

COLOSOS

EDUARDO FRAJMAN

Two days before...

Two boys fighting in the wood, eighteen perhaps, spitting bitter words Akamu couldn't understand. He came to them, feet uncertain in the mud, demanding "enough!" in heavy English.

Two heads swung to him. Zàng Liân hissed "lí kái!" go away! The stranger said nothing. He turned, raised both arms, brought them down on Zàng Liân's head with such force that Akamu lost his footing. The force of a great boulder falling off a cliff. Impossible force.

Minutes later it was over, Akamu cowering behind a tree, Zàng Liân broken, dead in the wet earth, the stranger gone.

*

Four years before...

A bus ticket. A sack with dry socks, extra underwear, a bar of chocolate. No money.

"Te la roban." Mamá cried and cried.

Rafael begged to stay. They said "no hay otra," not after cousin Silviano was shot down. They swore they loved him. He never saw them again.

Twenty of them – the oldest fifteen, some as young as eight or nine – rode the rain-soaked country, crossed at La Hachadura into Guatemala, the border guards smoking, looking the other way, then kept on north to Tecun Umán, just below the Suchiate river and the border with Mexico.

*

Two days before...

"Did you know?" Akamu still hugged the blanket the rescue team had wrapped him in.

Sun Lu-Tang made tea.

"He showed me... prowess when he arrived. He came to learn qigong, to better control it, he said."

“Control what?”

Sun Lu-Tang shook his bald head.

“What should I do, shifu?”

Sun Lu-Tang recited some Taoist parable about wu wei, about happenstance, about letting life flow as one lets water run through one’s fingers.

Akamu sighed. “I can’t do nothing.”

“I know.”

Sun Lu-Tang extracted a manila envelope from his desk cabinet. Inside was a flip-phone, a number.

*

Two days before...

In the midst of all the chaos, the construction, the budget cuts, the militiamen terrorizing Highway 380, the drug runners shaking down gas-station owners for protection money, she had to do this to him now.

“It’s just a couple of days, Sheriff.”

That it was. Could Alphonse say no? Three months she’d run the office, admirably replacing old Bessie Alberts, who until her last day was convinced the internet was a steel mesh you use to keep out desert flies.

“I wouldn’t ask...”

Hadn’t missed a day. Tidy filing system. Virtuosa scheduler.

“Go. I’ll figure it out.”

*

Four years before...

They found two men to cross them over. All the money they took, plus Miranda, a classmate of Rafael’s from back home, for the sweaty one, and a wispy, terrified little girl he didn’t know for the one with the scarred cheek.

In two wooden skiffs they cut through the river, Miranda’s blank face lighting the way.

As they waded ashore two small boys disappeared into the water. The men paid no mind. Once on land they simply left.

The fifteen-year-olds, Hermidio and Barry, started walking. Everyone followed.

“A dónde vamos, Hermidio?”

“Hacia el pueblo. Al tren.”

*

Two days before...

Breaking a lock's easy, doing it quietly's the hard part. Horace and Vassili were unmatched.

“Almost there.”

“Hurry up!”

Until the voice emerged over the Manhattan traffic.

“Am I interrupting something?”

The shape of a man in the doorway. Big. Black jacket, black ski mask. Vassili rushed him. The man flung him against the wall. Horace pulled his gun. The man moved too quickly. Impossibly quickly.

Then his pocket rang.

“Don't move,” he said, not unkindly, raising the flip-phone to his ear.

“Mierda!”

He trussed them up for the cops to find and disappeared into the night.

*

Four years before...

Always hungry, never thirsty. Too tired to cry.

It rained and rained. They walked under the trees hugging the road. On the second day Barry and Hermidio went food hunting and didn't return.

Then the storm. Thunder whips. Blinding flashes. The little ones screaming. The big ones ran, leaving them behind. Rafael did too.

He ran until he heard her.

“Ayúdemen!”

Diana in the water, all alone, drowning. He stopped for her.

“Levántate!”

“No puedo!”

He lifted her up. She weighed nothing.

They hunkered under an higuerón, waiting to see who'd die first, them or the storm.

*

The day before...

“I don’t mean to be rude. I just don’t understand. Every time....”

“I’m sorry, professor.”

The girl’s orange face was scrunched up, her eyes swollen red. Ancy fought her own temper.

“The samples in that lab are unique. Irreplaceable. Do you understand?”

“It won’t happen again...”

She was a plain, dumpy little thing. Her English was pitiful.

“Next time I’ll ask them to transfer you.”

The girl hung her head, all out of promises.

“I want this mess cleaned up. You know Diana, my assistant?”

Her fluff of hair danced as she nodded.

“She’ll show you how.”

*

The day before...

Vero preferred talking to texting. Kirsten obliged, their vintage ringers for each other the same – “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.”

“You going tonight?”

“I don’t know.”

“Good money.”

“Good grief.”

“I’ll keep them off you, I promise.”

“I’ll do the same.”

“Until I don’t want you to.”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“I didn’t last time.”

“I remember, naughty girl.”

“Couldn’t help it.”

“Right. Where is it, anyway?”

“Outside Juarez.”

“A ways.”

“Evan said they’re bussing us all down.”

“How many?”

“Thirty girls.”

“Jesus. Big party.”

“Best kind!”
“Very much disagree.”
“Wear something hot.”
“I always do.”

*

Four years before...

A full day Rafael walked and Diana followed. She talked the whole time, in heaven for joy to have found him.

“De dónde eres?”

“De Las Palmas.” Cold, starving, Rafael could barely get the words out.

“Yo soy de Ilobasco.”

She’d crossed from El Salvador with a group like his, set out with a girl from back home who never made it to the river.

Her arms and legs were skinny like a bird’s. Diana Pajarita.

They ate soggy bread crust from a trash can. When night came she fell asleep leaning her head against his chest.

*

The day before...

Voices in the lounge. Diana sitting on the couch, her face in her arms, audibly sobbing. Another girl next to her, murmuring consolation. Standing by the wall, looking pensive, the most beautiful man Ancy had ever seen.

He offered his hand.

“I’m Alejandro,” said the dimple at the corner of his mouth. “Alex.”

Diana wiped her eyes.

“Dr. Ooman. I’m... sorry... You remember my friend Ariadna?”

Ancy did. The girl flashed a little wave.

“What’s all this?”

Diana began. Alex left the room, an old flip-phone in his hand. That was curious. Appreciatively, Ancy watched him go.

*

The day before...

Hossenberg was a good deputy, also a class A whiner.
“I told Ms. Barrera weeks ago.”
The schedule on the monitor might as well be in Sanskrit.
“Just go. I’ll figure it out.”
“You’re an angel, boss. The wife and I’ll pray for you from Cancun!”
Breathe, Alphonse. One moment of peace?
“Sheriff Kaneza!”
Great. Montesinos never brought good news.
“Two-day delay.”
“You gotta be...”
“Both hammers broke on the same day. Weird coincidence, actually.”
“You don’t got other tools?”
“Nothing else can get through that lower wall.”
“You’re packing up?”
“Back in three days. I hope.”

*

Four years before...

They found others eventually, adults and kids and mothers with babies, converging like river tributaries, all vaguely knowing where to go. The town. The train.

There they found the loud circle of boys by the picnic tables. Inside was Alejandro, on the ground, three large ones kicking him over and over. Another held Verónica by the arms, she snarling like a demon.

“Vámonos!” Diana whispered.

Rafael nodded, then saw Arón, bruised and bloody. He begged them to help.

“No, no...” Diana started crying.

Rafael considered her, the boys, the circle. He murmured “qué bruto!” and ran inside.

*

The day before...

“Is he your boyfriend?” Ancy blushed as she said it.

Ariadna shook her head.

“He was my sister’s... Not anymore.”

“Does your sister live with you in New Mexico?”

She glanced down at Diana.

“We’re actually not sure where she lives.”

Their friend Rafael was dead, Diana said. Was killed.

“You remember Arón? He visited a few months ago? We showed him the lab?”

Short. Quiet. Black hair. Sad eyes.

“I remember.”

“We think... we know he did it.”

Ancy struggled to understand.

“But why? You’re just kids!”

Alex returned. They conferenced in Spanish.

They told her.

*

Four years before...

Alex and Vero were fourteen. Arón thirteen. Their group had held together until Luciano, the biggest and meanest, went after Verónica.

They laughed after, about the beating Alex and Arón took, about Vero sinking her nails into the monkey boy, about Rafa ramming into Luciano’s gut like a bull.

Searching for food they found an empty house, burned black, still smoking. Outside were Ariadna and María, ashen-faced, plastic-eyed.

“Agua. Por favor.”

Men had come in the house in the night, killed Mamá and Papá, taken their baby brother Anuncio.

Verónica decided for them all.

“Vengan con nosotros.”

*

The day before...

“You’re how old?”

“Seventeen next March, professor.”

“You got into college at sixteen?”

“I didn’t. I’m not a student.”

Ancy’s knees went weak.

“You’re not...”

“I never even went to high school.”

“But... you’re the best lab tech I’ve ever... you... how?”

“You never checked...”

She hadn’t even thought to check on the spindly bright-eyed strong-voiced girl, the girl who knew exactly what the Ancy Ooman Laboratory for the Study of Cellular Physiology specialized in and had her research prospectus all written up.

“You look so young!” Ancy remembered saying.

She’d grinned. “I get that a lot.”

*

Four years before...

Still they thought, the seven of them, to go to the train, ride to Ixtepec and once there find a way to climb onto La Bestia, the colossal freighter that’ll cross the desert northward, over endless tracks to the magical kingdom of Los Estados Unidos. They might’ve gone that way, maybe made it to the border, maybe died along the way. Maybe broken apart from each other. But they didn’t.

Alex was the first to spot Luciano and his band. He tried to rush the others away.

“Mi amor!” shrieked Luciano. Verónica went white. “Ya te vi!”

*

The day before...

All her research. All that work.

“It’s yours?”

Diana was done crying. In a blink she was the no-nonsense lab tech again.

“I needed an expert in the field, a lab out of the way...”

“A minor league expert, you mean.”

Then, in a blink, Diana was someone else. Not the young co-ed doing extra credit after Bio 101. Not the budding scientist seeking Ancy’s wisdom and expertise. Her eyes seemed to deepen, her voice.

“You’re a wonderful scientist, Dr. Ooman. You’ll be remembered for this. I promise.”

Curiously, Ancy thought, Ariadna's face darkened at these words.

*

Four years before...

They ran into the forest, the pack of howling boys behind them.

"Ya te agarro, mi amor!"

Arón, tiny, slippery, went ahead, finding a path among the tallgrass and the trees. Alex and Rafa held the back. It was useless. They were close.

"Ayay!" Ariadna fell to the ground, two red fires at her ankle.

They didn't have time to look for the snake. They kept on, Ariadna holding on to Alex's shoulders.

"Ahí estás, mi amor! Te agarro!"

Arón slipped, rolled downhill. Rafa and Alex decided together. They shoved the others into the ravine, followed behind.

*

The day before...

Three blood samples, all equally unlike any normal human blood, otherwise radically different from each other.

"Holding out on me...Sneaking around...Just yelled at the cleaning girl..."

Diana shrugged.

"You would've understood immediately. It was too soon."

"Understood what?"

"Show her," said Ariadna.

Alex made a production of walking around the room – he seemed to Ancy someone who enjoyed making a production – before picking up a stool with metal legs. He raised his left arm, held it straight ahead, and with his right slammed it hard with the stool. The metal stretched and bent like a candy snake.

*

Four years before...

Huddled under a rock around Ariadna, who was whimpering her pain, the swelling on her ankle throbbing and hot.

Diana chirped, pointing to a dark corner. A tuft of something, a different green than the grass and the shrubs, a bluish tint, as if glowing from inside, with squat leaves, almost round and folded onto themselves, and at the end of each stem a flower, the same blue-green color as the leaves, and at the center of each flower a fruit the size of a grape, the size of an eye.

She reached for it, Diana Pajarita.

*

The day before...

“You can all do that?”

“We can grow...,” said Alex

“Cultivate,” corrected Diana.

This thing, this compound, was in every cell of their body, they claimed, and they could actively, deliberately shape it, direct it.

“I was dying,” Ariadna said. “I was. It was Diana who found the fruit, who ate it first.” Her eyes glowed with unfallen tears. “But it was María, my sister, who first realized. She was just a baby, you understand, professor? Eleven years old and she knew. Told me to look for it inside, follow it, lead it to where it hurt.”

*

Four years before...

They stayed put most of that day.

“Búsquenlo,” María taught them, “bien adentro.”

María pictured it as a little mouse, a curious, good-humored creature, exploring, sniffing around, spreading joy. Verónica felt it as a viscous substance that oozed through her this way and that. Arón saw a little him inside himself, a pack of tools slung over a shoulder, eager to build. Alex kneaded it, stretched it like uncooked pizza dough. For Rafa it was a bright light that connected him with the others, with the world, with everything. For Ariadna it was ever after María’s voice.

*

The day before...

“And the plant?”

“We went back to look. Never found it. We don’t know what it was or where it came from, how, why it chose us.”

“Chose you?”

Diana lowered her eyes.

“I can’t explain it better.”

Ancy counselled herself to be patient, to think, to let the significance sink in. A world-changing discovery. Her name engraved forever among the pioneers of science.

“We can help each other,” said Diana, as if reading her mind.

But first they had to find the others.

“Please, professor, not a word to anyone. We’ll be back tomorrow. First thing.”

*

Four years before...

Later, weeks later, when they had a safe place, a home to share, the seven of them, to cultivate, to watch and help each other change, María tore a page from a magazine, framed it, and hung it on the wall.

*El que retorna, el campo agradecido;
Óptimo fruto, que obediente ofrece,
es del Señor, pues si fecundo crece,
se lo debe al cultivo recibido.*

[*The one returns, the field thankful;
the choice fruit, obediently offered,
belongs to God, for fecund growth,
is owed to the gift of cultivation.*]

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz
Soneto XXVIII

*

The day before...

Biosynthesis, as Ancy spent years explaining to mostly unprepared, mostly uninterested students, could theoretically be enhanced in a multiplicity of ways – pro-proteins could be activated more effectively by improving post-translational modification, new pathways could develop for

recalibration of high-energy molecules, cofactors could be produced more prolifically for catalytic enzymatic processes, polymerization could be facilitated by improving monomer reactions...

All of these processes at work at once, reinforcing each other, coalescing into one another, unmediated, with close to instantaneous, impossible effects. Unchartable increases in bone and muscle mass, tendon strength, neuron replenishment.

Yes, she understood what it meant.

*

Four years before...

Once Ariadna could walk they set out, silent, each palpitating, molding. They felt strong. They felt new. They were starving.

Food first, then shelter. Nowhere to go but to town, to the train station. Luciano was there, of course. Waiting.

“Hola, mis amores,” he purred.

Alex stepped forward.

“Basta ya. No te hicimos nada.”

Luciano cackled, ignoring him.

“Vente ya conmigo, mi amor,” he reached his hand to Vero.

Alex opened his mouth, trying to stall, to decide what to do. Charge Luciano, maybe. Sacrifice himself to save the rest.

There turned out to be no need.

*

The night before...

Horrible party, as she knew it would be. Guns and drugs and sweaty, grabby hands everywhere.

“Don’t touch!” Kirsten would go rock still. That usually worked.

She made her way around the dance floor, seeking space, seeking air. Outside she spotted Verónica chatting up three of the worst-looking sorts, tattoos on their necks and Berettas hanging from their belts. And she fearless, in her element, giving all indication of loving every moment, rubbing against them, smiling perfect teeth.

Kirsten went to her. “Let’s go home.”

“You go,” said Verónica. “I’ll catch up.”

The men licked their lips.

*

The night before...

“What do you mean you’re not coming in? Hernandez and Lombardi’re about to clock out... I don’t give a crap... Hossenberg’s out too... No, Ms. Barrera didn’t tell me...”

“I’m sorry, love. Can’t come home tonight... I know... I promise it won’t... Please don’t say that... I love you... I know... I’m sorry...”

Before abandoning Alphonse, Hernandez brought one last present.

“Put him in 2A, boss. Made a mess of Dilly’s Pub, carrying on, picking fights...”

“What was his blood alcohol?”

“Strange thing, sheriff. Breathalyzer showed nothing. Zero.”

“You ask him about it?”

“Not really a talker.”

*

The night before...

What was she thinking? If she got in that car...

“Vero!” Kirsten pleaded.

“Go away!”

“You wanna come, baby?” said one of them, slithery, pale.

“She doesn’t.”

A voice behind her, a tall, gorgeous man. Impossibly gorgeous.

“Me la prestan?” He grinned at the three narcos, all friendly like.

“Ándate,” snapped the one with the moustache.

The next voice was the one Kirsten least expected.

“Qué haces aquí?” Verónica, glaring at the newcomer!

“Es urgente.”

Moustache touched his gun. Slithery dragged Vero by the arm towards the SUV. Pretty boy backed down.

“Te veo después!” he called.

*

The night before...

Alphonse couldn't remember the last time he was alone in the office. Three cars out on night patrol. That was it. Nobody on phones. Nobody on cell duty. Ms. Barrera not answering his calls or his texts.

The stairway reeked of dust and glue and burnt rubber. Montesinos and his crew hadn't even cleaned up.

He filled a Cool-Aid pitcher for the alleged drunkard in 2A. The other cells were all, unusually, empty.

Just a boy, couldn't be more than eighteen.

"What were you doing in that bar, kid?"

Two dark eyes considered him.

"No hablo inglés."

*

The night before...

Verónica had disappeared into the SUV with slithery. The other two stayed put for a few extra beats.

"Come with me," gorgeous put a hand on Kirsten's back.

"Don't touch!" she snapped.

He pulled back.

"It's ok. I know you're freaked."

"No kidding!," she motioned towards the retreating men, pulled out her phone. "We have to get her out!"

"She'll be fine. I'm Alex, by the way. You?"

"You know Verónica?"

"She's my... she's like my sister."

"And you just let her..."

"I promise it's fine." He shifted his chin just so. "Well, maybe not for everyone."

*

Four years before...

Red-faced Verónica pushed Alex aside. Luciano's eyes got big when she pounced. He raised his hands but Vero was on him, reached for his hair and

pulled down, down, and she slammed her fist into the back of his head, and Luciano fell face-first into the dirt.

Luciano's boys, nothing more than boys, watched, watched as Vero brought her foot down on Luciano's skull, hard, again, on his shoulders, his wrists, his groin. When he moaned she broke his nose. When he went quiet she hit him again, again.

She howled as she did it. She howled.

*

The night before...

He'd liked her at first. She didn't laugh at his name, "Eztli."

"Beautiful," she'd said, touched his shoulder.

Now it was ruined, the güera and the tall one had ruined the mood. But Eztli wasn't gonna let this one go. He dragged her into the back seat, knowing Claudio and Pedrejo were behind, that he'd only have a few seconds alone to show her he was boss.

He shut the door and turned to her and there she was, little beads of sweat on her nose.

"Hola, mi amor," she purred, and hell was in her eyes.

*

Four years before...

Their first smartphone was stolen, their first computer. They stole, yes, food, money, until they didn't have to. They got jobs, Alex hauling boxes, Rafa mopping floors, Ariadna and Vero making tortillas, enough to pay for a roof, a bed. They took turns sleeping on it. Rafa and Ariadna shared for a time. Alex and María fell in love on that bed.

All the while they cultivated, each drawing a different blueprint, a different path.

They read, in Spanish and English, they watched movies, went online, taught each other to dance, to play, to sing, to fight.

*

That day...

He'd drunk all his Cool-Aid, snarfed down his dinner, barely slept from what Alphonse could tell. Just sat on the cot, back to the wall, eyes dim, staring ahead, his expression at once calm and purposeful.

Alphonse set a chair in front of 2A and sat.

"I'm not buying this no hablo garbage. You're gonna tell me your name and your deal."

The boy rewarded this with a lazy smile.

"Yep, you got me, Sheriff."

"I got squat. Ran your prints through the system, all the systems, all night long. You don't exist..."

"Arón."

"Arón what?"

"Arón nothing."

*

Three years before...

A cheap, rundown hacienda in San Marcos Tlacuilotepec.

María their coder, their hacker.

Diana their scientist, devouring online courses in physics, chemistry, medicine.

Rafa their linguist – English first, then French, Mandarin, Japanese.

Ariadna their scholar, their librarian.

Alex their encyclopedia of sports, film, music.

Arón and Verónica their memories of the real world they'd left behind, the poverty, the violence, the hunger, the fear.

They made sure to grow strong enough for self-defense, smart enough not to be fooled, not to give themselves away. They shared their feelings, their thoughts, their plans, though never all. Never all.

*

That day...

Beautiful young people all over her lab. Something out of a United Colors billboard. Alex introduced her to high-cheekboned Akamu, a lean, tight pack of muscle, and the two girls, each more stunning than the other. Kirsten, the blonde, said "howdy" in a Texas drawl. Verónica, the curvy brunette, her face a dance of twitchy anxiety, barely offered a nod.

“Is Diana here?”

Alex paced around.

“She won’t answer my calls.”

“She left with Ariadna.”

“I know. I can’t reach her either.”

“Did you go to her place?”

“I can’t... we... we don’t tell each other our addresses.”

*

Three years before...

Vero and Alex bought matching full-length mirrors and worked on their bodies together. Alex grew taller, wider. His face changed, his jawline, the color of his eyes. Vero’s waist shrank, her chest and bum swelled, her hair now fell in cascading curls around her shoulders. They strove more than the others to look older.

They began going out most nights, each their own way, and the stories around town began swirling, of men found beat up and bloodied in dark allies, of would-be robbers dragged to the police station by a mysterious giant dressed all in black.

*

That day...

“I’m sorry I missed your messages!”

“About time you called me back! This place is a graveyard. Nobody’s come in for early shift. What’s happening?”

“I... I’m not sure...”

“Ms. Barrera, how could you let this...?”

“I’m on my way to you now, Sheriff.”

“I thought you were in Arizona.”

“I drove through the night. I’ll be there within the hour.”

At least she could answer the phones. Alphonse rubbed his temples. Fourteen deputies all on leave on the same day, each with a perfectly valid excuse, each “ran it by Ms. Barrera.”

The whole thing smelled rotten.

*

Three years before...

María asked them to stop.

“Nos ponen a todos en peligro.”

“Por qué no usarlo?,” they argued, to make the world better?

You don’t fix the world by beating people, María countered, playing vigilante on would-be robbers, would-be rapists. Diana agreed. Rafa and Arón were undecided, in love as they both were with Vero from afar. From afar, because she had no time for them, for anyone other than the men she sought to punish, which was all men.

Ariadna didn’t care about the world or about punishment. She thought only of Anuncio, her stolen baby brother.

*

That day...

“Have you seen? What they can do?”

Akamu nodded. He had a square, serious, unfriendly face, but Kirsten needed to talk.

“You saw? Their friend Rafael...?”

“I don’t know... that his name.” His English was painful. “We call him Zàng Liàn at school. It mean ‘dirty face.’” He hung his head.

“What school?”

“Edmonton, Canada. School of tai chi and qigong.”

“I’ve heard of tai chi...”

“Chinese art of spiritual cultivation. School of shifu Sun Lu-Tang. Very great shifu. Gave me number. Now I here.”

“Why are you here?”

“To see more.”

Kirsten nodded now. “Yeah. Me too.”

*

That day...

She swooped into the office all out of breath. He should’ve known. He accepted her apologies, her excuses. Got mixed up. Can’t believe this happened. Full shift is on for tonight.

That part was true. Lombardi and Hernandez and “Walnut” Machado down in cells would come to work like it was nothing, just another evening.

He should’ve known.

“Lo hiciste?” Arón in 2A was talking to Ms. Barrera. Tears streamed down her face.

She got him from behind, a good, strong punch, strong, shoved him into 2A. Alphonse felt for his phone. It wasn’t there.

His gun was.

*

That day...

Off in their corner, in their own universe, Alejandro and Verónica seemed to have forgotten they were there.

Ancy leaned to Kirsten.

“How’s your Spanish?”

“I’m from south Texas. What do you think?”

The professor had a striking face, olive-dark, sharp-featured.

Kirsten could barely hear, except when Alex pressed the phone against his face.

“Estás segura?... Cómo sabes?... Dónde estás?...”

He slammed it shut.

“We have to go,” he said.

“Go where?”

“New Mexico.”

That was María on the phone, he said. Ariadna’d gone back sometime during the night.

“Where’s Diana?”

They saw the answer on his face.

*

That day...

“You open this right now! I’ll shoot you!”

Arón and Ms. Barrera were hugging. Alphonse’s Spanish was passable. You had to, he told her. We had to.

Arón let go, took a step toward 2A.

“This isn’t about you, Sheriff. It’ll be over soon. We’ll be out of your hair.”

“I’m counting to five. I swear I’ll put a bullet in your chest.”

“Sheriff...”

“Do you hear me?”

Another step.

Two shots. To the chest. Even with a vest he would’ve flown back, lost consciousness. He didn’t.

“It hurts, I ain’t gonna lie.”

Impossible.

Then they told him.

*

Two years before...

Thursday night was girls’ night. Vero liked drinking, the others dancing. They had drivers’ licenses, passports, Mexican and American.

Two men was how it started, wanted to chat up Vero. They all did.

“Hoy no, chicos,” she turned away.

They didn’t like that. She liked that even less.

Ambulances were called, police cruisers, even an army van.

Alex and María asked no questions.

“Empaquen. Nos vamos al norte.”

Ariadna balked. She wanted to stay, search for Anuncio. María called her insane, irrational. They fought about it. Didn’t matter. Next morning Vero, Rafa, and Arón were all gone.

*

That day...

“Ever heard of Katherine Mansfield, Sheriff? Genius. Died at thirty-four of tuberculosis. Wrote this story called ‘The Fly.’

So this man, the boss, is hanging with his broken-down old friend, Woodfield. He pities the geezer, they both know it, but Woodfield also knows the boss’ son died, and any power is better than no power, so he mentions it. After, the boss sits alone with his pain. A fly lands on his inkpot. He drips some ink on the fly’s wings, waits for it to clean itself, then drip-drops more. Tortures the fly to death. That’s the story.”

*

Two years before...

Maybe they were right, Rafa suggested. Maybe she should stop being so angry.

“No entiendes nada,” she hissed.

He held her. He did know. He did understand.

“Te amo, te amo.”

He tried to kiss her.

“No!”

“No seas necia.”

“Ya, idiota!”

She pushed him away. He let her. He loved her, he said again.

Arón was there, they realized. Watching them in silence.

Thinking...who knew what he was thinking?...who knew what was going on inside any of them, this power inside them, this impossible, inexhaustible power?

What, in the end, were they to do with it?

*

That day...

“Vienen de camino.” Ms. Barrera, Ariadna, looked afraid.

“You see, Sheriff, it has to be now. Diana was trying to synthesize the compound, enhance it. She would’ve been...”

“So you killed her.” Alphonse addressed Ariadna, hoping her guilt would work for him.

“He’s right,” she whispered. “It had to be done. My sister...”

“What about her?”

“She doesn’t care about anyone. Our baby brother was lost and she didn’t care to look for him.”

“Where is she?”

“We don’t know. First Alex, Verónica, the professor. Then we’ll find her. The two of us.”

Those were her last words.

*

That day...

Using the smallest words she could – words she hoped were intelligible to the Barbie doll and the martial artist who didn't speak English – Ancy recounted how Diana had pretended to receive the samples from some lab in Germany, how they'd worked for months analyzing the compound, identifying its basic components.

"I'd never seen anything like it. We were working on our first paper. I thought I was so nice giving her co-authorship..."

What she still couldn't understand...

"All on her own. How did she?"

"Maybe I can explain," the cleaning girl was there, orange-skinned, mop-haired, stupid-looking. "I'm María."

*

Two years before...

They lost each other. Vero never spoke to Rafael again. Ariadna never forgave María.

Long before, María had given them each a flip-phone with one number in the contacts list. She told them never to use smartphones, which would track movements and locations. Get a separate flip-phone for normal life. She found Arón's, cracked, the morning they said goodbye.

Just kids, let loose on the world, with no fear, no limitations but what their own priorities demarcated.

The teenage years are called "adolescence," the period of pain, the period of passion, of rage, of breaking, of becoming.

*

That day...

"Got yourself arrested."

"Yes."

"So you can fight it out down here, inside my concrete walls."

Just a kid. How to talk to him?

"You killed your sister. Ariadna."

Arón's lips disappeared into his mouth.

“And she killed Diana. Now these two...”

“Alex. Vero.”

“With your bare hands.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re sure you’ll win?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“You have to decide what to cultivate. Alex prioritized his looks, Vero too. Rafa wanted enlightenment or some tontera. María, Diana wanted to be geniuses.”

“Not you.”

“Not me. I’ve been preparing for today for two years. It’s going to be today.”

*

That day...

The two of them.

“Only Diana knew.” María grieved for her sister. “She thought we’d almost done it.”

“Done what?”

How could she not have seen it before, the spark in the girl’s eyes, the deliberation in her every movement? No wonder Alex, beautiful Alex, was captivated by her of all women.

“You’ve been playing me for months.”

“I’m sorry, professor. But, trust me, you’ll forget all about that after today.”

María tilted her head theatrically as she considered Kirsten and Akamu.

“You’ll do great.”

“For what?” Ancy snapped.

“She was wrong, Diana Pajarita. We’d already done it.”

*

That day...

Books would be written about Sheriff Alphonse Kaneza’s testimony. About how Arón, nothing but sixteen years old, appointed himself savior,

scourge of his own brothers and sisters, just children like himself, who in his mind would inevitably devolve into the boss from 'The Fly.'

Alejandro was magnificent, Verónica fearsome in her wrath. Arón beat them, smashed them to the ground, for the sake of the world.

A hero he was, yet he was wrong.

"Stop!"

Kirsten ran to Verónica. Akamu showed Arón he was beaten. He grasped the bars of 2A and bent them apart like wet clay.

*

The day after...

For Ancy it was a dance, a dance like she remembered back in Bangalore, where she'd go visit as a child, a dance inside herself, inside her every cell, and she was learning how to lead that dance, how to step and twist and skip and bend.

Surely María had landed in Dakar by now. Ulaanbaatar after, she said, rural China, Siberia, then down the Americas at her leisure.

Ancy passed the fruits around to her relatives, her colleagues, her neighbors.

Before she left, María bought a smartphone.

"Go ahead and track me. I'm not special anymore."

FIN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eduardo Frajman has a PhD in political science from the University of Maryland, College Park. He has taught at the college level for over twenty years, at institutions including DePaul University, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Oakton College, and the College of Lake County. His work has appeared in *Electric Literature*, *The Point*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, and many other publications.