

OSCAR GOES NATIVE

After his initial homecoming week, after he'd been taken to a bunch of sights by his cousins, after he'd gotten somewhat used to the scorching weather and the surprise of waking up to the roosters and being called Huáscar by everybody (that was his Dominican name, something else he'd forgotten), after he refused to succumb to that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says *You do not belong*, after he'd gone to about fifty clubs and because he couldn't dance salsa, merengue, or bachata had sat and drunk Presidentes while Lola and his cousins burned holes in the floor, after he'd explained to people a hundred times that he'd been separated from his sister at birth, after he spent a couple of quiet mornings on his own, writing, after he'd given out all his taxi money to beggars and had to call his cousin Pedro Pablo to pick him up, after he'd watched shirtless shoeless seven-year-olds fighting each other for the scraps he'd left on his plate at an outdoor café, after his mother took them all to dinner in the Zona Colonial and the waiters kept looking at their party askance (Watch out, Mom, Lola said, they probably think you're Haitian—La única haitiana aquí eres tú, mi amor, she retorted), after a skeletal vieja grabbed both his hands and begged him for a penny, after his sister had said, You think that's bad, you should see the bateys, after he'd spent a day in Bani (the campo where La Inca had been raised) and he'd taken a dump in a latrine and wiped his ass with a corn cob—now *that's* entertainment, he wrote in his journal—after he'd gotten somewhat used to the

surreal whirligig that was life in La Capital—the guaguas, the cops, the mind-boggling poverty, the Dunkin' Donuts, the beggars, the Haitians selling roasted peanuts at the intersections, the mind-boggling poverty, the asshole tourists hogging up all the beaches, the Xica da Silva novelas where homegirl got naked every five seconds that Lola and his female cousins were cracked on, the afternoon walks on the Conde, the mind-boggling poverty, the snarl of streets and rusting zinc shacks that were the barrios populares, the masses of niggers he waded through every day who ran him over if he stood still, the skinny watchmen standing in front of stores with their brokedown shotguns, the music, the raunchy jokes heard on the streets, the mind-boggling poverty, being piledrived into the corner of a concho by the combined weight of four other customers, the music, the new tunnels driving down into the bauxite earth, the signs that banned donkey carts from the same tunnels—after he'd gone to Boca Chica and Villa Mella and eaten so much chicharrones he had to throw up on the side of the road—now *that*, his tío Rudolfo said, is entertainment—after his tío Carlos Moya berated him for having stayed away so long, after his abuela berated him for having stayed away so long, after his cousins berated him for having stayed away so long, after he saw again the unforgettable beauty of the Cibao, after he heard the stories about his mother, after he stopped marveling at the amount of political propaganda plastered up on every spare wall—ladrones, his mother announced, one and all—after the touched-in-the-head tío who'd been tortured during Balaguer's reign came over and got into a heated political argument with Carlos Moya (after which they both got drunk), after he'd caught his first sunburn in Boca Chica, after

he'd swum in the Caribbean, after tío Rudolfo had gotten him blasted on mamajuana de marisco, after he'd seen his first Haitians kicked off a guagua because niggers claimed they "smelled," after he'd nearly gone nuts over all the bellezas he saw, after he helped his mother install two new air conditioners and crushed his finger so bad he had dark blood under the nail, after all the gifts they'd brought had been properly distributed, after Lola introduced him to the boyfriend she'd dated as a teenager, now a capitaleño as well, after he'd seen the pictures of Lola in her private-school uniform, a tall muchacha with heartbreak eyes, after he'd brought flowers to his abuela's number-one servant's grave who had taken care of him when he was little, after he had diarrhea so bad his mouth watered before each detonation, after he'd visited all the rinky-dink museums in the capital with his sister, after he stopped being dismayed that everybody called him gordo (and, worse, gringo), after he'd been overcharged for almost everything he wanted to buy, after La Inca prayed over him nearly every morning, after he caught a cold because his abuela set the air conditioner in his room so high, he decided suddenly and without warning to stay on the Island for the rest of the summer with his mother and his tío. Not to go home with Lola. It was a decision that came to him one night on the Malecón, while staring out over the ocean. What do I have waiting for me in Paterson? he wanted to know. He wasn't teaching that summer and he had all his notebooks with him. Sounds like a good idea to me, his sister said. You need some time in the patria. Maybe you'll even find yourself a nice campesina. It felt like the right thing to do. Help clear his head and his heart of the gloom that had filled them these months. His mother was less

hot on the idea but La Inca waved her into silence. Hijo, you can stay here all your life. (Though he found it strange that she made him put on a crucifix immediately thereafter.)

So, after Lola flew back to the States (Take good care of yourself, Mister) and the terror and joy of his return had subsided, after he settled down in Abuela's house, the house that Diaspora had built, and tried to figure out what he was going to do with the rest of his summer now that Lola was gone, after his fantasy of an Island girlfriend seemed like a distant joke—Who the fuck had *he* been kidding? He couldn't dance, he didn't have loot, he didn't dress, he wasn't confident, he wasn't handsome, he wasn't from Europe, he wasn't fucking no Island girls—after he spent one week writing and (ironically enough) turned down his male cousins' offer to take him to a whorehouse like fifty times, Oscar fell in love with a semiretired puta.

Her name was Ybón Pimentel. Oscar considered her the start of his *real* life.

L A B E B A

She lived two houses over and, like the de Leóns, was a newcomer to Mirador Norte. (Oscar's moms had bought their house with double shifts at her two jobs. Ybón bought hers with double shifts too, but in a window in Amsterdam.) She was one of those golden mulatas that French-speaking Caribbeans call chabines, that my boys call chicas de oro; she had snarled, apocalyptic hair, copper eyes, and was one whiteskinned relative away from jaba.

At first Oscar thought she was only a visitor, this tiny, slightly paunchy babe who was always high-heeling it out to her Pathfinder. (She didn't have the Nuevo Mundo wannabe American look of the majority of his neighbors.) The two times Oscar bumped into her—during breaks in his writing he would go for walks along the hot, bland cul-de-sacs, or sit at the local café—she smiled at him. And the third time they saw each other—here, folks, is where the miracles begin—she sat at his table and said: What are you reading? At first he didn't know what was happening, and then he realized: *Holy Shit!* A female was talking to *him*. (It was an unprecedented change in fortune, as though his threadbare Skein of Destiny had accidentally gotten tangled with that of a dooper, more fortunate brother.) Turned out Ybón knew his abuela, gave her rides whenever Carlos Moya was out making deliveries. You're the boy in her pictures, she said with a sly smile. I was little, he said defensively. And besides, that was before the war changed me. She didn't laugh. That's probably what it is. Well, I have to go. On went the shades, up went the ass, out went the belleza. Oscar's erection following her like a dowser's wand.

Ybón had attended the UASD a long time ago but she was no college girl, she had lines around her eyes and seemed, to Oscar at least, mad open, mad worldly, had the sort of intense zipper-gravity that hot middle-aged women exude effortlessly. The next time he ran into her in front of her house (he had watched for her), she said, Good morning, Mr. de León, in English. How are you? I am well, he said. And you? She beamed. I am well, thank you. He didn't know what to do with his hands so he laced them behind his back like a gloomy

parson. And for a minute there was nothing and she was unlocking her gate and he said, desperately, It is very hot. Ay sí, she said. And I thought it was just my menopause. And then looking over her shoulder at him, curious perhaps at this strange character who was trying not to look at her at all, or recognizing how in crush he was with her and feeling charitable, she said, Come inside. I'll give you a drink.

The casa near empty—his abuela's crib was spare but this was on some next shit—Haven't had the time to move in yet, she said offhandedly—and because there wasn't any furniture besides a kitchen table, a chair, a bureau, a bed, and a TV, they had to sit on the bed. (Oscar peeped the astrology books under the bed and a collection of Paulo Coelho's novels. She followed his gaze and said with a smile, Paulo Coelho saved my life.) She gave him a beer, had a double scotch, then for the next six hours regaled him with tales from her life. You could tell she hadn't had anyone to talk to in a long time. Oscar reduced to nodding and trying to laugh when she laughed. The whole time he was sweating bullets. Wondering if this is when he should try something. It wasn't until midway through their chat that it hit Oscar that the job Ybón talked so volubly about was prostitution. It was *Holy Shit!* the Sequel. Even though putas were one of Santo Domingo's premier exports, Oscar had never been in a prostitute's house in his entire life.

Staring out her bedroom window, he saw his abuela on her front lawn, looking for him. He wanted to raise the window and call to her but Ybón didn't allow for any interruptions.

Ybón was an odd odd bird. She might have been talkative, the sort of easygoing woman a brother can relax around, but

there was something slightly detached about her too; as though (Oscar's words now) she were some marooned alien princess who existed partially in another dimension; the sort of woman who, cool as she was, slips out of your head a little too quickly, a quality she recognized and was thankful for, as though she relished the short bursts of attention she provoked from men, but not anything sustained. She didn't seem to mind being the girl you called every couple of months at eleven at night, just to see what she was "up to." As much relationship as she could handle. Reminds me of the morir-vivir plants we played with as kids, except in reverse.

Her Jedi mindtricks did not, however, work on Oscar. When it came to girls, the brother had a mind-like a yogi. He latched on and stayed latched. By the time he left her house that night and walked home through the Island's million attack mosquitoes he was lost.

(Did it matter that Ybón started mixing Italian in with her Spanish after her fourth drink or that she almost fell flat on her face when she showed him out? Of course not!)

He was in love.

His mother and his abuela met him at the door; excuse the stereotype, but both had their hair in rolos and couldn't believe his sinvergüencía. Do you know that woman's a PUTA? Do you know she bought that house CULEANDO?

For a moment he was overwhelmed by their rage, and then he found his footing and shot back, Do you know her aunt was a JUDGE? Do you know her father worked for the PHONE COMPANY?

You want a woman, I'll get you a good woman, his mother

said, peering angrily out the window. But that puta's only going to take your money.

I don't need your help. And she ain't a puta.

La Inca laid one of her Looks of Incredible Power on him. Hijo, obey your mother.

For a moment he almost did. Both women focusing all their energies on him, and then he tasted the beer on his lips and shook his head.

His tío Rudolfo, who was watching the game on the TV, took that moment to call out, in his best Grandpa Simpson voice: Prostitutes ruined my life.

More miracles. The next morning Oscar woke up and despite the tremendous tidings in his heart, despite the fact that he wanted to run over to Ybón's house and shackle himself to her bed, he didn't. He knew he had to cogerlo con take it easy, knew he had to rein in his lunatic heart or he would blow it. Whatever it was. Of course the nigger was entertaining mad fantasies inside his head. What do you expect? He was a not-so-fat fatboy who'd never kissed a girl, never even lain in bed with one, and now the world was waving a beautiful puta under his nose. Ybón, he was sure, was the Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude. If he blew this, well, it was back to playing Villains and Vigilantes for him. This is it, he told himself. His chance to win. He decided to play the oldest card in the deck. The wait. So for one whole day he moped around the house, tried to write but couldn't, watched a comedy show where black Dominicans in grass skirts put white Dominicans in safari outfits into cannibal cookpots and everybody wondered aloud where their biscocho was. Scary. By noon

he had driven Dolores, the thirty-eight-year-old heavily scarred "muchacha" who cooked and cleaned for the family, up a wall.

The next day at one he pulled on a clean chacabana and strolled over to her house. (Well, he sort of trotted.) A red Jeep was parked outside, nose to nose with her Pathfinder. A Policía Nacional plate. He stood in front of her gate while the sun stomped down on him. Felt like a stooge. Of course she was married. Of course she had boyfriends. His optimism, that swollen red giant, collapsed down to an obliterating point of gloom from which there was no escape. Didn't stop him coming back the next day but no one was home, and by the time he saw her again, three days later, he was starting to think that she had warped back to whatever Forerunner world had spawned her. Where were you? he said, trying not to sound as miserable as he felt. I thought maybe you fell in the tub or something. She smiled and gave her ass a little shiver. I was making the patria strong, mi amor.

He had caught her in front of the TV, doing aerobics in a pair of sweatpants and what might have been described as a halter top. It was hard for him not to stare at her body. When she first let him in she'd screamed, Oscar, querido! Come in! Come in!

A NOTE FROM YOUR AUTHOR

I know what Negroes are going to say. Look, he's writing Sub-urban Tropical now. A puta and she's not an underage snort-addicted mess? Not believable. Should I go down to the Feria and pick me up a more representative model? Would it be better if I

turned Ybón into this other puta I know, Jahyra, a friend and a neighbor in Villa Juana, who still lives in one of those old-style pink wooden houses with the zinc roof? Jahyra—your quintessential Caribbean puta, half cure, half not—who'd left home at the age of fifteen and lived in Curazao, Madrid, Amsterdam, and Rome, who also has two kids, who'd gotten an enormous breast job when she was sixteen in Madrid, bigger almost than Luba from *Love and Rockets* (but not as big as Beli), who claimed, proudly, that her aparato had paved half the streets in her mother's hometown. Would it be better if I had Oscar meet Ybón at the World Famous Lavacarro, where Jahyra works six days a week, where a brother can get his head *and* his fenders polished while he waits, talk about convenience? Would this be better? Yes?

But then I'd be lying. I know I've thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Can't we believe that an Ybón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years?

This is your chance. If blue pill, continue. If red pill, return to the Matrix.

THE GIRL FROM SABANA IGLESIA

In their photos, Ybón looks young. It's her smile and the way she perks up her body for every shot as if she's presenting herself to the world, as if she's saying, Ta-da, here I am, take it or leave it. She dressed young too, but she was a solid thirty-six, perfect age for anybody but a stripper. In the close-ups you can see the

crow's-feet, and she complained all the time about her little belly, the way her breasts and her ass were starting to lose their firm, which was why, she said, she had to be in the gym five days a week. When you're sixteen a body like this is free; when you're forty—pfffft!—it's a full-time occupation. The third time Oscar came over, Ybón doubled up on the scotches again and then took down her photo albums from the closet and showed him all the pictures of herself when she'd been sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, always on a beach, always in an early-eighties bikini, always with big hair, always smiling, always with her arms around some middle-aged eighties yakoub. Looking at those old hairy blancos, Oscar couldn't help but feel hopeful. (Let me guess, he said, these are your uncles?) Each photo had a date and a place at the bottom and this was how he was able to follow Ybón's puta's progress through Italy, Portugal, and Spain. I was so beautiful in those days, she said wistfully. It was true, her smile could have put out a sun, but Oscar didn't think she was any less fine now, the slight declensions in her appearances only seemed to add to her luster (the last bright before the fade) and he told her so.

You're so sweet, *mi amor*. She knocked back another double and rasped, What's your sign?

How lovesick he became! He stopped writing and began to go over to her house nearly every day, even when he knew she was working, just in case she'd caught ill or decided to quit the profession so she could marry him. The gates of his heart had swung open and he felt light on his feet, he felt weightless, he felt *lithe*. His abuela steady gave him shit, told him that not even God loves a puta. Yeah, his tío laughed, but everybody knows that God *loves* a puta. His tío seemed thrilled that he no longer

had a pájaro for a nephew. I can't believe it, he said proudly. The palomo is finally a man. He put Oscar's neck in the NJ State Police-patented niggerkiller lock. When did it happen? I want to play that date as soon I get home.

Here we go again: Oscar and Ybón at her house, Oscar and Ybón at the movies, Oscar and Ybón at the beach. Ybón talked, voluniously, and Oscar slipped some words in too. Ybón told him about her two sons, Sterling and Perfecto, who lived with their grandparents in Puerto Rico, whom she saw only on holidays. (They'd known only her photo and her money the whole time she'd been in Europe, and when she'd finally returned to the Island they were little men and she didn't have the heart to tear them from the only family they'd ever known. That would have made me roll my eyes, but Oscar bought it hook, line, and sinker.) She told him about the two abortions she'd had, told him about the time she'd been jailed in Madrid, told him how hard it was to sell your ass, asked, Can something be impossible and not impossible at once? Talked about how if she hadn't studied English at the UASD she probably would have had it a lot worse. Told him of a trip she'd taken to Berlin in the company of a rebuilt Brazilian tranny, a friend, how sometimes the trains would go so slow you could have plucked a passing flower without disturbing its neighbors. She told him about her Dominican boyfriend, the capitán, and her foreign boyfriends: the Italian, the German, and the Canadian, the three benditos, how they each visited her on different months. You're lucky they all have families, she said. Or I'd have been *working* this whole

summer. (He wanted to ask her not to talk about any of these dudes but she would only have laughed. So all he said was, I could have shown them around Zurza; I hear they love tourists, and she laughed and told him to play nice.) He, in turn, talked about the one time he and his dork college buddies had driven up to Wisconsin for a gaming convention, his only big trip, how they had camped out at a Winnebago reservation and drank Pabst with some of the local Indians. He talked about his love for his sister Lola and what had happened to her. He talked about trying to take his own life. This is the only time that Ybón didn't say anything. Instead she poured them both drinks and raised her glass. To life!

They never discussed the amount of time they spent together. Maybe we should get married, he said once, not joking, and she said, I'd make a terrible wife. He was around so often that he even got to see her in a couple of her notorious "moods," when her alien-princess part pushed to the fore and she became very cold and uncommunicative, when she called him an idiot americano for spilling his beer. On these days she opened her door and threw herself in bed and didn't do anything. Hard to be around her but he would say, Hey, I heard Jesus is down at the Plaza Central giving out condoms; he'd convince her to see a movie, the going out and sitting in a theater seemed to put the princess in partial check. Afterward she'd be a little easier; she'd take him to an Italian restaurant and no matter how much her mood had improved she'd insist on drinking herself ridiculous. So bad he'd have to put her in the truck and drive them home through a city he did not know. (Early on he hit on this great scheme: he called Clives, the evangelical taxista his family always

used, who would swing by no sweat and lead him home.) When he drove she always put her head in his lap and talked to him, sometimes in Italian, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes about the beatings the women had given each other in prison, sometimes sweet stuff, and having her mouth so close to his nuts was finer than one might imagine.

L A I N C A S P E A K S

He didn't meet her on the street like he told you. His cousins, los idiotas, took him to a cabaret and that's where he first saw her. And that's where ella se metió por sus ojos.

Y B Ó N , A S R E C O R D E D B Y O S C A R

I never wanted to come back to Santo Domingo. But after I was let go from jail I had trouble paying back the people I owed, and my mother was sick, and so I just came back.

It was hard at first. Once you've been fuera, Santo Domingo is the smallest place in the world. But if I've learned anything in my travels it's that a person can get used to anything. Even Santo Domingo.

WHAT NEVER CHANGES

Oh, they got close all right, but we have to ask the hard questions again: Did they ever kiss in her Pathfinder? Did he ever put his hands up her supershort skirt? Did she ever push up against him and say his name in a throaty whisper? Did he ever stroke that end-of-the-world tangle that was her hair while she sucked him off? Did they ever fuck?

Of course not. Miracles only go so far. He watched her for the signs, signs that would tell him she loved him. He began to suspect that it might not happen this summer, but already he had plans to come back for Thanksgiving, and then for Christmas. When he told her, she looked at him strangely and said only his name, Oscar, a little sadly.

She liked him, it was obvious, she liked it when he talked his crazy talk, when he stared at a new thing like it might have been from another planet (like the one time she had caught him in the bathroom staring at her soapstone—What the hell is *this* peculiar mineral? he said). It seemed to Oscar that he was one of her few real friends. Outside the boyfriends, foreign and domestic, outside her psychiatrist sister in San Cristóbal and her ailing mother in Sabana Iglesia, her life seemed as spare as her house.

Travel light, was all she ever said about the house when he suggested he buy her a lamp or anything, and he suspected that she would have said the same thing about having more friends. He knew, though, that he wasn't her only visitor: One day he found three discarded condom foils on the floor around her bed,

had asked, Are you having trouble with incubuses? She smiled without shame. That's one man who doesn't know the word *quit*.

Poor Oscar. At night he dreamed that his rocketship, the *Hijo de Sacrificio*, was up and off but that it was heading for the Ana Obregón Barrier at the speed of light.

OSCAR AT THE RUBICON

At the beginning of August, Ybón started mentioning her boyfriend, the capitán, a lot more. Seems he'd heard about Oscar and wanted to meet him. He's really jealous, Ybón said rather weakly. Just have him meet me, Oscar said. I make all boyfriends feel better about themselves. I don't know, Ybón said. Maybe we shouldn't spend so much time together. Shouldn't you be looking for a girlfriend?

I got one, he said. She's the girlfriend of my mind.

A jealous Third World cop boyfriend? Maybe we shouldn't spend so much time together? Any other nigger would have pulled a Scooby-Doo double take—Eeuooooorr?—would have thought twice about staying in Santo Domingo another day. Hearing about the capitán only served to depress him, as did the spend-less-time crack. He never stopped to consider the fact that when a Dominican cop says he wants to meet you he ain't exactly talking about bringing you flowers.

One night not long after the condom-foil incident Oscar woke up in his overly air-conditioned room and realized with unusual clarity that he was heading down that road again. The road where he became so nuts over a girl he stopped thinking.

The road where very bad things happened. You should stop right now, he told himself. But he knew, with lapidary clarity, that he wasn't going to stop. He loved Ybón. (And love, for this kid, was a geas, something that could not be shaken or denied.) The night before, she'd been so drunk that he had to help her into bed, and the whole time she was saying, God, we have to be careful, Oscar, but as soon as she hit the mattress she started writhing out of her clothes, didn't care that he was there; he tried not to look until she was under her covers but what he did see burned the edges of his eyes. When he turned to leave she sat up, her chest utterly and beautifully naked. Don't go yet. Wait till I'm asleep. He lay down next to her, on top of the sheets, didn't walk home until it was starting to get light out. He'd seen her beautiful chest and knew now that it was far too late to pack up and go home like those little voices were telling him, far too late.

L A S T C H A N C E

Two days later Oscar found his tío examining the front door. What's the matter? His tío showed him the door and pointed at the concrete-block wall on the other side of the foyer. I think somebody shot at our house last night. He was enraged. Fucking Dominicans. Probably hosed the whole neighborhood down. We're lucky we're alive.

His mother jabbed her finger into the bullet hole. I don't consider this being lucky.

I don't either, La Inca said, staring straight at Oscar.

For a second Oscar felt this strange tugging in the back of

his head, what someone else might have called Instinct, but instead of hunkering down and sifting through it he said, We probably didn't hear it because of all our air conditioners, and then he walked over to Ybón's. They were supposed to be going to the Duarte that day.

O S C A R G E T S B E A T

In the middle of August Oscar finally met the capitán. But he also got his first kiss ever. So you could say that day changed his life.

Ybón had passed out again (after giving him a long speech about how they had to give each other "space," which he'd listened to with his head down and wondered why she insisted on holding his hand during dinner, then). It was super late and he'd been following Clives in the Pathfinder, the usual routine, when some cops up ahead let Clives pass and then asked Oscar to please step out of the vehicle. It's not my truck, he explained, it's hers. He pointed to the sleeping Ybón. We understand, if you could pull over for a second. He did so, a little worried, but right then Ybón sat up and stared at him with her light eyes. Do you know what I want, Oscar?

I am, he said, too afraid to ask.

I want, she said, moving into position, un beso.

And before he could say anything she was on him.

The first feel of a woman's body pressing against yours—who among us can ever forget that? And that first real kiss—well, to be honest, I've forgotten both of these firsts, but Oscar never would.

For a second he was in disbelief. This is it, this is really it! Her lips plush and pliant, and her tongue pushing into his mouth. And then there were lights all around them and he thought I'm going to transcend! Transcendence is müine! But then he realized that the two plainclothes who had pulled them over—who both looked like they'd been raised on high-G planets, and whom we'll call Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grod for simplicity's sake—were beaming their flashlights into the car. And who was standing behind them, looking in on the scene inside the car with an expression of sheer murder? Why, the capitán of course. Ybón's boyfriend!

Grod and Grundy yanked him out of the car. And did Ybón fight to keep him in her arms? Did she protest the rude interruption to their making out? Of course not. Homegirl just passed right out again.

The capitán. A skinny forty-something jabao standing near his spotless red Jeep, dressed nice, in slacks and a crisply pressed white button-down, his shoes bright as scarabs. One of those tall, arrogant, acerbically handsome niggers that most of the planet feels inferior to. Also one of those very bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away. He'd been young during the Trujillato, so he never got the chance to run with some real power, wasn't until the North American Invasion that he earned his stripes. Like my father, he supported the U.S. Invaders, and because he was methodical and showed absolutely no mercy to the leftists, he was launched—no, vaulted—into the top ranks of the military police. Was very busy under Demon Balaguer. Shooting at sindicatos from the backseats of cars. Burning down organizers' homes. Smashing in people's faces with crowbars.

The Twelve Years were good times for men like him. In 1974 he held an old woman's head underwater until she died (she'd tried to organize some peasants for land rights in San Juan); in 1977 he played mazel-tov on a fifteen-year-old boy's throat with the heel of his Florsheim (another Communist troublemaker, good fucking riddance). I know this guy well. He has family in Queens and every Christmas he brings his cousins bottles of Johnnie Walker Black. His friends call him Fito, and when he was young he wanted to be a lawyer, but then the calie scene had pulled him and he forgot about all that lawyering business.

So you're the New Yorker. When Oscar saw the capitán's eyes he knew he was in deep shit. The capitán, you see, also had close-set eyes; these, though, were blue and terrible. (The eyes of Lee Van Cleef!) If it hadn't been for the courage of his sphincter, Oscar's lunch and his dinner and his breakfast would have whooshed straight out of him.

I didn't do anything, Oscar quailed. Then he blurted out, I'm an American citizen.

The capitán waved away a mosquito. I'm an American citizen too. I was naturalized in the city of Buffalo, in the state of New York.

I bought mine in Miami, Gorilla Grod said. Not me, Solomon Grundy lamented. I only have my residency.

Please, you have to believe me, I didn't do *anything*.

The capitán smiled. Motherfucker even had First World teeth. Do you know who I am?

Oscar nodded. He was inexperienced but he wasn't dumb. You're Ybón's ex-boyfriend.

I'm not her ex-novio, you maldito parigüayo! the capitán

screamed, the cords in his neck standing out like a Krikfalusi drawing.

She said you were her ex, Oscar insisted.

The capitán grabbed him by the throat.

That's what she said, he whimpered.

Oscar was lucky; if he had looked like my pana, Pedro, the Dominican Superman, or like my boy Benny, who was a model, he probably would have gotten shot right there. But because he was a homely slob, because he really looked like un maldito pariguayo who had never had no luck in his life, the capitán took Gollum-pity on him and only punched him a couple of times. Oscar, who had never been "punched a couple of times" by a military-trained adult, felt like he had just been run over by the entire Steelers backfield circa 1977. Breath knocked out of him so bad he honestly thought he was going to die of asphyxiation. The captain's face appeared over his: If you ever touch my mujer again I'm going to kill you, pariguayo, and Oscar managed to whisper, You're the ex, before Messrs. Grundy and Grod picked him up (with some difficulty), squeezed him back into their Camry, and drove off. Oscar's last sight of Ybón? The capitán dragging her out of the Pathfinder cabin by her hair.

He tried to jump out of the car but Gorilla Grod elbowed him so hard that all the fight jumped clean out of him.

Nighttime in Santo Domingo. A blackout, of course. Even the Lighthouse out for the night.

Where did they take him? Where else. The canefields.

How's that for eternal return? Oscar so bewildered and frightened he pissed himself.

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Didn't you grow up around here? Grundy asked his darker-skinned pal.

You stupid dick-sucker, I grew up in Puerto Plata.

Are you sure? You look like you speak a little French to me.

On the ride there Oscar tried to find his voice but couldn't.

He was too shook. (In situations like these he had always assumed his secret hero would emerge and snap necks, à la Jim Kelly, but clearly his secret hero was out having some pie.) Everything seemed to be moving so fast. How had this happened? What wrong turn had he taken? He couldn't believe it. He was going to die. He tried to imagine Ybón at the funeral in her nearly see-through black sheath, but couldn't. Saw his mother and La Inca at the grave site. Didn't we tell you? Didn't we tell you? Watched Santo Domingo glide past and felt impossibly alone. How could this be happening? To him? He was boring, he was fat, and he was so very afraid. Thought about his mother, his sister, all the miniatures he hadn't painted yet, and started crying. You need to keep it down, Grundy said, but Oscar couldn't stop, even when he put his hands in his mouth.

They drove for a long time, and then finally, abruptly, they stopped. At the canefields Messrs. Grod and Grundy pulled Oscar out of the car. They opened the trunk but the batteries were dead in the flashlight so they had to drive back to a colmado, buy the batteries, and then drive back. While they argued with the colmado owner about prices, Oscar thought about escaping, thought about jumping out of the car and running down the street, screaming, but he couldn't do it. Fear is the mind killer, he chanted in his head, but he couldn't force himself

like getting smashed in the face with those patented Pachmayr Presentation Grips.) He *shrieked*, but it didn't stop the beatings; he begged, and that didn't stop it, either; he blacked out, but that was no relief; the niggers kicked him in the nuts and perked him right up! He tried to drag himself into the cane, but they pulled him back! It was like one of those nightmare eight-a.m. MLA panels: *endless*. Man, Gorilla Grod said, this kid is making me *sweat*. Most of the time they took turns striking him, but sometimes they got into it together and there were moments Oscar was sure that he was being beaten by three men, not two, that the faceless man from in front of the colmado was joining them. Toward the end, as all life began to slip away, Oscar found himself facing his abuela; she was sitting in her rocking chair, and when she saw him she snarled, What did I tell you about those putas? Didn't I tell you you were going to die?

And then finally Grod jumped down on his head with both his boots and right before it happened Oscar could have sworn that there was a third man with them and he was standing back behind some of the cane but before Oscar could see his face it was Good Night, Sweet Prince, and he felt like he was falling again, falling straight for Route 18, and there was nothing he could do, nothing at all, to stop it.

CLIVES TO THE RESCUE

The only reason he didn't lay out in that rustling endless cane for the rest of his life was because Clives the evangelical taxista had had the guts, and the smarts, and yes, the goodness, to

to act. They had guns! He stared out into the night, hoping that maybe there would be some U.S. Marines out for a stroll, but there was only a lone man sitting in his rocking chair out in front of his ruined house and for a moment Oscar could have sworn the dude had no face, but then the killers got back into the car and drove. Their flashlight newly activated, they walked him into the cane—never had he heard anything so loud and alien, the susurrations, the crackling, the flashes of motion underfoot (snake? mongoose?), overhead even the stars, all of them gathered in vainglorious congress. And yet this world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling that he'd been in this very place, a long time ago. It was worse than déjà vu, but before he could focus on it the moment slipped away, drowned by his fear, and then the two men told him to stop and turn around. We have something to give you, they said amiably. Which brought Oscar back to the Real. Please, he shrieked, don't! But instead of the muzzle-flash and the eternal dark, Grod struck him once hard in the head with the butt of his pistol. For a second the pain broke the yoke of his fear and he found the strength to move his legs and was about to turn and run but then they both started whaling on him with their pistols.

It's not clear whether they intended to scare him or kill him. Maybe the capitán had ordered one thing and they did another. Perhaps they did exactly what he asked, or perhaps Oscar just got lucky. Can't say. All I know is, it was the beating to end all beatings. It was the Götterdämmerung of beatdowns, a beatdown so cruel and relentless that even Camden, the City of the Ultimate Beatdown, would have been proud. (Yes sir, nothing

follow the cops on the sly, and when they broke out he turned on his headlights and pulled up to where they'd last been. He didn't have a flashlight and after almost half an hour of stomping around in the dark he was about to abandon the search until the morning. And then he heard someone *singing*. A nice voice too, and Clives, who sang for his congregation, knew the difference. He headed toward the source full speed, and then, just as he was about to part the last stalks a tremendous wind ripped through the cane, nearly blew him off his feet, like the first slap of a hurricane, like the blast an angel might lay down on takeoff, and then, just as quickly as it had kicked up it was gone, leaving behind only the smell of burned cinnamon, and there just behind a couple stalks of cane lay Oscar. Unconscious and bleeding out of both ears and looking like he was one finger tap away from dead. Clives tried his best but he couldn't drag Oscar back to the car alone, so he left him where he was—just hold on!—drove to a nearby batey, and recruited a couple of Haitian bracerros to help him, which took a while because the bracerros were afraid to leave the batey lest they get whipped as bad as Oscar by their overseers. Finally Clives prevailed and back they raced to the scene of the crime. This is a big one, one of the bracerros cracked. Mucho plátanos, another joked. Mucho mucho plátanos, said a third, and then they heaved him into the backseat. As soon as the door shut, Clives popped his car into gear and was off. Driving fast in the name of the Lord. The Haitians throwing rocks at him because he had promised to give them a ride back to their camp.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS
OF THE CARIBBEAN KIND

Oscar remembers having a dream where a mongoose was chatting with him. Except the mongoose was the Mongoose. What will it be, muchacho? it demanded. More or less?

And for a moment he almost said less. So tired, and so much pain—Less! Less! Less!—but then in the back of his head he remembered his family. Lola and his mother and Nena Inca. Remembered how he used to be when he was younger and more optimistic. The lunch box next to his bed, the first thing he saw in the morning. *Planet of the Apes*.

More, he croaked.

_____, said the Mongoose, and then the wind swept him back into darkness.

DEAD OR ALIVE

Broken nose, shattered zygomatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his teeth snapped off at the gum, concussion. But he's still alive, isn't he? his mother demanded. Yes, the doctors conceded.

Let us pray, La Inca said grimly. She grabbed Beli's hands and lowered her head.

If they noticed the similarities between Past and Present they did not speak of it.

BRIEFING FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL

He was out for three days.

In that time he had the impression of having the most fantastic series of dreams, though by the time he had his first meal, a caldo de pollo, he could not, alas, remember them. All that remained was the image of an Aslan-like figure with golden eyes who kept trying to speak to him but Oscar couldn't hear a word above the blare of the merengue coming from the neighbor's house.

Only later, during his last days, would he actually remember one of those dreams. An old man was standing before him in a ruined bailey, holding up a book for him to read. The old man had a mask on. It took a while for Oscar's eyes to focus, but then he saw that the book was blank.

The book is blank. Those were the words La Inca's servant heard him say just before he broke through the plane of unconsciousness and into the universe of the Real.


ALIVE

That was the end of it. As soon as moms de León got a green light from the doctors she called the airlines. She wasn't no fool; had her own experience with these kinds of things. Put it in the simplest of terms so that even in his addled condition he could understand. You, stupid worthless no-good hijo-de-la-gran-puta, are going home.

No, he said, through demolished lips. He wasn't fooling, either. When he first woke up and realized that he was still alive, he asked for Ybón. I love her, he whispered, and his mother said, Shut up, you! Just shut up!

Why are you screaming at the boy? La Inca demanded.

Because he's an idiot.

The family doctora ruled out epidural hematoma but couldn't guarantee that Oscar didn't have brain trauma. (She was a cop's girlfriend? Tío Rudolfo whistled. I'll vouch for the brain damage.) Send him home right now, the doctora said, but for four days Oscar resisted any attempt to pack him up in a plane, which says a lot about this fat kid's fortitude; he was eating morphine by the handful and his grill was in agony, he had an around-the-clock quadruple migraine and couldn't see squat out of his right eye; motherfucker's head was so swole he looked like John Merrick Junior and anytime he attempted to stand, the ground whisked right out from under him. Christ in a handbasket! he thought. So this is what it felt like to get your ass kicked. The pain just wouldn't stop rolling, and no matter how hard he tried he could not command it. He swore never to write another fight scene as long as he lived. It wasn't all bad, though; the beating granted him strange insights: he realized, rather unhelpfully, that had he and Ybón not-been-serious the capitán would probably never have fucked with him. Proof positive that he and Ybón had a relationship. Should I celebrate, he asked the dresser, or should I cry? Other insights? One day while watching his mother tear sheets off the beds it dawned on him that the family curse he'd heard about his whole life might actually be true. 

Fukú.

He rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you.* His mother raised her fist in a fury but La Inca intercepted it, their flesh slapping. Are you mad? La Inca said, and Oscar couldn't tell if she was talking to his mother or to him.

As for Ybón, she didn't answer her pager, and the few times he managed to limp to the window he saw that her Pathfinder wasn't there. I love you, he shouted into the street. I love you! Once he made it to her door and buzzed before his tío realized that he was gone and dragged him back inside. At night all Oscar did was lie in bed and suffer, imagining all sorts of horrible *Succesor*-style endings for Ybón. When his head felt like it was going to explode he tried to reach out to her with his telepathic powers.

And on day three she came. While she sat on the edge of his bed his mother banged pots in the kitchen and said *puta* loud enough for them to hear.

Forgive me if I don't get up, Oscar whispered. I'm having slight difficulties with my cranium.

She was dressed in white, and her hair was still wet from the shower, a tumult of brownish curls. Of course the capitán had beaten the shit out of her too, of course she had two black eyes (he'd also put his .44 Magnum in her vagina and asked her who she *really* loved). And yet there was nothing about her that Oscar wouldn't have gladly kissed. She put her fingers on his hand and told him that she could never be with him again. For some reason Oscar couldn't see her face, it was a blur, she had retreated completely into that other plane of hers. Heard only the sorrow of her breathing. Where was the girl who had noticed him

checking out a flaquita the week before and said, half joking, Only a dog likes a bone, Oscar. Where was the girl who had to try on five different outfits before she left the house? He tried to focus his eyes but what he saw was only his love for her.

He held out the pages he'd written. I have so much to talk to you about—

Me and _____ are getting married, she said curtly.

Ybón, he said, trying to form the words, but she was already gone.

Se acabó. His mother and his abuela and his tío delivered the ultimatum and that was that. Oscar didn't look at the ocean or the scenery as they drove to the airport. He was trying to decipher something he'd written the night before, mouthing the words slowly. It's beautiful today, Clives remarked. He looked up with tears in his eyes. Yes, it is.

On the flight over he sat between his tío and his moms. Jesus, Oscar, Rudolfo said nervously. You look like they put a shirt on a turd.

His sister met them at JFK and when she saw his face she cried and didn't stop even when she got back to my apartment. You should see Mister, she sobbed. They tried to *kill* him.

What the fuck, Oscar, I said on the phone. I leave you alone for a couple days and you almost get yourself slabbed?

His voice sounded muffled. I kissed a girl, Yuniór. I finally kissed a girl.

But, O, you almost got yourself killed.

It wasn't completely egregious, he said. I still had a few hit points left.

But then, two days later, I saw his face and was like: Holy shit, Oscar. Holy fucking shit.

He shook his head. Bigger game afoot than my appearances.

He wrote out the word for me: *fukú*.

SOME ADVICE

Travel light. She extended her arms to embrace her house, maybe the whole world.

PATERSON, AGAIN

He returned home. He lay in bed, he-healed. His mother so infuriated she wouldn't look at him.

He was a complete and utter wreck. Knew he loved her like he'd never loved anyone. Knew what he should be doing—making like a Lola and flying back. Fuck the capitán. Fuck Grundy and Grod. Fuck everybody. Easy to say in the rational day but at night his balls turned to ice water and ran down his fucking legs like piss. Dreamed again and again of the cane, the terrible cane, except now it wasn't him at the receiving end of the beating, but his sister, his mother, heard them shrieking, begging for them to stop, please God *stop*, but instead of racing toward the voices, he *ran away*! Woke up *screaming*. *Not me*. *Not me*.

He watched *Virus* for the thousandth time and for the thousandth time teared up when the Japanese scientist finally reached Tierra del Fuego and the love of his life. He read *The Lord of the Rings* for what I'm estimating the millionth time, one of his greatest loves and greatest comforts since he'd first discovered it, back when he was nine and lost and lonely and his favorite librarian had said, Here, try this, and with one suggestion changed his life. Got through almost the whole trilogy, but then the line "and out of Far Harad black men like half-trolls" and he had to stop, his head and heart hurting too much.

Six weeks after the Colossal Beatdown he dreamed about the cane again. But instead of bolting when the cries began, when the bones started breaking, he summoned all the courage he ever had, would ever have, and forced himself to do the one thing he did not want to do, that he could not bear to do.

He listened.

This happened in January. Me and Lola were living up in the Heights, separate apartments—this was before the whitekids started their invasion, when you could walk the entire length of Upper Manhattan and see not a single yoga mat. Me and Lola weren't doing that great. Plenty I could tell you, but that's neither here nor there. All you need to know is that if we talked once a week we were lucky, even though we were nominally boyfriend and girlfriend. All my fault, of course. Couldn't keep my rabo in my pants, even though she was the most beautiful fucking girl in the world.

Anyway, I was home that week, no call from the temp agency, when Oscar buzzed me from the street. Hadn't seen his ass in weeks, since the first days of his return. Jesus, Oscar, I said. Come up, come up. I waited for him in the hall and when he stepped out of the elevator I put the mitts on him. How are you, bro? I'm copacetic, he said. We sat down and I broke up a dutch while he filled me in. I'm going back to Don Bosco soon.

Word? I said. Word, he said. His face was still fucked up, the left side a little droopy.

You wanna smoke?

I might partake. Just a little, though. I would not want to cloud my faculties.

That last day on our couch he looked like a man at peace with himself. A little distracted but at peace. I would tell Lola that night that it was because he'd finally decided to live, but the truth would turn out to be a little more complicated. You should have seen him. He was so thin, had lost all the weight and was still, still.

What had he been doing? Writing, of course, and reading. Also getting ready to move from Paterson. Wanting to put the past behind him, start a new life. Was trying to decide what he would take with him. Was allowing himself only ten of his books, the core of his canon (his words), was trying to pare it all down to what was necessary. Only what I can carry. It seemed like another odd Oscar thing, until later we would realize it wasn't.

And then after an inhale he said: Please forgive me, Yuniior, but I'm here with an ulterior motive. I wish to know if you could do me a favor.

Anything, bro. Just ask it.

He needed money for his security deposit, had a line on an apartment in Brooklyn. I should have thought about it—Oscar never asked anybody for money—but I didn't, fell over myself to give it to him. My guilty conscience.

We smoked the dutch and talked about the problems me and Lola were having. You should never have had carnal

relations with that Paraguayan girl, he pointed out. I know, I said, I know.

She loves you.

I know that.

Why do you cheat on her, then?

If I knew that, it wouldn't be a problem.

Maybe you should try to find out.

He stood up.

You ain't going to wait for Lola?

I must be away to Paterson. I have a date.

You're shitting me?

He shook his head, the tricky fuck.

I asked: Is she beautiful?

He smiled. She is.

On Saturday he was gone.

The Final Voyage

The last time he flew to Santo Domingo he'd been startled when the applause broke out, but this time he was prepared, and when the plane landed he clapped until his hands stung.

As soon as he hit the airport exit he called Clives and homeboy picked him up an hour later, found him surrounded by taxistas who were trying to pull him into their cabs. Cristiano, Clives said, what are you doing here?

It's the Ancient Powers, Oscar said grimly. They won't leave me alone.

They parked in front of her house and waited almost seven hours before she returned. Clives tried to talk him out of it but he wouldn't listen. Then she pulled up in the Pathfinder. She looked thinner. His heart seized like a bad leg and for a moment he thought about letting the whole thing go, about returning to Bosco and getting on with his miserable life, but then she stooped over, as if the whole world was watching, and that settled it. He winched down the window. Ybón, he said. She stopped, shaded her eyes, and then recognized him. She said his

name too. *Oscar*. He popped the door and walked over to where she was standing and embraced her.

Her first words? *Mi amor*, you have to leave right now.

In the middle of the street he told her how it was. He told her that he was in love with her and that he'd been hurt but now he was all right and if he could just have a week alone with her, one short week, then everything would be fine in him and he would be able to face what he had to face and she said I don't understand and so he said it again, that he loved her more than the Universe and it wasn't something that he could shake so please come away with me for a little while, lend me your strength and then it would be over if she wanted.

Maybe she did love him a little bit. Maybe in her heart of hearts she left the gym bag on the concrete and got in the taxi with him. But she'd known men like the capitán all her life, had been forced to work in Europe one year straight by niggers like that before she could start earning her own money. Knew also that in the DR they called a cop-divorce a bullet. The gym bag was not left on the street.

I'm going to call him, *Oscar*, she said, misting up a little. So please go before he gets here.

I'm not going anywhere, he said.

Go, she said.

No, he answered.

He let himself into his abuela's house (he still had the key).

The capitán showed up an hour later, honked his horn a long time, but *Oscar* didn't bother to go out. He had gotten out all of *La Inca's* photographs, was going through each and every

one. When *La Inca* returned from the bakery she found him scribbling at the kitchen table.

Oscar?

Yes, *Abuela*, he said, not looking up. It's me.

It's hard to explain, he wrote his sister later.

I bet it was.

CURSE OF THE CARIBBEAN

For twenty-seven days he did two things: he researched-wrote and he chased her. Sat in front of her house, called her on her beeper, went to the World Famous Riverside, where she worked, walked to the supermarket whenever he saw her truck pull out, just in case she was on her way there. Nine times out of ten she was not. The neighbors, when they saw him on the curb, shook their heads and said, *Look at that loco*.

At first it was pure terror for her. She didn't want nothing to do with him; she wouldn't speak to him, wouldn't acknowledge him, and the first time she saw him at the club she was so frightened her legs buckled under her. He knew he was scaring her shitless, but he couldn't help it. By day ten, though, even terror was too much effort and when he followed her down an aisle or smiled at her at work she would hiss, *Please go home, Oscar*.

She was miserable when she saw him, and miserable, she would tell him later, when she didn't, convinced that he'd gotten

killed. He slipped long passionate letters under her gate, written in English, and the only response he got was when the capitán and his friends called and threatened to chop him to pieces. After each threat he recorded the time and then phoned the embassy and told them that Officer ——— had threatened to kill him, could you please help?

He had hope, because if she really wanted him gone she could have lured him out in the open and let the capitán destroy him. Because if she wanted to she could have had him banned from the Riverside. But she didn't.

Boy, you can dance *good*, he wrote in a letter. In another he laid out the plans he had to marry her and take her back to the States.

She started scribbling back notes and passed them to him at the club, or had them mailed to his house. Please, Oscar, I haven't slept in a week. I don't want you to end up hurt or dead. Go home.

But beautiful girl, above all beautiful girls, he wrote back. This is my home.

Your real home, mi amor.

A person can't have two?

Night nineteen, Ybón rang at the gate, and he put down his pen, knew it was her. She leaned over and unlocked the truck door and when he got in he tried to kiss her but she said, Please, stop it. They drove out toward La Romana, where the capitán didn't have friends supposedly. Nothing new was discussed but he said, I like your new haircut, and she started laughing and crying and said, Really? You don't think it makes me look cheap?

You and cheap do not compute, Ybón.

What could we do? Lola flew down to see him, begged him to come home, told him that he was only going to get Ybón and himself killed; he listened and then said quietly that she didn't understand what was at stake. I understand perfectly, she yelled. No, he said sadly, you don't. His abuela tried to exert her power, tried to use the Voice, but he was no longer the boy she'd known. Something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own.

Two weeks into his Final Voyage his mother arrived, and she came loaded for bear. You're coming home, right now. He shook his head. I can't, Mami. She grabbed him and tried to pull, but he was like Unus the Untouchable. Mami, he said softly. You'll hurt yourself.

And you'll kill yourself.

That's not what I'm trying to do.

Did I fly down? Of course I did. With Lola. Nothing brings a couple together quite like catastrophe.

Et tu, Yúnior? he said when he saw me.

Nothing worked.

THE LAST DAYS OF OSCAR WAO

How incredibly short are twenty-seven days! One evening the capitán and his friends stalked into the Riverside and Oscar stared at the man for a good ten seconds and then, whole body shaking, he left. Didn't bother to call Clives, jumped in the first taxi he could find. Once in the parking lot of the Riverside he

tried again to kiss her and she turned away with her head, not her body. Please don't. He'll kill us.

Twenty-seven days. Wrote on each and every one of them, wrote almost three hundred pages if his letters are to be believed. Almost had it too, he said to me one night on the phone, one of the few calls he made to us. What? I wanted to know. What?

You'll see, was all he would say.

And then the expected happened. One night he and Clives were driving back from the World Famous Riverside and they had to stop at a light and that was where two men got into the cab with them. It was, of course, Gorilla Grod and Solomon Grundy. Good to see you again, Grod said, and then they beat him as best they could, given the limited space inside the cab.

This time Oscar didn't cry when they drove him back to the canefields. Zafra would be here soon, and the cane had grown well and thick and in places you could hear the stalks clack-clack-clacking against each other like triffids and you could hear kriyol voices lost in the night. The smell of the ripening cane was unforgettable, and there was a moon, a beautiful full moon, and Clives begged the men to spare Oscar, but they laughed. You should be worrying, Grod said, about yourself. Oscar laughed a little too through his broken mouth. Don't worry, Clives, he said. They're too late. Grod disagreed. Actually I would say we're just in time. They drove past a bus stop and for a second Oscar imagined he saw his whole family getting on a guagua, even his poor dead abuelo and his poor dead abuela, and who is driving the bus but the Mongoose, and who is the

cobrador but the Man Without a Face, but it was nothing but a final fantasy, gone as soon as he blinked, and when the car stopped, Oscar sent telepathic messages to his mom (I love you, señora), to his tío (Quit, tío, and live), to Lola (I'm so sorry it happened; I will always love you), to all the women he had ever loved—Olga, Maritza, Ana, Jenni, Nataly, and all the other ones whose names he'd never known—and of course to Ybón.³³

They walked him into the cane and then turned him around. He tried to stand bravely. (Clives they left tied up in the cab and while they had their backs turned he slipped into the cane, and he would be the one who would deliver Oscar to the family.) They looked at Oscar and he looked at them and then he started to speak. The words coming out like they belonged to someone else, his Spanish good for once. He told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world. Love was a rare thing, easily confused with a million other things, and if anybody knew this to be true it was him. He told them about Ybón and the way he loved her and how much they had risked and that they'd started to dream the same dreams and say the same words. He told them that it was only because of her love that he'd been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop, told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over

33. "No matter how far you travel . . . to whatever reaches of this limitless universe . . . you will never be . . . ALONE!" (The Watcher, *Fantastic Four* #13 May 1963.)

there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be.

They waited respectfully for him to finish and then they said, their faces slowly disappearing in the gloom, Listen, we'll let you go if you tell us what *fiuego* means in English.

Fire, he blurted out, unable to help himself.

Oscar—

The End of the Story

That's pretty much it.

We flew down to claim the body. We arranged the funeral. No one there but us, not even Al and Miggs. Lola crying and crying. A year later their mother's cancer returned and this time it dug in and stayed. I visited her in the hospital with Lola. Six times in all. She would live for another ten months, but by then she'd more or less given up.

I did all I could.

You did enough, Mami, Lola said, but she refused to hear it. Turned her ruined back to us.

I did all I could and it still wasn't enough.

They buried her next to her son, and Lola read a poem she had written, and that was it. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Four times the family hired lawyers but no charges were ever filed. The embassy didn't help and neither did the government. Ybón, I hear, is still living in Mirador Norte, still dancing at the Riverside but La Inca sold the house a year later, moved back to Baní.