

*The
Pura
Principle*

THOSE LAST MONTHS. NO WAY of wrapping it pretty or pretending otherwise: Rafa was dying. By then it was only me and Mami taking care of him and we didn't know what the fuck to do, what the fuck to say. So we just said nothing. My mom wasn't the effusive type anyway, had one of those event-horizon personalities—shit just fell into her and you never really knew how she felt about it. She just seemed to take it, never gave anything off, not light, not heat. Me, I wouldn't have wanted to talk about it even if she had been game. The few times my boys at school tried to bring it up, I told them to mind their own fucking business. To get out of my face.

I was seventeen and a half, smoking so much bud that if I remembered an hour from any one of those days it would have been a lot.

My mother was checked out in her own way. She wore herself down—between my brother and the factory and taking care of the household I'm not sure she slept. (I didn't lift a fucking finger in our apartment, male privilege, baby.) Lady *still* managed to scrounge a couple hours here and there to hang with her new main man, Jehovah. I had my yerba, she had hers. She'd never been big on church before, but as soon

as we landed on cancer planet she went so over-the-top Jesu-
cristo that I think she would have nailed herself to a cross if
she'd had one handy. That last year she was especially Ave
Maria. Had her prayer group over to our apartment two, three
times a day. The Four Horsefaces of the Apocalypse, I called
them. The youngest and the most horsefaced was Gladys—
diagnosed with breast cancer the year before, and right in the
middle of her treatment her evil husband had run off to
Colombia and married one of her cousins. Hallelujah! Another
lady, whose name I could never remember, was only forty-five
but looked ninety, a complete ghettowreck: overweight, with a
bad back, bad kidneys, bad knees, diabetes, and maybe sciatica.
Hallelujah! The chief rocker, though, was Doña Rosie, our
upstairs neighbor, this real nice boricua lady, happiest person
you've ever seen even though she was blind. Hallelujah! You
had to be careful with her because she had a habit of sitting
down without even checking if there was anything remotely
chairlike underneath her, and twice already she'd missed the
couch and busted her ass—the last time hollering, *Dios mío,*
qué me has hecho?—and I had to drag myself out of the base-
ment to help her to her feet. These viejas were my mother's
only friends—even our relatives had gotten scarce after year
two—and when they were over was the only time Mami
seemed somewhat like her old self. Loved to tell her stupid
campo jokes. Wouldn't serve them coffee until she was sure
each tacita contained the exact same amount. And when one

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of the Four was fooling herself she let her know it with a simple extended *Bueeeennnnnoooo*. The rest of the time, she was beyond inscrutable, in perpetual motion: cleaning, organizing, cooking meals, going to the store to return this, pick up that. The few occasions I saw her pause she would put a hand over her eyes and that was when I knew she was exhausted.

But of all of us Rafa took the cake. When he'd come home from the hospital this second go-round, he fronted like nothing had happened. Which was kinda nuts, considering that half the time he didn't know where the fuck he was because of what the radiation had done to his brain and the other half he was too tired to even fart. Dude had lost eighty pounds to the chemo, looked like a break-dancing ghoul (my brother was the last motherfucker in the Jerz to give up his tracksuit and rope chain), had a back laced with spinal-tap scars, but his swagger was more or less where it had been before the illness: a hundred percent loco. He prided himself on being the neighborhood lunatic, wasn't going to let a little thing like cancer get in the way of his official duties. Not a week out of the hospital, he cracked this illegal Peruvian kid in the face with a hammer and two hours later threw down at the Pathmark because he thought some fool was talking shit about him, popped said fool in the piehole with a weak overhand right before a bunch of us could break it up. What the fuck, he kept yelling, as if we were doing the craziest thing ever. The bruises he gave himself fighting us were purple buzz saws, infant hurricanes.

Dude was figureando *hard*. Had always been a papi chulo, so of course he dove right back into the grip of his old sucias, snuck them down into the basement whether my mother was home or not. Once, right in the middle of one of Mami's prayer sessions, he strolled in with this Parkwood girl who had the hugest donkey on the planet, and later I said, Rafa, un chín de respeto. He shrugged. Can't let them think I'm slipping. He'd hang out at Honda Hill and come home so garbled that he sounded as if he was speaking Aramaic. Anybody who didn't know better would have thought homeboy was on the mend. I'll put the weight back on, you'll see, was what he told folks. Had my mother making him all these nasty protein shakes.

Mami tried to keep his ass home. Remember what your doctor said, hijo. But he just said, Ta to, Mom, ta to, and danced right out the door. She never could control him. With me she yelled and cursed and hit, but with him she sounded as if she was auditioning for a role in a Mexican novela. Ay mi hijito, ay mi tesoro. I was all focused on this little whitegirl in Cheesequake but I tried to get him to slow his roll, too—Yo, shouldn't you be convalescing or something?—but he just stared at me with his dead eyes.

Anyway, after a few weeks on overdrive motherfucker hit a wall. Developed this dynamite cough from being out all night and ended up back at the hospital for two days—which after his last stint (eight months) didn't really count as nothing—and when he got out you could see the change.

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Stopped breaking night and drinking until he puked. Stopped with the Iceberg Slim thing, too. No more chicks crying over him on the couch or gobbling the rabo downstairs. The only one who hung tough was this ex of his, Tammy Franco, whom he'd pretty much physically abused their whole relationship. Bad, too. A two-year-long public-service announcement. He'd get so mad at her sometimes that he dragged her around the parking lot by her hair. Once her pants came unbuttoned and got yanked down to her ankles, and we could all see her toto and everything. That was the image I still had of her. After my brother, she had hopped on a whiteboy and gotten married faster than you can say I do. A beautiful girl. You remember that José Chinga jam "Fly Tetas"? That was Tammy. Married and beautiful and still after my brother. What was strange was that on the days she dropped by she wouldn't come into the apartment, not at all. She'd pull her Camry up in front and he would go out and sit with her in the bitch seat. I'd just started summer vacation and while I waited for the whitegirl to answer my phone calls, I'd watch them from the kitchen window, waiting for him to palm her head down into his lap, but nothing like that ever happened. It didn't even look like they were talking. After fifteen, twenty minutes, he'd climb out and she'd drive away and that would be that.

What the fuck you guys doing? Trading brain waves?

He was fingering his molars—the radiation had cost him two already.

Ain't she, like, married to some Polack? Doesn't she have, like, two kids?

He looked at me. What the fuck do you know?

Nothing.

Nothing at all. Entonces cállate la fucking boca.

So this was where he should have been from the start: taking it easy, hanging around the crib, smoking all my weed (I had to hide my puffing, while he twisted his joints right in the living room), watching the tube, sleeping. Mami was ecstatic. She even beamed every now and then. Told her group that Dios Santísimo had answered her prayers.

Alabanza, Doña Rosie said, her eyes rolling around like marbles.

I sat with him sometimes when the Mets were playing, and he wouldn't say a word about how he was feeling, what he was expecting to happen. It was only when he was in bed, dizzy or nauseous, that I'd hear him groaning: What the hell is happening? What do I do? What do I do?

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN it was the calm before the storm. Not two weeks after he recovered from the cough, he disappeared for almost the whole day, then rolled into the apartment and announced that he had scored himself a part-time job.

A part-time job? I asked. Are you fucking nuts?

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A man has to stay busy. He grinned, showed us all the gaps. Got to make myself useful.

It was at the Yarn Barn, of all places. At first my mom pretended to wash her hands of him. You want to kill yourself, kill yourself. But later I heard her trying to talk to him in the kitchen, a low monotonous appeal until my brother said: Ma, how about you leave me alone, yeah?

Talk about a total mystery. Wasn't like my brother had some incredible work ethic that needed exercising. The only job Rafa had ever had was pumping to the Old Bridge whitekids, and even on that front he'd been super chill. If he wanted to keep busy he could have gone back to that—it would have been easy, and I told him so. We still knew a lot of whitekids over in Cliffwood Beach and Laurence Harbor, a whole dirtbag clientele, but he wouldn't do it. What kind of legacy is that?

Legacy? I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Bro, you're working at the Yarn Barn!

Better than being a dealer. Anybody can do that.

And selling yarn? That's only for the giants?

He put his hands on his lap. Stared at them. You live your life, Yunion. I'll live mine.

My brother had never been the most rational of agents, but this one was the ill zinger. I chalked it up to boredom, to those eight months he had spent in the hospital. To the medicine he was taking. Maybe he just wanted to feel normal. In all honesty, he seemed pretty excited about the whole thing. Dressed

up to go to the job, delicately combed that once great head of hair that had grown back sparse and pubic after the chemo. Gave himself plenty of time, too. Can't be late. Every time he headed out, my mother would slam the door behind him, and if the Hallelujah Crew was available they'd all be at their rosaries. I might have been zooted out of my gourd most of the time or chasing that girl over in Cheesequake, but I still managed to drop in on him a few times just to be sure he wasn't facedown in the mohair aisle. A surreal sight. The hardest dude in the nabe chasing price checks like a herb. I never stayed longer than it took to confirm that he was still alive. He pretended not to see me; I pretended not to have been seen.

When he brought home his first check, he threw the money on the table and laughed: I'm making bank, baby.

Oh yeah, I said, you're killing it.

Still, later that night I asked him for twenty. He looked at me and then gave it over. I jumped in the car and drove out to where Laura was supposed to be hanging with some friends but by the time I arrived she was gone.

THAT JOB NONSENSE DIDN'T LAST. I mean, how could it? After about three weeks of making the fat white ladies nervous with his skeletal self, he started forgetting shit, getting disoriented, handing customers the wrong change, cursing people

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out. And finally he just sat down in the middle of an aisle and couldn't get up. Too sick to drive himself home, so the job people called the apartment, got me right out of bed. I found him sitting in the office, his head hanging, and when I helped him to his feet this Spanish girl who was taking care of him started bawling as if I was leading him off to the gas chamber. He had a fever like a motherfucker. I could feel the heat through the denim of his apron.

Jesus, Rafa, I said.

He didn't lift his eyes. Mumbled, Nos fuimos.

He stretched out on the back seat of his Monarch while I drove us home. I feel like I'm dying, he said.

You ain't dying. But if you do kick it leave me the ride, OK?

I'm not leaving this baby to nobody. I'm going to be buried in it.

In this piece of crap?

Yup. With my TV and my boxing gloves.

What, you a pharaoh now?

He raised his thumb in the air. Put your slave ass in the trunk.

The fever lasted two days, but it took a week before he was close to better, before he was spending more time on the couch than in bed. I was convinced that as soon as he was mobile he was going to head right back to the Yarn Barn or try to join the Marines or something. My mother feared the same. Told

him every chance she got that it wasn't going to happen. I won't allow it. Her eyes were shining behind her black Madres de Plaza de Mayo glasses. I won't. Me, your mother, will not allow it.

Leave me alone, Ma. Leave me alone.

You could tell he was going to pull something stupid. The good thing was he didn't try to go back to the Barn.

The bad thing was that he went and basically got married.

REMEMBER THE SPANISH CHICK, the one who'd been crying over him at the Yarn Barn? Well, turns out she was actually Dominican. Not Dominican like my brother or me but *Dominican* Dominican. As in fresh-off-the-boat-didn't-have-no-papers Dominican. And thick as fucking shit. Before Rafa was even better, she started coming around, all solicitous and eager; would sit with him on the couch and watch *Tele-mundo*. (I don't have a TV, she announced at least twenty times.) Lived in London Terrace, too, over in Building 22, with her little son, Adrian, stuck in a tiny room she was renting from this older Gujarati guy, so it wasn't exactly a hardship for her to hang out with (as she put it) her gente. Even though she was trying to be all proper, keeping her legs crossed, calling my mother Señora, Rafa was on her like an octopus. By visit five, he was taking her down to the basement, whether the Hallelujah Crew was around or not.

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Pura was her name. Pura Adames.

Pura Mierda was what Mami called her.

OK, for the record, I didn't think Pura was so bad; she was a hell of a lot better than most of the hos my brother had brought around. Guapísima as hell: tall and indiecita, with huge feet and an incredibly soulful face, but unlike your average hood hottie Pura seemed not to know what to do with her fineness, was sincerely lost in all the pulchritude. A total campesina, from the way she held herself down to the way she talked, which was so demotic I couldn't understand half of what she said—she used words like *deguabinao* and *estribao* on the regular. She'd talk your ear off if you let her, and was way too honest: within a week she'd told us her whole life story. How her father had died when she was young; how for an undisclosed sum her mother had married her off at thirteen to a stingy fifty-year-old (which was how she got her first son, Nestor); how after a couple years of that terribleness she got the chance to jump from Las Matas de Farfán to Newark, brought over by a tía who wanted her to take care of her retarded son and bed-ridden husband; how she had run away from her, too, because she hadn't come to Nueva Yol to be a slave to anyone, not anymore; how she had spent the next four years more or less being blown along on the winds of necessity, passing through Newark, Elizabeth, Paterson, Union City, Perth Amboy (where some crazy cubano knocked her up with her second son, Adrian), everybody taking advantage of her good nature; and

now here she was in London Terrace, trying to stay afloat, looking for her next break. She smiled brightly at my brother when she said that.

They don't really marry girls off like that in the DR, do they, Ma?

Por favor, Mami said. Don't believe anything that puta tells you. But a week later she and the Horsefaces were lamenting how often that happened in the campo, how Mami herself had had to fight to keep her own crazy mother from trading her for a pair of goats.

NOW, MY MOTHER, she had a simple policy when it came to my brother's "amiguitas": since none of them were ever going to last, she didn't even bother to learn their names, paid them no more heed than she'd paid our cats back in the DR. Mami wasn't mean to them or anything. If a girl said hi, she would say hi back, and if a girl was courteous Mami would return the courtesy. But the vieja didn't expend more than a watt of herself. She was unwaveringly, punishingly indifferent.

Pura, man, was another story. Right from the beginning it was clear that Mami did not like this girl. It wasn't just that Pura was mad obvious, dropping hints nonstop about her immigration status—how her life would be so much better, how her son's life would be so much better, how she would finally be able to visit her poor mother and her other son in

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Las Matas, if only she had papers. Mami had dealt with paper bitches before, and she never got this pissy. Something about Pura's face, her timing, her personality, just drove Mami batshit. Felt real personal. Or maybe Mami had a presentiment of what was to come.

Whatever it was, my mother was super evil to Pura. If she wasn't getting on her about the way she talked, the way she dressed, how she ate (with her mouth open), how she walked, about her campesina-ness, about her prieta-ness, Mami would pretend that she was invisible, would walk right through her, pushing her aside, ignoring her most basic questions. If she had to refer to Pura at all, it was to say something like Rafa, what would Puta like to eat? Even I was like Jesus, Ma, what the fuck. But what made it all the iller was that Pura seemed completely oblivious of the hostility! No matter how Mami acted or what Mami said, Pura kept trying to chat Mami up. Instead of shrinking Pura, Mami's bitchiness seemed only to make her more present. When she and Rafa were alone, Pura was pretty quiet, but when Mami was around, homegirl had an opinion about *everything*, jumped in on every conversation, said shit that made no sense—like that the capital of the United States was NYC or that there were only three continents—and then would defend it to the death. You'd think with Mami stalking her she'd be careful and restrained, but nope. The girl took liberties! *Búscame algo para comer*, she'd say to me. No please or nothing. If I didn't get her what

she wanted, she would help herself to sodas or flan. My mother would take food out of Pura's hands, but as soon as Mami turned around Pura would be back in the fridge helping herself. Even told Mami that she should paint the apartment. You need color in here. *Esta sala está muerta.*

I shouldn't laugh, but it was all kinda funny.

And the Horsefaces? They could have moderated things a little, don't you think, but they were, like, Fuck that, what are friendships for if not for instigating? They beat the anti-Pura drums daily. *Ella es prieta. Ella es fea. Ella dejó un hijo en Santo Domingo. Ella tiene otro aquí. No tiene hombre. No tiene dinero. No tiene papeles. Qué tú crees que ella busca por aquí?* They menaced Mami with the scenario of Pura getting pregnant with my brother's citizen sperm and Mami having to support her and her kids and her people in Santo Domingo *forever*, and Mami, the same woman who now prayed to God on a Mecca timetable, told the Horsefaces that if that happened she'd cut the baby out of Pura herself.

Ten mucho cuidado, she said to my brother. I don't want a mono in this house.

Too late, Rafa said, eyeing me.

My brother could have made life easier by not having Pura over so much or by limiting her to when Mami was at the factory, but when had he ever done the reasonable thing? He'd sit on the couch in the middle of all that tension, and he actually seemed to be enjoying himself.

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Did he like her as much as he was claiming? Hard to say. He was definitely more caballero with Pura than he'd been with his other girls. Opening doors. Talking all polite. Even making nice with her cross-eyed boy. A lot of his ex-girls would have died to see this Rafa. This was the Rafa they'd all been waiting for.

Romeo or not, I still didn't think the relationship was going to last. I mean, my brother never kept a girl, ever; dude had thrown away better bitches than Pura on the regular.

And that was the way it seemed to go. After a month or so, Pura just disappeared. My mom didn't celebrate or anything but she wasn't unhappy, either. A couple weeks after that, though, my brother disappeared. Took the Monarch and vanished. Gone for one day, gone for two. By then Mami was starting to flip seriously out. Had the Four Horsefaces putting out an APB on the godline. I was starting to worry, too, remembering that when he was first diagnosed he'd jumped into his ride and tried to drive to Miami, where he had some boy or another. He hadn't made it past Philly before his car broke down. I got worried enough that I walked over to Tammy Franco's house, but when her Polack husband answered the door I lost my nerve. I turned around and walked away.

On the third night we were in the apartment just waiting when the Monarch pulled up. My mother ran over to the window. Holding the curtains until her knuckles were white. He's here, she said finally.

Rafa stomped in with Pura in tow. He was clearly drunk, and Pura was dressed as if they'd just been at a club.

Welcome home, Mami said quietly.

Check it out, Rafa said, holding out both his and Pura's hands.

They had rings on.

We got married!

It's official, Pura said giddily, pulling the license from her purse.

My mother went from annoyed-relieved to utterly unreadable.

Is she pregnant? she asked.

Not yet, Pura said.

Is she pregnant? My mother looked straight at my brother.

No, Rafa said.

Let's have a drink, my brother said.

My mother said: No one is drinking in my house.

I'm having a drink. My brother walked toward the kitchen but my mother stiff-armed him.

Ma, Rafa said.

No one is drinking in this house. She pushed Rafa back. If this—she threw her hand in Pura's direction—is how you want to spend the rest of your life, then, Rafael Urbano, I have nothing more to say to you. Please, I would like you and your puta to leave my house.

My brother's eyes went flat. I ain't going anywhere.

I want you both out of here.

For a second I thought my brother was going to put his hands on her. I really did. But then all the swolt went out of him. He put his arm around Pura (who, for once, looked as if she understood that something was wrong). I'll see you later, Ma, he said. Then he got back into the Monarch and drove away.

Lock the door, was all she said before she went back to her room.

I NEVER WOULD HAVE GUESSED it would last as long as it did. My mother couldn't resist my brother. Not ever. No matter what the fuck he pulled—and my brother pulled a lot of shit—she was always a hundred percent on his side, as only a Latin mom can be with her querido oldest hijo. If he'd come home one day and said, Hey, Ma, I exterminated half the planet, I'm sure she would have defended his ass: Well, hijo, we were overpopulated. There was the cultural stuff, and the cancer stuff, of course, but you also got to factor in that Mami had miscarried her first two pregnancies and by the time she'd gotten knocked up with Rafa she'd been told for years she'd never have children again; my brother himself almost died in childbirth, and for the first two years of his life Mami had this morbid fear (so my tías tell me) that someone was going to kidnap him. Factor in, too, that he had always been the most beautiful of boys—her

total consentido—and you begin to get a sense of how she felt about the lunatic. You hear mothers say all the time that they would die for their children, but my mom never said shit like that. She didn't have to. When it came to my brother, it was written across her face in 112-point Tupac Gothic.

So yeah, I figured that after a few days she'd crack, and then there'd be hugs and kisses (maybe a kick to Pura's head), and it would be all love again. But my mother wasn't playing, and she told him as much the next time Rafa came to the door.

I don't want you in here. Mami shook her head firmly. Go live with your *wife*.

You think I was surprised? You should have seen my brother. He looked shitsmacked. Fuck you then, he said to Mami, and when I told him not to talk to my mom like that he said, Fuck you, too.

Rafa, come on, I said, following him into the street. You can't be serious—you don't even know that chick.

He wasn't listening. When I got close to him, he punched me in the chest.

Hope you like the smell of Hindu, I called after him. And baby shit.

Ma, I said. What are you thinking?

Ask him what *he* is thinking.

Two days later, when Mami was at work and I was in Old Bridge hanging out with Laura—which amounted to listening to her talking about how much she hated her

stepmother—Rafa let himself into the house and grabbed the rest of his stuff. He also helped himself to his bed, to the TV, and to Mami's bed. The neighbors who saw him told us he had some Indian guy helping him. I was so mad I wanted to call the cops, but my mother forbade it. If that's how he wants to live his life, I won't stop him.

Sounds great, Ma, but what the fuck am I going to watch my shows on?

She looked at me grimly. We have another TV.

We did. A ten-inch black-and-white with its volume control permanently locked at 2.

Mami told me to bring down a spare mattress from Doña Rosie's apartment. This is just terrible what's happening, Doña Rosie said. It's nothing, Mami said. You should have seen what we slept on when I was little.

Next time I saw my brother on the street he was with Pura and the kid, looking awful in gear that no longer fit him. I yelled, You asshole, you got Mami sleeping on the fucking floor!

Don't talk to me, Yuniór, he warned. I'll fucking cut your throat.

Any time, brother, I said. Any time. Now that he weighed a hundred and ten pounds and I had bench-pressed my way up to a hundred and seventy-nine, I could be aguajero, but he just ran his finger across his neck.

Leave him alone, Pura pleaded, trying to keep him from coming after me. Leave us all alone.

Oh, hi, Pura. They ain't deported you yet?

By then my brother was charging, and, a hundred and ten pounds or not, I decided not to push it. I scrambled.

Never would have predicted it, but Mami hung tough. Went to work. Did her prayer group, spent the rest of her time in her room. He's made his choice. But she didn't stop praying for him. I heard her in the group asking God to protect him, to heal him, to give him the power of discernment. Sometimes she sent me over to check up on him under the pretense of bringing him medicine. I was scared, thinking he was going to murder me on the stoop, but my mother insisted. You'll survive, she said.

First I had to be let into the apartment by the Gujarati guy, and then I had to knock and be let into their room. Pura actually kept the place pretty tight, got herself dolled up for these visits, put her son in his FOB best. She really played it to the hilt. Gave me a big hug. How are you doing, hermanito? Rafa, on the other hand, didn't seem to give two shits. He lay on the bed in his underwear, didn't say anything to me, while I sat with Pura on the edge of the bed, dutifully explaining some pill or another, and Pura would nod and nod but not look like she was getting any of it.

And then quietly I'd ask, Has he been eating? Has he been sick at all?

Pura glanced at my brother. He's been muy fuerte.

No vomiting? No fevers?

Pura shook her head.

OK, then. I got up. Bye, Rafa.

Bye, dickhole.

Doña Rosie was always with my mother when I returned from these missions, to keep Mami from seeming desperate. How did he look? la Doña asked. Did he say anything?

He called me a dickhole. I'd say that was promising.

Once, when Mami and I were heading to the Pathmark, we caught sight of my brother in the distance with Pura and the brat. I turned to watch them to see if they would wave, but my mother kept walking.

SEPTEMBER BROUGHT SCHOOL BACK. And Laura, the white-girl I'd been chasing and giving free weed, disappeared back into her regular friends. She said hi in the halls of course but she suddenly had no more time for me. My boys thought it was *hilarious*. Guess you ain't the one. Guess I ain't, I said.

Officially it was my senior year but even that seemed doubtful. I'd already been demoted from honors to college prep—which was Cedar Ridge's not-going-to-college track—and all I did was read, and when I was too high to read I stared out the windows.

After a couple weeks of that bullshit, I went back to cutting classes, which was the reason I'd been dumped out of honors in the first place. My mom left for work early, got back late, and

couldn't read a word of English, so it wasn't as if I was ever in danger of being caught. Which was why I was home the day my brother unlocked the front door and walked into the apartment. He jumped when he saw me sitting on the couch.

What the hell are you doing here?

I laughed. What the hell are *you* doing here?

He looked awful. He had this black cold sore at the corner of his mouth, and his eyes had sunk into his face.

What the fuck you been doing to yourself? You look *terrible*.

He ignored me and went into Mami's room. I stayed seated, heard him rummaging around for a while, and then he walked out.

This happened two more times. It wasn't until the third time he was crashing around Mami's room that it dawned on my Cheech and Chong ass what was happening. Rafa was taking the money my mother kept stashed in her room! It was in a little metal box whose location she often changed but which I kept track of just in case I ever needed some bucks on the quick.

I went into her room while Rafa was mucking around in the closet, and slid the box out from one of her drawers, put it snug under my arm.

He came out of the closet. He looked at me, I looked at him. Give it to me, he said.

You ain't getting shit.

He grabbed me. Any other time of our lives this would have been no contest—he would have broken me in four—but the rules had changed. I couldn't decide which was greater: the exhilaration of beating him at something physical for the first time in my life or the fear of the same.

We knocked this over and that over, but I kept the box from him and finally he let go. I was ready for a second round, but he was shaking.

That's fine, he panted. You keep the money. But don't you worry. I'll fix you soon enough, Mr. Big Shit.

I'm terrified, I said.

That night I told Mami everything. (Of course, I stressed that it had all gone down *after* I got home from school.)

She turned the stove on under the beans she had left soaking that morning. Please don't fight your brother. Let him take whatever he wants.

But he's stealing our money!

He can have it.

Fuck that, I said. I'm going to change the lock.

No, you are not. This is his apartment, too.

Are you fucking kidding me, Ma? I was about to explode, but then it hit me.

Ma?

Yes, hijo.

How long has he been doing it?

Doing what?

Taking the money.

She turned her back to me, so I put the little metal box on the floor and went out for a smoke.

AT THE BEGINNING of October, we got a call from Pura. He's not feeling well. My mother nodded, and so I went over to check. Talk about an understatement. My brother was straight delusional. Burning up with fever and when I put my hands on him, he looked at me with zero recognition. Pura was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding her son, trying to look all worried. Give me the damn keys, I said, but she smiled weakly. We lost them.

She was lying, of course. She knew that if I got the keys to the Monarch she'd never see that car again.

He couldn't walk. He could barely move his lips. I tried to carry him but I couldn't do it, not for ten blocks, and first time ever in the history of our nabe there was no one around. By then Rafa had stopped making any kind of sense and I started getting really scared. For real: I started flipping. I thought: He's going to die here. Then I spotted a shopping cart. I dragged him over to it and put him in. We good, I said to him. We great. Pura watched us from the front stoop. I have to take care of Adrian, she explained coolly.

All Mami's praying must have paid off, because we got one miracle that day. Guess who was parked in front of the

THIS IS HOW YOU LOSE HER

apartment, who came running when she saw what I had in the shopping cart, who took Rafa and me and Mami and all the Horsefaces up to Beth Israel?

That's right: Tammy Franco. Aka Fly Tetas.

HE WAS IN for a long long time. A lot happened during and after, but there were no more girls. That part of his life was over. Every now and then Tammy visited him at the hospital, but it was like their old routine; she would just sit there and say nothing and he would say nothing and after a while she would leave. What the fuck is that? I asked my brother, but he never explained it, never said a word.

As for Pura—who visited my brother exactly never while he was in the hospital—she dropped by our apartment one more time. Rafa was still in Beth Israel, so I wasn't under any obligation to let her ass in, but it seemed stupid not to. Pura sat down on the couch and tried to hold my mother's hands, but Mami wasn't having any of it. She had Adrian with her, and the little manganzón immediately started running around and knocking into things, and I had to resist the urge to break my foot off in his ass. Without losing her poor-me look, Pura explained that Rafa had borrowed money from her and she needed it back; otherwise, she was going to lose her apartment.

Oh, por favor, I spat.

My mother eyed her carefully. How much was it?

Two thousand dollars.

Two thousand dollars. In 198—. This bitch was tripping.

My mother nodded thoughtfully. What do you think he did with the money?

I don't *know*, Pura whispered. He never explained *anything* to me.

And then she fucking smiled.

The girl really was a genius. Mami and I both looked like creamed shit, but she sat there as fine as anything and confident to the max—now that the whole thing was over she didn't even bother hiding it. I would have clapped if I'd had the strength, but I was too depressed.

Mami said nothing for a while, and then she went into her bedroom. I figured she was going to emerge with my father's Saturday-night special, the one thing of his that she'd kept when he left. To protect us, she claimed, but more likely to shoot my father dead if she ever saw him again. I watched Pura's kid, happily throwing around the *TV Guide*. I wondered how much he was going to like being an orphan. And then my mother came out, with a hundred-dollar bill in hand.

Ma, I said weakly.

She gave the bill to Pura but didn't let go of her end. For a minute they stared at each other, and then Mami let the bill go, the force between them so strong the paper popped.

Que Dios te bendiga, Pura said, fixing her top across her breasts before standing.

None of us saw Pura or her son or our car or our TV or our beds or the X amount of dollars Rafa had stolen for her ever again. She blew out of the Terrace sometime before Christmas to points unknown. The Gujarati guy told me when I ran into him at the Pathmark. He was still pissed because Pura had stiffed him almost two months' rent.

Last time I ever rent to one of you people.

Amen, I said.

SO YOU'D HAVE thought Rafa would be at least a little contrite, when he finally got out. Fat chance. He didn't say a thing about Pura. Didn't talk much about anything. I think he knew in a real way that he wasn't going to get better. He watched a lot of TV and sometimes he took slow walks down to the landfill. He took to wearing a crucifix, but he refused to pray or to give thanks to Jesus, as my mother asked him to. The Horse-faces were back in the apartment almost every day, and my brother would look at them and for kicks say, Fuck Jesu, and that would only get them to pray harder.

I tried to stay out of his way. I had finally hooked up with this girl who wasn't half as fine as Laura, but who at least liked me. She had introduced me to mushrooms and that was how I

was spending the time I was supposed to be in school, shrooming my ass off with her. I was so not thinking about the future.

Every now and then when me and Rafa were alone and the game was on I tried to talk to him, but he never said nothing back. His hair was all gone and he wore a Yankee cap even indoors.

And then about a month after he got out of the hospital I was coming home from the store with a gallon of milk, high and thinking about the new girl, when out of nowhere my face *exploded*. All the circuits in my brain went lights out. No idea how long I was down, but a dream and a half later I found myself on my knees, my face ablaze, holding in my hands not the milk but a huge Yale padlock.

Wasn't until I made it home and Mami put a compress on the knot under my cheek that I figured it out. Someone had thrown that lock at me. Someone who, when he was still playing baseball for our high school, had had his fastball clocked at ninety-three miles per hour.

That's just terrible, Rafa clucked. They could have taken your eye out.

Later, when Mami went to bed, he looked at me evenly: Didn't I tell you I was going to fix you? Didn't I?

And then he laughed.