made my breathing easy and full.

"Ven. Ven a la sala," the woman shouted to them.

She shook my hand and spoke to me in Spanish, the words coming too quick to catch.

"I don't—," I started, but she smiled so I smiled back. I kept smiling. I thought she'd asked me a question but I was nervous and my high school Spanish helped me order drinks y nada mas. I felt alone in their bright livingroom and the smell of coffee made me think of that café story you had me read and how I might as well have been deaf like that old man and all I could say or do was nada y pues nada. So I kept smiling.

The people from the kitchen drifted into the livingroom. One couple sat on the couch and whispered. Two men in cowboy hats stood watching me as their beer bottles sweated in their hands and I realized that I was sweating too. Also, my cheeks were cramped from smiling and I thought I'd better say something.

I said, "Hi."

They stared at me. One of the men removed his hat and called over his shoulder down the long hallway behind him. "Elena. El caminero de los perros está aquí."

I smiled at him and he wiped his forehead with the back of his forearm and put his hat back on. I heard Elena's voice come muffled down the hall.

"Está en el baño," the man said.

The woman beside me said, "Está bien." She stepped over to a nearby dresser and set the dishtowel down. "A ver..." The dresser was too big for the house, for any house really. There were big brass handles on the drawers. There were fancy square patterns carved into it and they looked done by hand, each a little different, and there was a blocky pyramid carved across the entire front. She took a dogleash from an open drawer that made one side of the pyramid look like it was crumbling away. She made kissing noises at no one and I must have looked confused because she smiled at me.

Then, what looked to me like a grizzly bear stepped out of the kitchen. It was really just a Rottweiler but, when it yawned and I saw its teeth, I thought it could have been mixed. It growled then, I think at me. I don't know, it was hard to see it from where I'd ducked behind the woman and was peeking over her shoulder.

It barked, filled the room with the stink of dog breath. I could see drool spots in the goat skin rug beneath it. I wondered if the dog on top of it was how that poor goat got there to begin with. The woman turned to look at me and handed me the leash.

"¿Mama, que estás haciendo?", came the frantic voice from the hall. Elena stepped into the living room wearing a bathrobe and rubbing her wet hair with a towel. "Es mi amigo."

The woman looked at me, from my K-swiss up to the v-neck of my Hanes.

"¿Tu amigo?" she said. "Hm."

In the backyard there were tables set up and draped with white tablecloths. The tables near the fence had bricks under the legs on one side because the ground sloped down beneath more houses, past them rooftops sprawled all the way to downtown L.A. What the yard lacked in size, most of it was a concrete patio, it made up for with the view. You could pick a trail of palm trees and follow it to the red horizon where the haze blurred the buildings. Compared to the city out there this yard felt like another country.

Elena sat beside me on the benchswing, pushing us back with the toe of her boot and letting us swing slowly forward. She smelled like flowers I don't know the names of, there was the smell of the earth and horses too and I knew she rode them through the surrounding hills because she never looked at the skyline, instead looking at the woods around her house the way I looked at the city and picked out familiar streets or buildings.

She told me the men and women at the party were her aunts and uncles. The men disappeared into the house while the aunts began moving pots and trays into the kitchen as soon as the sun had set. The house was in the shadow of the mountains, and I was surprised by how dark it was and how soon.

"I'm going to help them," she said. "Stay here. Finish your food."

But I couldn't eat. I was nervous as hell. One of the aunts mad-dogged me the whole time she covered trays with foil. She had gray hair that curled by her ears but her skirt was high and her heels too. I picked at the carne asada on my plate to avoid her stare.

There was a jingle nearby, then a low growl, and I looked up to see the Rottweiler crouched in front of me, drooling on my white shoes.

“Hey boy. You don’t want to eat me, right? I taste like cologne. I practically bathe in the stuff.”

I tossed some meat down and it never reached the cement. The dog sat there chomping. Then it let its red tongue hang out over its teeth. It was a nice dog, man. Nice looking, I mean. Shiny coat. Brown on its wide chest and around its big brows. I had a lot of time to admire it because it wouldn’t let me out of my seat. It barked every time I tried to stand. I set my plate on the ground and it licked the plate clean, almost swallowed the fork. I’d just picked up the plate and fork when Elena came back.

“You must have been starving,” she said, staring at the red grease smears like watercolors on the empty plate. “I’m glad you two are making friends.” She petted the dog and scratched its ear. I tried to scratch the other ear.

“Oh!” she shouted. “He didn’t mean to bite you. He was just playing.”

“I’m left handed anyway,” I said.

“Isn’t he gorgeous? We had him sent from Germany, back when we lived in Mexico. He cost twenty thousand dollars.”

You were good in English class, but I was always a natural with numbers. I figured out on the spot that I would have to serve twenty tables a night every night of the year to buy a dog like that.

“His daddy and mommy were both champions. We show him, sometimes.”

“Show him to who?”

“At contests. Dog shows.”

The dog’s stomach made a noise that sounded like water boiling over. It whined and rested its chin on its front paws.

“¿Tienes hambre?” She said to it, bent over with her hands on her thighs. “He must be starving. We keep him on a strict diet: this gourmet stuff. Want to help feed him?”

She stood and walked off and I followed her to the side of the house with the empty plate in one hand and the bent fork in the other. There was a silver dog dish on a welcome mat beside a door with a window in it. I could see Elena’s mom talking to this guy I hadn’t seen in the house earlier. All the while Elena poured and the dogfood rattled into the dish. Toro whimpered and turned and went back out toward the patio. When Elena followed him, whistling, I stayed to watch her moms in the kitchen. Elena’s moms liked to keep her hand near her chin, I think to look like a jewelry model but instead it made it look like she was struggling with a head that weighed too much for that slender neck. Her cheekbones would have been too big if they didn’t draw your eyes toward hers, darker than her daughter’s. And I could see where Elena had gotten her beautiful hair. It was like the hair of the Aztec princess in the calendar behind the counter at the panadería: the princess looks desperate, Spaniards surround her, but she won’t leave the man that’s died in her arms and her hair drapes over him like a veil.

The mom laughed sharply and stood before the sink. She put on yellow gloves and directed the young man toward the back door with a jerk of her chin as she scrubbed at a plate with a sponge.

“Elena,” the guy called.

I headed back to the yard and the guy from the kitchen came out of the sliding glass doors that opened onto the patio just as I got there. He stamped the toe of his boot onto the cement. The boots were suede. Suede. I’d never heard of any guy having suede shoes but Elvis. He had on a t-shirt two sizes too small and jeans so tight they could make a rapper sing like Linda Ronstadt.

“Ceaser,” Elena said. She ran to him and hugged him and he spun her around like she was a little girl. The guy was definitely big. He was also popular and it was obvious that they weren’t related. They spoke in Spanish and fast. They didn’t stop touching once: his hand on the small of her back or hers hanging from his elbow.

I cleared my throat.

“Oh”, she said. Then to him, “Es mi amigo.”

I waved. He nodded.

“¿Donde está Toro?” He asked.

“No sé.”

He whistled sharply three times and clapped his hands. The dog slumped into the light of the patio from beneath a tablecloth. It lay down at Elena’s feet and the man bent down to pet it.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Elena said.

The dog stood then, looked suddenly scared; with its head in the air like it smelled an intruder it humped its back. It swayed its head from side to side and Ceaser stepped closer, just in time to have his suede boots covered in Mexican food.

I stood in the doorway of the living room. The dog was on the couch with a serape over it and the moms and pops made baby noises at it from where they sat at either end. Neither spot seemed a good place to sit and I was nervous that Toro would prove me right. Ceaser stood behind the bar, at the kitchen sink, and rolled his eyes and muttered in Spanish as he brushed his boots with a toothbrush.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "Tell them I'm sorry. How do you say that in Spanish?" They knew I'd fed the dog. I guess ten minutes wasn't long enough for Toro to digest the evidence. The beans and rice stuck to the suede pretty good; you'd think the more something is worth, the tougher it would be.

"Lo siento," she said. Whenever she spoke I was sure she puckered her lips more than she needed to.

I tried it, "Lo siento." But the words didn't sound full like hers.

Ceaser stopped brushing, looked up at me and shook his head. He held up the toothbrush.

I said, "I wouldn't reuse that." Elena giggled and Ceaser went back to scrubbing, harder. "Think he understood that?" I whispered. She shook her head no.

She told me not to worry. She said that anyone could have made that mistake and that it was her fault for inviting me over and not knowing her family would be there. She said that her family made everyone nervous, not just me. I couldn't believe the girl was so down.

"Want to go riding tomorrow?" She asked.

"I've got to go to a wedding rehearsal."

I told her how Eva is your sister, practically mine, and you were gonna walk her down the aisle and everything.

"Let's go out the next night," she said.

Ceaser's grumblng had gotten louder. Elena's moms turned her head to whisper something at him.

"Cool," I said. "But do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Nope."

"Who is that guy?"

"Him?" She thought about it with her bottom lip between her teeth. "He's a friend."

"A friend," I said. "Hm."

I dropped you off at the pad after the rehearsal and rolled over to her place around ten. She came out with a black shirt and black jeans on a hanger and cowboy boots in the other hand, their heels swinging together as she walked. There was a hat propped crookedly on top of the one she wore. Her boots made a hollow sound on the street and I couldn't see her face until she'd stopped outside my window and leaned inside to kiss me on the cheek.

"Sorry I didn't go inside," I said. "I—."

"It's probably better," she said. "Take the hat."

I did, and I set it on the passenger seat. I nodded toward all the gear still in her hands. "You going to change at the club?"

She said, "No," and she spun around to show off her tight jeans and shiny black top, "You are." When she stopped spinning her hair landed over her left shoulder as if she'd styled it that way. I leaned my forearm on the inside of the door and readjusted my pants. She didn't show much skin but her figure was perfect. I'd say thick but you'd think fat. I'd say muscular but you'd think buff. The only thing to compare her to was that sleek brown horse I'd seen her riding in that parade. Every time she moved she seemed playful but sure, and when I reached out to wrap my arm behind her waist and pull her toward me her eyes flashed wide, she smiled, and it seemed like she'd fought to make a snap decision: whether or not to run. Not from being scared, but to run so I could chase her. Then we kissed.

She stood in the parking lot, leaning on the Impala, watching that the club's security guard didn't walk across the lot from his porta-potty sized booth and see my naked ass in the car. I was naked because cowboy pants don't fit well over boxer shorts, and I stopped wearing tighty-whiteys when I was ten.

She shouted, "He's coming."

I jumped into the backseat with my legs tangled in the Wrangler jeans. I lay there breathing hard with my eyebrow pressed against the chrome window crank. She was laughing her ass off and when I finally got up the courage to look out the rear window the lot was empty of anything but Chevy Silverados. And a lot of them.

"Ha. Ha. Very funny," I said.

The Silverado is the official truck of vaqueros. I always know they're straight from Mexico if there's decals in the windows. Like that tío I stayed with before you took me in. He had all these hats and naked ladies in sombreros and lassos decaled on the windows. I don't know much more about him. For all I know one of those trucks could have been his.

It was tough to get out of the car. Tough because the jeans would have been tight on a girlscout, the shirt too, but when I did get out she wrapped her arms around me and said, "Vamos a bailar."

"Bailar," I shouted.

The security guard looked at us from where he stood in front of a vendor's cart. The vendor put a bacon wrapped hot dog on a bun, squirted ketchup on it and handed it over. The security guard handed the vendor a few bills and took a bite of his hot dog and walked back to his booth chewing.

"Those L.A. dogs smell bomb," I said. They smelled like fat and family cookouts.

She took my hand and led me past the hot dog cart to the club.

"Me and my sister get one of those every time we come here. *After* we drink."

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah. Yuri. She's the oldest, but you wouldn't know. I never see her. She's either out all night or locked up in her room sleeping."

I said, "You better take these," and I held out the keys to my car.

"Why?"

"I barely got room in these pants for me."

The neon sign out front said, "Leonardo's". Judging by the guys in line I was probably the only fool there whose real name didn't end with an O. I said so.

"Why, what's your real name?"

The guy ahead of us in line wouldn't stop mad-dogging and I noticed then that my shirt was covered in badges.

She tugged at my arm. "Why do they call you Toro?" She asked.

"I got a better question. Why does my shirt make me look like a Nascar driver?"

She pushed her eyebrows together and if they hadn't been plucked so thin they might have gotten closer.

I said, "Why is my shirt covered with badges?"

"They're good. You look authentic. For all these guys know," she swept her arm toward the men at the door and a few of them smiled; one showed a gold tooth, "you're a professional bullrider."

"Is that why they don't like me? Are they jealous?" The trend had caught on. It seemed like every man in line had tilted his hat back to give me the eye.

"They're probably just wondering what a white guy is doing at Leonardo's."

"I ain't all white."

"I know," she said, "But without the baggy clothes and shaved head it's harder to tell."

I pointed to a badge on my chest. "I don't mind this one." It said PBR in red letters. "I'm down with PBR. It's some bomb-ass beer for cheap."

She laughed and rolled her eyes. "That's not what PBR stands for."

I said, "Pabst Blue Ribbon. I'm pretty sure--."

"Professional Bull Riding."

I made a ticking sound with my tongue. I shrugged. "Yeah. Well. They're both American as hell anyway."

There was a stage at the back of the club and on either side there were emergency exits. There was no band, just banda music playing through the speakers so loud it was hard to think in English. In a small room to the left of the entrance there was two pool tables and an old man playing eight-ball by himself. He took a shot, scratched, and laughed as he put the cue in its rack on the wall. There was a second floor with arched openings that looked down onto the dance-floor and the shapes of people up there. To our right was a bar and I squeezed her hand before letting it go and heading over. I bought us a bucket of coronas from a bartender that looked like a Mexican Magnum P.I.

We were at one of the high tables surrounding the dance-floor and I started to like the enthusiasm of the music. You know how that music is, it sounds like Latino Polka. Anyways, she saw me bobbin my head and she pulled me out onto the dance-floor. It was crowded out there, man, and I kept bumping hats with guys at every turn. You ever dance banda? Me neither. But I caught on real quick-like and me and her was spinning and bouncing all over. I just copied the other guys that seemed to know what they were doing. It seemed like the guy does a lot of fancy stuff with the right foot. Twirls it behind him, stomps it on the floor. So I stomped and twirled like a motherfucker. And all the while I had her up close, my arm around her waist, her left hand in mine, and she sort of rode my thigh like it had a saddle on it. I dug my nose into her hair where it collected at her neck and was about to take the deepest breath I could when I felt someone's foot beneath mine. I looked up and it was a blonde woman dressed in a white dress, and the man glaring at me from beside her was the guy with the gold tooth from outside. The woman didn't look mad at all. In fact, she just smiled at me and I couldn't help but notice her tits floated somewhere near her neck, because she kept swaying her body from side to side. I told her I was sorry and I pulled

down on the front of my hat like cowboys do in the movies. The guy didn't like that and shouted at me in Spanish and Elena got between us, saying how sorry we were.

We went back to our table. I handed her a bottle and I took one too. I tilted the salt shaker over both our hands and we drank. I licked the salt off her hand. She licked the salt off of mine. I said, "If we get to do that every time I'm gonna go get some more."

"I'd stay clear of *him* tonight," she said. She was watching gold-tooth dance. "He's the only guy wearing a jacket and it's because he's the only guy in here with a gun."

"That's against the law," I said. "I mean, a real man shouldn't depend on no piece."

"I think that's Leonardo."

"As in—"

"Yeah. He's always here and he's got a different girl with him every time and their beauty isn't always . . . natural." I must have looked nervous because she leaned over and asked, "Aren't you having fun?"

I nodded, "Sure. It's just, I feel a little out of place."

"Do you like the music?"

"Yeah. And I like dancing to it more than I thought I would."

"So you know this music?" She smiled big.

"No." Her smile didn't quite fall, it just sort of shrank. "But I know some of the old mariachi music. We danced to some of it at the rehearsal yesterday."

"What song?"

"La Paloma."

"I love that song." She said. "Do you know what it means?"

"Something about a bird. A pigeon."

"A dove. It says: they say that at nighttime it doesn't do anything but cry. They say that it doesn't eat, it doesn't do anything but drink. They say the sky carries away its cries. It sings." She considered the words for a while, as if she were reading them off of the ceiling. "Of a fatal love, it dies."

"So it's a happy song?" I said. "No, it's pretty. It just sounds so much better in Spanish."

"They always do. Put it on the jukebox."

"It's a slow-dance." I covered my mouth with my hand. "Are you sure about this?"

She laughed and waved me off.

The Jukebox was back in the room with the pool-tables. Standing there in front of the jukebox I could see the people entering the club. I pressed the arrow pointing right and a card flapped out of the way and I flipped past a few more. I couldn't find the song because I didn't know the names of any of the artists and when I looked around the room there was no one else there. A few balls sat on one table and the triangle was in the center of the other. I went back to my search of the jukebox but by then I was tapping the glass, sure I wouldn't find the song, and that I'd miss out on my slow dance.

"You know," a woman said from right beside me, "I like it here. But the dancing isn't exactly my style."

The woman that spoke seemed sure of every word. As light as that dress must have been, that's how light the southern accent was that bent the ends of her words. It was the woman in white standing beside me, and a little too close. I just kind of smiled and chuckled. She put her finger on my PBR badge and slid it down to my nipple as if she could see through my shirt. I looked down at where her finger was just to make sure she couldn't. "But I'm like you," she said. "I like a little bit more action. I like to *really* dance. I like a bronc that bucks."

I licked my lips and they tasted like the salt from Elena's skin.

She laughed up at the ceiling and her nostrils were almost as red as her lips. "Well don't just stand there hogging up the juke. What are you looking for?"

"La Paloma."

She raised an eyebrow. I backed up and stumbled a little on the heel of my boot. I was about to walk away when Leonardo came in. When he saw me next to his girl it looked like he swallowed his Adam's apple never to let it back up.

"¿Que estás haciendo, pinche?" He said.

She'd crouched down to peer into the jukebox and when she stood up straight she said, "I found your little paloma, sweetie." And then she followed my eyes and saw her man. She looked at me and shrugged. That was it. She knew this guy was about to kill me and all she did was shrug. The song played. The steady bass note of the guitar predicted each chord. Compared to the flashy music that had been playing, this song sounded lonely.

"Vamos," said the man. He directed me toward the dance floor and I went.

Elena ran up to me and the man grabbed her arm. I put my hand out to stop him as calmly as I could. I didn't touch her because I didn't want her to feel that I was shaking. I leaned in close to her and I whispered, "My

keys are in your purse. Pull the car round back by the emergency doors. Leave it running with the top down. Be ready to drive.”

I gave her a look that I hoped made me seem strong and I felt the same knot I get between my eyebrows anytime I have to walk through Compton alone. It’s just a little tense, you know, when you’re pretending you ain’t afraid to get shot.

She walked off and by then La Paloma had ended and the speakers seemed to blast people out onto the dance-floor when the banda came back on. The dance-floor was crowded as I stepped and sidestepped my way toward the exit. Every now and then I looked back over my shoulder to see the man’s gold tooth shining at me from the side of his grin. Mostly, I bumped shoulders or put my hands on people’s backs as I passed them to avoid a crash. I kept my eyes on the glowing green exit sign above the twirling hair and bobbing cowboy hats.

The thick stink and heat of all those people made it hard to breathe and easy to panic. I tried to gain some distance between me and Leonardo; I helped a platinum haired woman stumble behind me. He didn’t think twice about pushing her aside. Can you believe that asshole?

The most I could gain was a few yards and, well, I didn’t inherit my height from the Latino side of my family so I was easy to follow in that crowd. The exit was maybe ten yards away. If I wanted to lose him, I had to do something. If I could get to a bottle, I could break it against something, maybe hold him off until the cops came and maybe even cut him up. I thought of all these options, but the dancing crowd kept knocking my train of thought off the tracks, and a man who was fatter than he was tall twirled his girl impressively and twirled his shoulder right into my chest. I coughed and my hat went flying off and down to the polished wooden floor. It was hard to spot down there in all that darkness. So I followed it.

The air was fresh down around all those dancing legs. I grabbed my hat as I crawled toward what I thought would be the exit. I set my hand down in a puddle of what smelled like cheap tequila. A red high-heel landed in the middle of my hand, pivoted, and disappeared into the mass of legs but I kept going, cussing, crab-crawling, not looking back. When I got to the end of the floor I jumped up with one hand on my hat and the other in my mouth, turned back to see Leonardo struggling through the dancers, pushing men out of the way and shouting, but I couldn’t hear him over that happy music. He reached down and out of sight and I didn’t want to see whatever he wanted to show me. I caught a glimpse of that blonde watching us from the edge of the dance-floor just as I spun around and crashed through the double doors. They slammed shut behind me.

The car wasn’t there. I looked right; not in the lot. I looked left; the brake lights stared at me like cat’s eyes in the alley. There was a single gunshot in the club and it didn’t echo like I thought it would. Pop, like a single drum beat, then muffled screams. I whistled and ran toward the car and she must have thought I was calling her. She also must have had a boot-heel made of lead because the car gunned backward. Luckily, I jumped in time to let my leg take most of the impact from the bumper. I tumbled into the back seat as the car skidded to a halt and my feet hung out of the car and one boot had slipped half off so it looked like my ankle was broke. The seat was soft and cool against my cheek and on my right leg the jeans felt like one of those blood pressure wraps that tighten and don’t quit.

“Drive,” I yelled.

She was screaming, “Oh my god. Oh my god.”

I heard the clutch grind and catch and the rear tires squealed.

“Be quiet. My . . . Everything hurts.” I tugged the boot back up my calf. “These are too big damnit.”

“Are you okay?” She said. “What happened?”

I lay on my back and sank into the soft white leather.

I said, “In a barfight, there are things a man’s got to do that a woman should not know.”

I couldn’t see a single star in the L.A. sky as it blew coldly past.

She drove us to her house and after she’d gone inside I tried to turn the car around and head back down the hill but my leg was too stiff to use the pedals. I tried using the left foot but every time I hit the brake I slammed my chest into the steering wheel. So I let the Impala coast a few blocks down the hill and parked it on the street. I couldn’t fall asleep until early morning and I slept most of the day away smelling the sweaty inside of my hat while it blocked the sun.

I pulled the screen door open and limped inside to raise my voice against explosions blasting through the speakers that stood taller than your little sister, who ran through the living room and out the door just as I came through. The big screen TV was bright and the rest of the room wasn’t.

Carlos and Stomper looked at me from the couch with their mouths open. Pamela sat sandwiched between both of those big fools and the plastic covering on the couch bunched up beneath them.

“Where’s the beer?” I said.

"It's at the bar, pardner," Carlos said. He laughed, you know how he does, with his chins pressed into his chest and his tongue hanging out. The guys reached over Pamela's hair to high five.

"Watch it pendejos," Pamela said. "I just got my hair done today." She palmed the sides of her dark curly hair. Her fingernails were the color of plums. "You ain't been around here for a day or two," she said to me.

Standing in the kitchen, my leg ached if I put too much weight on it, one shoulder rubbed the fridge and the other scraped a cabinet's handle where it hung crookedly from one screw. I pulled a beer from the sink where others bobbed in ice. There was a bag of trash and a bag of beer bottles pushed against the security door that opens out into the yard. Bo was sniffing around that door and crying like it hadn't been fed in days. I knew you'd been busy with the wedding prep and worried about that speech you had to give, but I still couldn't feed Bo after what happened the other night.

"You a big Justin Timberlake fan?" Pamela called. I was leaning against the fridge in the kitchen, drinking my beer.

"I always knew you'd go gay, Toro."

"Justin means Cowboy boots," I said. "It's a brand. Like Dayton means rims."

"Right," Thumper said. "Except rims get you chickenheads, homie, and cowboy boots get you beat up."

"Shut up," Pamela said, and pointed at the TV. "It's the good part."

They all stared at the TV.

"Where's Cristobal?" I asked.

Thumper jerked his chin toward the back of the house. I limped down the hallway, stepped on a Barbie. I looked around the family room. You been rebuilding that room since I met your ass in the fifth grade. When you plan on laying some carpet instead of that concrete that gives me frostbite every time I step on it?

I took off my hat before I opened the door and looked inside. I could see you in that mirror on the wall, next to your diploma, and in the reflection I could see you sitting on your bed. You didn't even look up from the notebook in your lap. You were shaking your leg like I always tell you you do, but you never believe me.

"Just wanted to see how it's coming," I said.

You didn't look up once.

"I don't think I can do this," you said. Just like you're saying right now.

You said, "If my dad wanted her to get married he'd be here. He'd know what to say tomorrow."

I didn't know what to tell you. I don't remember if I told you anything. I shut the door as quietly as I could and I stood in the dark hallway. I noticed your mom threw out your pops records and put her weight machine in the family room instead. I stared at the outline of that machine, the cables hanging in the evening light from the window. Their shadows crisscrossed the floor like they were holding the room together.

I stood in the corner of the livingroom with the phone to one ear and my finger stuck in the other.

"Can't you guys turn it down?"

Pamela took my hat and rested it on top of her puffy hair. She smiled at me. She hadn't heard a word I'd said. Elena answered the phone.

I asked her if she would see me that night. I knew I'd be busy with the wedding all of the next day, and I couldn't go that long without seeing her.

"Tonight?" she said. "I'd love to, but I can't. When I got home last night Toro was in bad shape. He's been in bed all night and today too. I'm worried about him."

I flexed my injured leg a little and bit my lip.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. We said goodbye and I figured I'd head out to sleep some more in the car until everyone left and I could make my bed on the couch.

"Getting back to the range?" Carlos said.

I took my hat from Pamela's head.

"Heading back to Brokeback Mountain?" Thumper said.

"Please, before you go," Pamela said. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"No reason."

The three of them just stared.

"I been seeing this girl—."

They all stood and burst out laughing. Stomper shook his head and pointed at me. Carlos did a bowlegged walk around the coffee table while Pamela smiled and made kissy faces.

"That's cute," she said.

"She's a cowgirl. She bought it all for me. What am I supposed to do?"

Carlos said, "Tell that bitch she's out her mind she wants you stuffing your - hey, you tuck it between your legs or what?"

Stomper said, "What's her name?"

"Elena."

"She ride up at Pico?"

"Yeah. Near the arena."

"This guy I sometimes share my route with, he works down there on weekends. Wears his pants tighter than you. He said he's been seeing this chick that rides down there. Maybe you know them."

"What's he look like?"

"I don't know. A vaquero. Wears some nice suede boots though. Everywhere he goes."

When I got outside I put on the hat without thinking. But I didn't mind the hat. It made me feel authentic. Like if without the hat, the clothes and the boots were a costume, but with it I made some kind of sense.

I tried until dark to sleep in the car but I kept thinking about Ceaser: how close he and Elena seemed to be and how much he seemed to belong with her family in a way I never could. I thought about Elena's excuse not to see me tonight and as I started the car and backed down the driveway I decided that I'd better make sure I wasn't wasting my time on this girl.

At the top of each jump I could see her through the window lying in her bed, alone. At the bottom I was on the slope and I stared at the stucco wall of the house. I was able to jump maybe twice before my leg started throbbing again. The only man in there was in a poster on the wall, a man with a thin mustache wearing a sombrero and the name Vicente scribbled in big looping letters. I remembered my own clothes and wished I'd changed, but then I thought she might like to see me this way.

I went out to the patio where the chairs from the party were stacked as tall as me. I took one from the top and dragged it around the side of the house to her window. I shook it by the arms; it was good to stand on and I did. She saw me right away.

She got out of bed, ran to the window and opened it, leaving her blanket to trail from the bed to her feet. She was wearing a big t-shirt that just reached her thighs.

"What are you doing?" She asked. She looked out the window in both directions.

"I don't know. Are your parents here?"

"No. They went to a movie."

"So Toro really is sick?"

"Which Toro?" she said. She had slapped her hand on her hip and jutted her small chin at me.

"Not me. I *know* what's wrong with me."

"I don't know what's wrong with him." She laughed and said, "Ceaser says he smells you on my clothes. I borrowed this shirt from my dad and washed everything I've worn since that night you fed him. He's starting to come around. I think maybe Ceaser was right."

"Who the hell *is* Ceaser? I mean, what's he to you?"

"I don't know. I feel bad for him. He's been seeing my sister for years now, but she does him wrong all the time. Tonight she's out with some... I don't know much about him."

"I got ten bucks says he's a milkman and he wears suede boots like Ceaser's."

"How'd you know?"

I bit my lip and looked behind me. I could see downtown L.A. lit up like a fiesta. But nearby, everything was dark and wild and I didn't know where any street or path through the surrounding hills went.

"Come inside," she said.

"I didn't come for that."

"Why did you come then?"

"I think I came to tell you this isn't working."

"That's it?"

"Well I didn't plan it out. I didn't write a speech. I didn't even know I was going to say this."

The room looked warm. The blanket on the floor was red. The white sheets fell and pooled at the foot of the bed and on the left wall there was a mirrored closet door in which I saw me and her like an outsider would. It could have been romantic except for the pale green cloth draped over the lampshade next to her bed; the light made my reflection in the mirror look sick. "I'm sorry," I said. "You remember what we said about La Paloma?"

She pushed her lips out and looked up at the ceiling without moving her head. She said, "You're starting to piss me off."

"I don't know what to say." Man, I never heard myself sound so weak. Then I heard barking in the livingroom. A steady thumping traveled down the hall. The door was closed, and then it wasn't, and there was Toro leaping toward the open window with its mouth open and dripping.

I jumped from the chair over the fence at the side of the house figuring I'd run down the slope toward a path. Instead my legs gave out, and I slid on my ass reaching for anything I could grab in the dark - the branches cutting my face, the tufts of grass beneath me - anything. It was a tree that stopped me, finally, and I didn't have to reach for it.

Toro's growling was far behind me. Somewhere in the fall I'd lost a boot. I stumbled through the loose dirt of the slope and limped onto the asphalt of the road leading down out of the hills and found my car a little further down the road. I also found that I'd lost my keys somewhere in the brush along with that boot. My spares were back at your place. I could have followed the trail of moonlit palm trees straight into L.A. but I was headed in the other direction where there were no trees, only flickering streetlamps set too far apart.

Walking along Rosecrans I felt strange because I was heading the way most traffic does in the morning but it was sunrise on a Saturday and the street was empty. I felt wrong for walking on the sidewalk when that big street led straight to home, under the freeway where I couldn't go. I took the sidewalk where it angled off of the street, past a gas station where wasted lights buzzed and I could see a clerk asleep with his head on the cash register.

I looked at the black bottomed sock on my foot. The boot on the other foot was in good shape. The jeans were good, guess they do make them tough. The shirt was ripped anywhere it had been a tight fit, so just about everywhere there was a seam. I still had my hat. The sun was just rising, so I thought I could still get to the wedding on time.

But then I smelled frijoles, lard, carne and spices. After a used car lot with not much to choose from but a lot of balloons and banners I passed a small, square building with only one window. There was an unlit sign that said, "El Rey de las Rosas" and there was a rose on the sign below the words. I know I should have been in a hurry but I was starving and I'd been walking all night. I must have been covered in dirt and I could hardly stand up straight because of my leg.

I walked up to the window and inside there was an old man standing at the grill and flipping strips of carne. I leaned my head in to take a deep breath and feel the heat.

"¿Que quieres, mijo?" he said. His hair was gray but his voice was eager as a young man's. "¿Pues?"

"No hablar español."

"No hablo," he said. "You say, No hablo español."

I said it back to him and he smiled.

"What do you want?"

"I don't know," I said.

"No offense but is looking like life is not treating you so good."

"Bad couple of days at least."

"Hijola. A few days can do that? I no want to see you next week." He smiled. I smiled back, I think.

I said, "Two carne asada tacos. And a soda, please."

He got it all ready: wrapped the meat in corn tortillas stacked in twos, squeezed a ripe lime wedge over both tacos with strong, dark hands. He poured the soda. He set it all on the counter in front of the window.

"Gratis," he said.

"De nada."

I was reaching for my wallet but he held up his hand and said, "No. Gratis means free."

"Oh." I took off the hat and wiped my forehead and put the hat back. "Thanks."

"Where you going?"

"A wedding. Family party."

"That's good," the old man said. "There is a thing people say: Sin la familia, no puede existir la vida. La familia es la más importante." He seemed to look past me for a second. "Pues, la tradición también." He waved his hand as if to wave away his thoughts and then pushed all of the food toward me. "Pues, se parece que no es posible para separarlos. Sin una la otra no pueda sobrevivir. But I could not say it in English to you. It is not the same. In English it is too much, como se dice, sentimiento?"

"Feeling?"

"No."

"Sentimental?"

"Eso es." He took some napkins from a stack and held them under the soda machine and let water run over them. "For me, sentimental is good. It is nothing like life." He handed me the napkin and I said thanks, wiped my hands, and he leaned out of the window and looked at my missing boot. He bit his lip. "For most people the sentimental is more of the same, so they no trust it. So is better you hear some things in Spanish I guess. For you, it

makes more things true. Los dos, ambos, both.” He looked happy about what he’d said. Then he said, “Como te llamas?”

“Me llamo Toro.”

He smiled and shook his head. “¿Y el verdadero?”

“David.”

“Comelo,” he said, “David.”

I finished the food there at the window. I drank the soda till only air came through the straw. I waved goodbye but he was singing to himself, and cooking, and I didn’t want to interrupt.

I know you want to think about something besides your speech, so think about this. I remember that man. Perfectly. The whole time I walked I said his words to myself again and again, trying to figure out what he’d said.

I’m asking you what he meant because you’re better with words than I ever was. When you go out there to speak you’ll know just what to say. You always do. All I could do was listen to him and then walk down the street, trying to hail a cab. You ever try to hail a cab outside of downtown? You damn right there ain’t any. Ain’t a single person that will pick a man up if he’s stuck between one place and the other. At least, it don’t feel like it.