



La Misa Saltando

A novel by MICHAEL SCOTT CURNES

For Armando

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Chapter One

How could I believe Mamα when she said I was her favorite? It was not the first time the woman had lied. You must understand that when I was conceived in June of 1957, the second of four gently bronzed children, Marcos P▷rez Jim▷nez had been the latest military dictator from Tachira Province to strangle Venezuela by the throat. A total of five dictators have come from this place to rule the Venezuelan People. I have never been to this place called Tachira. Frankly I'm afraid to go there. It's known as the Porch of the Andes when it's not being more commonly referred to as el Criadero del Dictadores, which means the Nursery of Dictators. Whether or not Marcos P▷rez Jim▷nez had a hand in it, he advanced to the head of government following the political assassination of Carlos Delgado Chalbaud in 1950. In the seven turbulent and nationally demeaning years that led up to my mother's third and if she's to be believed "favorite" pregnancy, Marcos P▷rez Jim▷nez had managed to squash the once-promising labor movement, neutralize the press, shut down almost every university in the country, outlaw political opposition and all but destroy any hope Venezuelan's had for a democracy in this century. To have selfishly wanted to bring a child into this most desperate and certainly hopeless of times, my mother would have had to first lie to herself.

One month before I was born, about the time mama must have been having her first of one thousand second thoughts, the growing intolerance of the

government dictatorship culminated in an overthrow of the Perez Jiménez regime by combined naval and air force commandos. A quasi-civilian military junta was clumsily installed and just in time to mark my headfirst entry into Venezuelan citizenship at 8:05 on the morning of February 17, 1958.

I was born in the city of Caracas, which asphalts the floor of a valley that for most of my life seemed like the bottom of a very deep soup bowl. And if you can imagine a few spoons full of Mamá's abóndigas stew swirled around in the bottom of that bowl, the portion that stubbornly clings to the steep sides would represent the slum-like neighborhoods where I grew up. It was there that I played baseball, believing like every other poor chico in South America that playing well enough might one day be a way out of the Soup Bowl. Believing had worked for José Conséco, a boy just about my age that lived seven or eight quadrants from my house. He now plays for a Major League Baseball team in America and has never once returned to the Soup Bowl.

It was in that steep sloped neighborhood known as El Pueblo Olvidó or Forgotten Town, that I lost my baby teeth, lost my virginity twice and lost faith in my church, my government and in my mother's ability to speak the truth or hold a secret under pressure –all before turning the age of thirteen.

It was in a four room house, four very small rooms, where my two sisters: Magaly and Nieves, my brother: Roberto and me, Armando, divined what we could from our country's muddled sense of destiny. By that I mean we said our prayers and made up the rest as we evolved along under the ever watchful eyes

of our Christian-Democratic parents: Roberto and Nieves the Elders. We weren't the only ones making it up as we went. Our government, our parents, the Church, nobody seemed to know what to expect from one day to the next. I didn't claim to see or know the future either but I could hardly allow it to interrupt my childhood. I decided very early that I could not be bothered by the terrifying consequences that seemed to hover above most Venezuelanos during those times, hover over them like the laughing and powerless Madonna they implored hourly for intervention. I knew that failing a confluence with some tributary of the affluent mainstream that flowed thick as petroleum through the streets of downtown Caracas, hope would be just as empty and meaningless for me as it had been for my father. Without breaking out of the immobilizing mold of classless poverty, I could expect to live in that four-room house, with the sun weathered clapboards clinging to their last chips of pink paint, forever. This was not to be my lot. It's not that I thought or knew I was better than anyone else in the slums but I did know there was more to the Soup Bowl than what my parents had settled for, plenty more. And while I never amounted to much of a baseball player, I did lose my virginity twice before turning thirteen. I'd bet a hundred Bolívares that José Conséco couldn't make that claim. In those years, my blossoming identity seemed to be electronically wired to circuits located just below my belt. When you were as low on the greased socioeconomic pole as I felt my family was you hitched your destiny to anything with a chugging cylinder of promise. If I was anything below the belt, I was chugging.

I am dark skinned. When I implied before that I was gently bronzed it was in a self-effacing sense, like when a fat lady refers to herself as being pleasantly plump. My father's people were so hopelessly mestizo it would be impossible to trace my lineage, though my skin reveals much. Mamá grips her Creole ancestry like there's no mañana and I've heard her father, my grandfather, boast of his descent from the great emancipator, Simón Bolívar, but then I've heard just about every other Venezuelan make the same boast. Bolívar was born in Caracas in 1783. If Venezuela may be allowed one national here, it is he. This may come as a shock to the Major League ego of José Conséco just as it came to me despite my fame for having lost my virginity twice, but after all, before the turn of the century, Símon did come first even if he didn't cum twice. Well, that and he died. You pretty much have to be dead to be a hero I'm told, not just in the Soup Bowl, either.

I'm Catholic by immersion. Mamá tells me I'm baptized, so I'll be saved. I know it is another of her lies. Sometimes I think there should be an automatic pardon when the hopelessly deceived deceive others but then that would let the whole Catholic Church down off the Cross, and that's just too much transgression to for-give me father for I have sinned. Redemption was so automatic with me. Like a gumball machine, really. It didn't matter what I did as long as I remembered to ask forgiveness and turn the crank. Sometimes I asked for forgiveness even before I'd transgressed just to make sure I was covered.

I was twelve on Christmas Eve, 1970, a few months before turning thirteen. The Christian-democrats had managed to hold onto power for a solid year and with the blessing of the Church (some said with the installation of it) there seemed cause for national optimism. I was in Grade Six, my first year at Liceo Leonardo Secundaria, not far from Parque Central in the downtown district. I choose to believe I had been singled out the year before for my voice; a rather angelic voice that had in fact been a perfect boy's lyric soprano until Christmas Eve, 1970.

People I know will recount this same story differently so I will give you that warning and then tell it the way that it was. It had been the year before that Christmas Eve in 1969, actually, during a similar mass at a much smaller church, that my voice was first heard publicly. I was proclaimed a divine sensation. If not overnight, then certainly before the New Year, my family had been recruited from the mountainside barrio church in El Pueblo Olvidó, where we had always prayed for just such a milágro, to the swank Santiago Apóstol Basilica in downtown Caracas. Nobody in my family seems prepared to admit it, especially my brother and sisters, but I knew it had been my voice that prompted the job offer that rescued my father from unemployment and whisked him up, up, up the ranks of the petroleum industry ladder in the fat years before the Arab-Israeli War. I'm certain it had been my voice that got my siblings into the prestigious Liceo Leonardo School along with me. Few can argue it had been my voice that carried the reputation and the harmony of the Santiago Apóstol

Coro de Muchachos for much of my first year there. But most notably, it had been my voice that had started to change before it had reigned a year and just a few weeks before the Christmas High Mass season.

In what was to be the crowning achievement of his illustrious choral directing career with Santiago Apóstol before transferring to an American diocese in Miami, the young Father Federico had been rehearsing his boys choir to deliver his own twenty minute arrangement of the aria *Avé María*. Father Federico had hand picked me for his choir, for his *résumé* and for his finale. The singing boys choir was to enter the gilded nave from four directions and outline the octagonal shape of the decorative floor beneath the basilica dome. Meanwhile, I was to be positioned one hundred feet up, on the narrow walkway of the dome, awaiting my musical cue to solo the aria one octave and ten stories higher than the choir.

"Armando!" Father Federico whispered abruptly, kneeling next to me and out of sight below the railing of the narrow balcony. Every possible pew, alcove and folding chair was filled with Christmas worshippers below us. The boys choir was already entering the giant nave and it was nearing my moment. Because my voice had been very unpredictable during the rehearsals leading up to this night, many were understandably nervous, including the angels no doubt. Father Federico had led me up the circular staircase to the walkway each time we had rehearsed the *Avé*. I liked Father Federico. I trusted him.

"Armando. Yo seré usando mí mano para estabilizar la diafragma tuyo.

¿Comprendes?”

“Sí,” I whispered as he reached his trembling hand under my white choir robe until its warmth found the brown skin of my stomach and applied a reassuring pressure there. On cue, I spread my satin-gowned arms like angel’s wings and opened my mouth to fill the dome of the basilica with my voice. Note after pure note, I laid out the first stanza, building toward the high C that had troubled me in recent rehearsals. *Avé María, gratia plena... Dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus...* Every neck in the place was craning toward the dome. *Sancta María...* I stole a breath and reached for the C just as Father Federico’s hand slipped below my waist to squeeze my testicles together. *Sancta María!* My voice sailed over the note, which I held for as long as Father Federico held my testicles. The almost mechanical exactness of the note ricocheted back at me from every dimple and gable in the dome long after all human expiration had drained from my lungs. Like a record with a bad scratch, I kept singing her name ...*María...María* and each time scaling one note higher than the C that had plagued me in the rehearsals leading up to this moment. High D. High E. High F. It was the closest I’d come to experiencing a divine miracle. It was no longer my voice. It was no longer human. High G. Shaking with jubilation as though my insides were about to explode and splatter all over the dome, I kept singing. ...*María, ora pro nobis, nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora in hora.* I slowly lowered my arms as the gasps of amazement rose high into the cupola to drown out my own

gasps for air. Suddenly, turning dizzy and certain to faint, I collapsed backward against the dome wall. The choir had resumed the musical arrangement from their octagon formation in the center of the cobbled mosaic floor. At that moment, in complete though heaving repose, I watched as my youthful soul leapt from the railing that encircled the balcony, arched into the stale, candled air with limbs extended for flight, and plunged into the peopled vastness of the basilica. It was another moment without breathing before I realized my physical body hadn't been attached to that vision but that Father Federico's physical body had been. He had chosen that perch and the precise moment that he would leave it and this world. I didn't spring to my feet to see what my mind had already figured out. One or two-dozen screams from the cathedral floor marked my passage from boy soprano to the cynic baritone I am to this day.

Minutes later, when the first of three priests arrived on the walkway, short on breath and long on disbelief, I still couldn't stand. My choir robe was bunched up around my chest. My pants and underwear were pulled down. Everything about my brown and red nakedness revealed all the priests needed to know. The last earthly traces of Father Federico were dotted everywhere: on my legs, on the balcony, on the stucco wall of the dome. And I, still seized in youth-fled paralysis, remained as throbbing hard as though my unintended arousal had been carved in marble. All I could do was marvel at the immensity of my now-ordained manhood and wonder if perhaps the size of it alone had accidentally knocked Father Federico off the balcony. The priests attended to my shock and

indeed to their own I dare say. I remember nothing more until days later when at the funeral of Father Federico, kneeling before a fresco of the Virgin Mary, I discovered solace, however temporary. By the look on her sculpted face, I knew I wasn't the first Catholic to be perplexed by the circumstances surrounding the loss of virginity and innocence. I prayed to her. That made the most sense at the time.

I have boasted of losing my virginity twice. If Father Federico had at least one hand in the first event, it was my own father who arranged for my Second Coming, as it were. No sooner had they consigned Father Federico's body to a cemetery in the outskirts of the city, the priests confided the rather delicate details of the candlelight Christmas service to my mother who first promised the Virgin, the clergy and then me, she would not tell my rather reactionary and somewhat maniacal father. In case I have not been entirely clear about my disappointment surrounding my mother's casual management of truth, let me offer one more illustration to make my case. While she may have waited the duration of the very tense, forty-minute bus ride from the communion-confessional to our new, ten-room suburban home, she did not wait for the petroleum company attaché to touch the entryway tiles before deciphering the *Avé María* very much between the lines for anyone who happened to be listening within a three barrio radius. My quick tempered father burst into my bedroom where I was praying to the Holy Mother (for the last time I might add) grabbed me by the collar of my shirt, drove me into downtown Caracas in the family's

white rusted Ford sedan, and transacted one hour with a female prostitute named Rosalisa. What does a twelve-year old do with such a gift? --Vomit, I'm afraid. It's not that I found the experience particularly nauseating. She was a nice woman and gentle, though I remember her a little impatient when it came to scouring the Body and Blood of Christ, the only contents in my stomach, from her orange and yellow shag carpet. I credit her with neither my delivery nor my salvation. I haven't been with a woman since but that isn't Rosalisa's fault. I don't blame her. I don't blame my mother. I could never blame Father Federico. I suppose there is the Catholic Church and maybe the Mother of Christ but blaming the only other deflowered virgin in the Catholic pantheon seemed pointless as she'd never been that real to me anyway. In those confusing political years, blaming the government was too much like blaming the Church and neither grudge completely gratifying. So I spent all of five minutes attempting to find a pecho or a chest on which to pin my blame before realizing neither guilt nor blame nor my conscience consumed me. What consumed me life the conflagration of the century was a need to grow-up, so I did—overnight.

Closing my eyes, laying on my back on my bed in my own bedroom, the first time I didn't have to share with my younger brother Roberto, I had my first vision of the Holy Ghost of Father Federico. I was not frightened as he stood or rather hovered before me completely naked as Cupid. For this first appearance since his death, he didn't speak but only smiled. He had much to smile about with his angelic hard-on glowing white hot like the flames of ten dozen candles.

When I opened my eyes, the sheet on my bed was drenched in gallons of semen but I was not alarmed. I was suddenly adjusted, suddenly adult. Praise be to Father Federico.

To celebrate my accelerated metamorphosis, I burst from the double doors of our ten-room house into the pre-dawn hours of the upscale California Sur neighborhood. I raced along the edge of the city district called Los Chaquaramos without stopping, cut across downtown Caracas, past Liceo Leonardo Secundaria just as the sun spilled over the top of the Soup Bowl to illuminate the dome of the Basilica. I began climbing through the streets of the district of San Bernardino toward the jungle-base of the Ávila. The Ávila is the highest mountain forming the rim of the Soup Bowl, seventy-eight hundred feet above the Caribbean Sea on the other side. At night, throughout my childhood, I had seen the lights of the Hotel Humboldt on top of the Ávila, and believed God lived there where he kept his eye on each of the four million *abondígas* or meatballs in His Soup Bowl. It was only as a new adult, as a cynic baritone rapidly heading bass, that I had begun to realize that God had so many more pressing pastimes like staging plane crashes and organizing wars, spreading hunger and diseases, that he had likely checked out of the Humboldt Hotel long ago from boredom in the Soup Bowl. I could relate to that. My training as a singer had given me remarkable breath control and even more amazing stamina when motivated. I ran and I kept running. The sun was clean over the ridge of the mountains now but I didn't sweat and I didn't heave for oxygen or long for

water. I ducked under the four-lane Cota Mil which translates into the “thousand tail” highway that wraps around Caracas like an artist’s detail fired and cured into the pottery of the Soup Bowl. On the other side of the freeway, as the noises of traffic grew distant, I entered the jungles of El Parque Nacional de Ávila tracking a dusty trail up the side of the mountain. I had already run 20, maybe 25 kilometers through the city. My momentum was such that I figured I could probably run straight up the side of the Ávila and since God wasn’t minding the Humboldt, I could escape over the rim of the Soup Bowl to the real world on the other side. But twenty minutes later winded, delirious and slightly euphoric from the sudden rise in elevation and decline in blood sugar, I tripped on a rock and fell flat-out on the trail. When I pulled myself upright, I had a view of Caracas I will never be able to forget no matter how long I am allowed to live. It was that moment a song I’d learned when I was much younger in school and a song I had sung in a recital at Liceo Leonardo during the past school year popped automatically into my head. It had been written by Billy Frometo in 1937 and at least in Caracas, practically qualified as a second national anthem. The words and notes launched from my body in the loudest, not to mention the deepest, voice I’d ever issued, to glide off the side of the Ávila to settle like a mist over my city. Twelve hundred feet up the mountain, I had discovered the most impressive stage of my singing career and from it, I stood as tall as I ever had and I honored the Soup Bowl that had nurtured me thus far.

Para cantarte a ti, puse al arpa,

Todos las cuerdas de oro.
Para cantarte a ti, mi garganta
Recogí un riseñor.
Para cantarte a ti, mi Caracas
He pedido al poeta
Que le ponga a mi verso
Todo su inspiración.
Y, es que yo quiero tanto a mi Caracas
Que mientras viva no podré olvidar.
Su cerro, sus techos rojos, su lindo cielo
Las flores, de mil colores, de Galipán.
Y es que yo quiero canto a mi Caracas
Que solo pido a Dios, cuando yo muera
En vez de una oración sobre me tumba
El último compass de Alma Llanera.

I suppose it sounds cheesy. (I have heard this saying used and assume it means the same as when we say ¡Qué rico! or how rich). Yes, I have to agree, it was cheesy rich. Once again, someone else may tell this story differently but until they do, I am bound to continue. Others heard my new voice that day and commended me as I passed them on the path on my way down the Ávila. It was the first time I had conjured even so much as a tune in my head since the night Father Federico had died. One woman said I should make a recording of

Canto a Caracas with my voice; that it would sell a million copies, she said. I did not make such a record, in any version of this story, but I kept singing.

The next four years of my life were anti-climatic by comparison. I sang in school and eventually I sang in the Basilica again. As my body lengthened into adulthood, I took up dancing classes mostly to demonstrate to Mamá that I had no intention of pursuing the priesthood. My older sisters were married one year after the other and soon it was only Roberto and I in the 10-room house with our parents. Roberto eventually entered the military, as do all young boys in Venezuela if they don't pursue University within six months of finishing secondary school. When it came my turn at the age of 18, I looked at my military option historically and reasoned that an always vigilant, coup-ready military likely had no room for a dancing baritone so instead I enrolled in the Universidad Central de Venezuela and continued to live at home with my parents, where we now had 3.3 rooms a piece. I studied under the umbrella of Humanities but pursued my counter-education in the university's School of Arts. I pursued dance, voice and theatre. But aware that my father had kept Rosalisa very much in the forefront of his mind and Roladex should I ever appear to be wavering in my manhood, the textbooks for dance and theatre never left the university and only those on Economics and Sociology and Sciences made their way into our home where I used them as props around the stage that was our house. Just as father had once sponsored Rosalisa to ensure my proper development, he was also willing to underwrite my education so long as it

matched a curriculum acceptable to his masculine sensibilities, if there is such a thing. Grateful for his assistance and attention in my life, I didn't mind his requirements. My father had been a tremendous provider. I only wish I could have better met his expectations of me but that would have been impossible. He of course, might tell this part of the story differently but then he never managed to fully recover from the episode with Father Federico. But then who of us did, I wonder?

University brought with it the first freedoms I had been allowed in my life. I enjoyed the liberty to come and go from my father's house whenever I chose. I could stay out all night if I wanted to, but I don't think I ever did. I had nothing to rebel against and yet all the freedom in the world to be a rebel. I realize James Dean once had this problem too but this unfortunately, is where any comparison to James Dean must end. At 18, I had an Afro hairstyle. It was 1976 if this can be used as an excuse and my very curly hair seemed unable to be anything else. I mentioned that I am dark skinned and that by looking at me there can be no mistaking my ancestry. The Afro rather clarified what most people had already assumed anyway. For me it was no cause for shame. Otherwise I had perfectly white teeth, a dimpled smile, a nose somewhat flattened but still in proportion to my squarely jawed face, petroleum-mixed-with- water colored eyes, a long neck with a pronounced Adam's Apple and a dancer's musculature. Finally, at 18, what seemed to be the enormous size of my penis no longer stood out like a case of uncontrolled medical swelling in

comparison to a slight frame. At 18, I was nicely proportioned and more than adequately hung. Lastly, in 1976 I will report that I was six feet tall. I've since changed my hairstyle.

As a founding member of OPEC, Venezuela had been able to quadruple its price of oil after the Arab-Israeli War in 1973. This sudden world stature resulted in a spending frenzy with an ego to match the new purse and shoes. Before this economic windfall, Venezuela was nothing more than a vacation spot for homesick Cubans who had chosen exile in Miami. During a five-year free for all, suddenly cash rich Venezuelanos discovered Miami along with all that capitalism American-style had to offer. It was a gluey sweet taste many could not cleanse from their mouths or remove off their fingers which made the recession and oil glut that followed in 1978 seem particularly unsavory. My father had managed frugality during the oil boom and as he had come from poverty, my family didn't feel the recession like the rest of the country. The recession automatically raised our economic status, deplorably moderate, as it was a few comfortable notches. I bought a car when I turned nineteen with money my father had funneled me. It was a beater of a car but few my age could their own transportation, the gasoline or a place to park it. Mine was a used Chevy Nova Hatchback, –green. I was embarrassed owning a car with the name Nova. In Spanish, no va means it doesn't go. I'm surprised Chevrolet sold any of these cars in Latin America, much more the green ones. Fortunately anything resembling pride came much later in life for this kid stuck with an Afro

and a green car.

My first years in college were fairly low-key. I didn't know what to date so I didn't. As a result, I didn't have sex, except with myself. And when I fantasized which was pretty much all of the time, I saw Father Federico's face at the precise moment of ejaculation. In my fantasies, I could be with anyone to start with; well not anyone if I'm honest, —any man and he would have his own identity until I began to climax and at that moment, his face would automatically transform into that of Father Federico's. As Father Federico's privates were the only adult male parts I'd ever witnessed in a state of arousal other than my own, every fantasy man came standard with Father Federico's organs. And one more thing: after each ejaculation, when my heart had slowed down and I could open my eyes, there would always be a vision of Father Federico smiling either at my side or just over me. His favorite trick, about every six or eight episodes, was to orchestrate the initial F on my chest and stomach using my semen, just to remind me I think, that he is always there— watching, inspiring, waiting.

I had a very tangible fear for the first man with whom I finally had sexual relations. His name was Julio Benatar. He was an engineering student from a very wealthy family. He drove a silver Renault Fuego, which means fire. I told him I didn't have a car. First off, he looked too much like Father Federico to stand any chance of breaking me out of my obsessive curse. Second, in the flirtatious days leading up to the inevitable encounter, I could not achieve an erection nor conjure the spirit, much more the blessing of Father Federico. I

knew my interest in another subject had enraged him and I fully believed he was capable of hurting Julio, like in a car accident or by blinding him with a freak and sudden propulsion of my semen should we proceed with the dirty deed.

I was all nerves following the evening's lecture on the random properties of physics, I think the subject was. Julio, my classmate, paramour, and all around human sacrifice-to-be had pressed his leg into mine for a solid hour. We had planned to take a drive out of the Soup Bowl and down the mountain to his parent's private beach house about 40 kilometres away. He held my hand as he drove his Fuego through the streets of Caracas and then down the steep mountain grade to the Caribbean. All my life that has been a military police checkpoint halfway down the mountain though which all cars must pass to gain clearance. Julio insisted we should keep holding hands through the checkpoint and refused to let go. He repeatedly asked what we had to be ashamed of and what the military police could possibly do to us. I wanted to say to Julio that my brother was in the military and that they could do plenty. Though I was close to fainting and my hand had gone numb inside Julio's grip, we were waved through the checkpoint by the policeman who was too engrossed in a novel to even make eye contact. Julio raised our clasped hands defiantly and with a whoop sped through the gate triumphant.

At his parent's condo, we smoked some marijuana, a first for me, and began to disrobe each other. There was no sign of Father Federico, even when I shut my eyes to double-check for him. The dope was a relocating experience. It

put me in a fuzzy place I'd never been and a place that was apparently beyond Father Federico's reach. Having dated my own body exclusively for the past seven years and knowing how it worked, I was able to devote myself to the exploration of Julio's body. In the sense I could touch him and feel his weight on me, he was no Father Federico. When I finally permitted myself to orgasm, Julio was pressing himself into me and I thought it wise to shoot while the shooting was good since the trajectory would be contained by his body. Adult sex was an awakening for me but when it was over, it was over. We scrambled in the dark for our clothes without one word exchanged.

It was a silent ascent over the mountain into the Soup Bowl. My hands held themselves. The police checkpoint had closed for the night and without so much as an *adios*, Julio left me in the parking lot outside our classroom. Since nobody was going to steal a green car that according to its nameplate didn't go anyway, my car was exactly where I'd left it. I didn't attend that lecture, even randomly, or see Julio Benatar again. Father Federico, however and to my somewhat sentimental relief, reappeared a few days later. Clearly, he wasn't pleased with my exploits. And when next he left the mark of Federico on my chest, it burned my brown skin with an acid-like assurance that only a Catholic would understand. Perhaps it was just panic, but days later I had a nervous breakdown when I discovered I could still see the letter F on my skin. I have been unable to achieve a suntan over those miraculous if not vengeful lines ever since. It wasn't exactly the blood of the lamb, or was it? but I felt I'd been

redeemed and marked all at once.

Months later, when presented with an opportunity to leave home for the first time, instead of telling Mamá this little abóndiga had tired of just barely holding his head above the broth in the Soup Bowl, I followed her lead and lied. It's better for everyone sometimes.

Chapter Two

National inflation grew worse under the Christian Democrats but my father, ever the survivor, hung in there. Venezuelan's confidence in the economy provoked a steady increase of foreign investment elsewhere but my father never stopped believing in his government and never allowed the family boat to feel the waves beginning to ripple beneath it. He worked longer days for the same money, which was his way of ensuring he never took anything for granted. I did not share his optimism though perhaps I may have inherited his work ethic. I became involved in a student-led Democratic Action movement working even harder and longer hours to unseat the Christian Democrats he so unwaveringly endorsed. We voiced our political differences at the table or in the hallway or on the toilet from behind a closed bathroom door whenever our

schedules infrequently managed to coincide. He was never angry with me for opposing him. I think he realized that while he allied his future with the establishment of the day, which to him must have seemed a sure and prudent thing, it was all right for his son to be pursuing something potentially surer still as long as the passion behind the pursuit was the same. In all our friendly debates preceding the election I never used the one argument that had actually been my call to Democratic Action; that being Andrés Sanchez. Andrés reminded me of a tall Julio Benatar who reminded me of Father Federico before him. I was hopelessly attracted to one very certain type of man. This, unfortunately, never took me too far from where I had started. Unlike Julio or Father Federico, my attraction to Andrés had not a single prospect of finding reciprocation. This not only condemned me to a dead-end crush on a man rumored to favor the companionship of his beauty pageant wife but to serving the Democratic Action Party which anyone could see was certainly going no where, at least in this election. Love and politics, as my father would say: I certainly knew how to pick them. Luis Herrera Campins, the head of my father's party of choice, went on to sweep the election. Andrés defected almost immediately to score an administrative post in the new president's cabinet, most likely without ever having learned my name or at least my desires.

The year was 1978. I was six feet tall, which should tell you something. While the Bolívar, my country's currency, took a beating in the Mercado, the tender to hoard had become the English Language. Speaking English and

speaking it very well easily exchanged with a gold standard perception of worldliness not before recognized in the Soup Bowl. I had taken several years of English at Liceo Leonardo Secundaria and had practiced conversational English with Father Federico who had been studying for his new post in Miami before the fall. It had elevated my status at the Democratic Action office on campus where everyone, on account of the aforementioned exchange rate and a purported CIA bankroll, spoke English.

One day in the cafeteria at the Universidad Central, while staring dreamily at Andrés as he picked cold chicken bones clean with teeth that actually gleamed just like the Close-up commercials, our young democratic conversation shifted to record the arrival of a large contingent of international students, mostly American, that had been visiting the city that week according to Andrés as part of a performing group. The first association my mind made with this information was that they must have belonged to a traveling circus. History would record that first perception to be more accurate than not.

Two red faced American men sat at the orange table next to our gold one just as a piece of dark chicken meat lodged between the chalk-like incisors of Andrés forcing me to look away. As I could not bear the compromise of perfection, however temporary, I began to eavesdrop on the heavily punctuated conversation taking place between the Americans while appearing to study the metal grid and recessed lighting of the suspended ceiling of the busy cafeteria. Speaking freely as though none of the savage indians of this third world country

could understand a word they said, they quickly revealed they were in the middle of a lover's dispute provoked, apparently, when the red-headed red-faced American slept with another man in the performing troupe. I stole a glance at the blond-headed red-faced American to catch his reaction to this shocking news. It certainly sounded like my kind of circus especially if men were having sexual relationships with men even if they weren't very successful at it, so I positioned my chair in order to learn more. Just then a typical California looking girl with long blond hair and eyes too blue to be taken seriously, joined the men at the orange table causing their discussion to mutate into generalities to involve her. Andrés slugged me in the arm to make sure I'd noticed the arrival of the Californian, the arm I might add, I had been using to prop my head at just the right angle to hear their conversation and keep from falling out of my chair. I recovered my balance before making a spectacle. With the drama of the orange table altered and at what I perceived to be a harmless moment, I leaned over to introduce myself hoping the two men might pardon my intrusion as automatically as they had received the full-bosomed Miss California.

Having now made two beauty pageant references, I should interject that in my country, beauty and competition is nothing short of an industry to rival petroleum. Taking very good notes from its American mentors up until 1978, Caracas Television Canal 2 (Channel Two), having already mastered the formula variety show in the early 70's, began mass producing thoroughbred beauty champions who were more than worthy of their own full scale televised

showcases. Venezuelans have always been extraordinarily beautiful people. Carmen Zubillaga, after all, had been crowned Miss World in 1955, just four years into that pageant's history. It was no surprise then, with Venezuela's inaugural televised pageant in 1978, that the evening's winner, one Señorita Maritza Sayalero, went on to win Miss Universe in 1979. Venezuelan women have been winning ever since, capturing Miss Universe three more times: Irene Saez in 1981, Barbara Palacio Teyde in 1986 and Alicia Machado in 1996; Miss World four more times: Pilin Leon in 1981, Astrid Herrera in 1984, Ninebeth Jiminez in 1991 and Jacqueline Aguilera in 1995; and Miss International twice: Alejandrina Sicilia Hernandez in 1985 and Consuelo Adler in 1997. It didn't take Venezuelans and the world long to realize that any one of these women was easier to look at on her worst day than baseball great José Conseco had been at his best. Venezuela began redefining its national heroes into heroines. Of course, Canal 2 hasn't wasted any time collecting on debts of gratitude secured with each and every winning crown by enslaving the pageant winners and runners-up as recurring stock characters in the six or eight telenovelas, two, maybe three feature-length movies and the dozens of commercials produced each year in its Caracas studios. Irene Saez (Miss Universe 1981) had loftier plans and later became the first female mayor of Caracas and even ran for President in 1998, though she was defeated early in the primaries. But back to 1978 and the travelling circus...

The blond red-faced American who had apparently not cheated on his

lover up to that point suddenly acted as though he might be interested in equalizing the score between them and welcomed me to their table with a rather provocative grin. I asked if they were American and indeed the men, one from Nebraska and one from Florida, answered affirmatively in their respective regional American accents. Miss California, not so ironically, hailed from California. I asked if they were enjoying My Caracas and if they could tell me more about the group they traveled with and in minutes my chair had scooted to their table, not that Andrés Sanchez had paid any attention to my migration.

We spent much of that next hour or so talking, snacking on pan-fried arepas, which I'd introduced them to and washing the traditional corn flour morsels down our throats with Pepsi, the national cola of Venezuela. I then walked the three of them back to the campus theatre where they invited me to their performance that was scheduled to occur later that evening. Attending that performance was to be *el principio del fin* or the beginning of the end. I sat very close to the front of the theatre that night, watching in amazement as 100 exuberant performers sang in seven languages and performed dances from all over the world in traditional costumes. The man from Nebraska and the man from Florida seemed to be the stars of the show dancing in every dance, singing almost every other song and even singing in Spanish to my surprise. They had not spoken one word of Spanish with me during the afternoon and gave me no indication they even could but they sang with so much confidence on stage and in my language that all at once I envied them. I was a singer with a voice as

good as theirs, maybe better and I'd been trained as a dancer. It seemed quite conceivable that I could join their circus and leave the Soup Bowl. Seven months later, I did both.

I remember it was early July 1979 and my skin was sticking to the lawn chair on the patio of an L-shaped adobe house belonging to my host parents, Jim and Janet Burr, in the sandy outskirts of Tucson, Arizona. Well after ten o'clock one of those first desert evenings, disoriented by my orchestrated turn of events and overwhelmed by an environment more foreign to me than the surface of the moon, I was foolishly waiting for the night to cool the thick, hot air. I must have waited half that night for relief from a temperature that was not to be diminished by a month of night falls or the dozen or so sudden rainstorms that occurred during my first weeks in Tucson. The weather had always been mild in the Soup Bowl and I had never known such intense heat. And the night bugs around my new temporary American home made such annoying sounds it was difficult in the beginning to forget they were everywhere, crawling, eating, lurking. The Burr's were nice enough people to have taken me into their home. They had no children of their own and did their best to comfort me, but the never ending heat and the million bugs per square foot made Tucson, Arizona seem like the most inhospitable place on earth. Despite this, I learned to love it.

As part of the circus training, four hundred students and I had traveled from eighteen different countries to the Arizona desert to spend five weeks learning and rehearsing a two-hour musical show that would take us around the

world for the next year. When I got to Tucson, I didn't encounter the man from Nebraska or the man from Florida that I'd met in Caracas but there were all types of men from everywhere and plenty of Miss California's. I made four hundred friends in the first week. In the second week they divided four hundred of us into four casts of 100 performers each. I focused my friendships, wise to never become too attached as things kept changing. Rehearsals were six days a week and 12 hours each day. I had never danced so hard in my life. Every day was just like running from my family's house in downtown Caracas to the top of the Avila and back again, twice. The third week in Arizona, my cast's director, Juan-Luis Hernandez, revealed our tour schedule for the year "on the road" to come. From the start of staging in Tucson, Juan-Luis had given me more than my normal share of attention. At first, I didn't realize that he may have had an interest in me beyond my stage talents but within a few weeks it had become more than obvious. He came from the Guadalajara District in Mexico and had traveled with the circus some years before becoming a director. I had repeatedly declined his invitations to dinner and Sunday drives always with the same excuse of having already made plans with my host parents. He hadn't given up though and I was afraid the other cast members might begin to notice the favoritism he extended me. The director began reading through a list of American towns and cities and states I'd never heard of before and then he announced Canada. This interested me mostly because it wasn't the United States. Then Juan-Luis added Idaho and Oregon to the list before he paused a

moment while everyone shifted from one leg to the other. He continued his list with Mexico City, Managua Nicaragua, Panama, Bogota Colombia "and just for Armando," the director paused again while I certainly blushed, "Caracas Venezuela!" So the circus would go full circle taking me right back to the Soup Bowl where I'd started. I was at the same time filled with pride and disappointment all the while on the verge of passing out in the stale Arizona heat that had topped 110 degrees Fahrenheit and then stuck there. After Juan-Luis made the announcement and before a scheduled vocal workshop, I removed the dance shoes that had been pinching my feet. I then made the mistake of walking barefoot on a sidewalk between the gymnasium where we danced and the cafeteria where, like the circus animals we were, we grazed on leaf lettuce salads without dressing. Upon contact with the concrete the bottoms of my feet burned then blistered and I had to wrap them in gauze then dance on them for several days. Janet, my "host mother" had broken a paddle off one of the giant cacti in her yard and applied the gooey sap to my feet to soothe the blisters and soften the calluses that had formed there. She had been a kind woman to attend a stranger's feet. Janet died from breast cancer in 1986 leaving Jim behind in their Tucson home at the edge of the desert. When I learned through a letter from Jim that she had become ill and wasn't responding to treatment, I at once severed the seasonal communication I had maintained with the couple since leaving Arizona. Venezuelan's, like most people of Latino descent, are terribly superstitious about death. To acknowledge or witness it's potential

would be to accept one's own helplessness and eminent defeat. We don't do that. I remember the very afternoon she died. I had stepped on a nail sticking through a board in the street in front of my family's house that day. Sitting down on the curb, I removed my shoe and began massaging the pain and rusty poisons from my foot. I looked skyward and saw Father Federico. Janet was floating next to him holding the paddle of a cactus in one hand and a glass of lemonada in the other. Upon seeing this vision of Our Lady Janet, Patron Saint of the Desert, the pain left my foot instantly. I sat on the curb in front of my house for several minutes that day, remembering her kindness.

By the time the equipment truck and busses finally left Tucson the first week of August, my English had been perfected, I'd lost fifteen pounds and I felt as though I was the superstar of the show. Everyone traveling with me probably felt the same way but I seemed to get more than my share of audience attention. Coming from Venezuela with my dark skin and an accent at least when I spoke, I realized I was a novelty not unlike a Siberian tiger in the real circus. Every time I entered the stage, girls would scream or whistle. The first time this happened, at a high school in a little town called Safford, Arizona, I began laughing right on stage. Juan-Luis yelled at me later. I was still six feet tall at the time and couldn't understand how I could possibly be provoking such a response. I sang two songs in the show, one silly and one important. When I say silly I mean a song with lyrics having no particular importance. This song was called "Jukebox Saturday Night." It was a very fast song with difficult words

for my Venezuelan tongue to get around:

Moppin' up soda-pop rickies, to our heart's delight, dancing to swingeroo quickies, Juke Box Saturday Night! Goodman and Kaiser and Miller, helped to make things right. Mixing hot licks with vanilla, Juke Box Saturday Night!

I say the other song was important because it carried the message of the show. I liked this song because it was the last song of the night and the music was slow and building which gave my deep voice the opportunity to work each note and to string the words together into profound sayings that left the audience thinking. I also liked singing this song because it meant I got to lead the bows and receive the standing ovation they gave us in almost every town and city. I also danced nine of the twelve major dances during the two-hour show and made it a point to visit with people in the audience during the intermission mostly to practice my English. I worked very hard for every performance and by the end of each show I believed I had personally earned the ovation and adoration of the public. I did not develop an ego over this or turn conceited around the other performers in my cast. I managed to live on the satisfaction of having performed well. I feel I was respected for this.

I was shy with the other performers in the beginning even with those I called my friends. Maybe it was because I came from another country. Maybe it was because I was older or felt older than many of the cast members with whom I traveled. Some had just turned eighteen and had left secondary school for this opportunity. I was 21 in 1979, already four years older than half the performers.

I had almost finished college before joining this circus. Many had come direct from secondary graduation ceremonies to Arizona. I realized very early that my motivations and perceptions of the world were different from the others so I mostly stared out the bus windows at the American Southwest as it raced past in a blur of nearly imperceptible sun-faded colors. We must have played every small town in Arizona and New Mexico in those first weeks, working the kinks from the show in front of small audiences and getting used to the routine of travel, setup, rehearse, perform, strike, travel some more. As student performers, we stayed with families like Jim and Janet everywhere we went. It seemed there was never a place and certainly no time for privacy and quiet thought unless I discovered it inside my head by closing my eyes and concentrating. When I reached this place in my mind, and it was rare, it was never long before I started to worry about my father's disappointment in me for running off with the circus. He'd had eight months to accept my plans, from the night I'd announced my intention after my audition following the performance in Caracas to the day I left for Tucson. All the while I sensed he believed I would forget the idea and settle back down to my studies and substitute vocation. Quite to the contrary, during those eight months I could not get the idea of traveling and performing out of my mind. I'd purchased a record album with the music from the show that first night I auditioned. My new friends made just that day, whose names I can no longer remember, had signed their autographs on the record cover wishing me equal measures of luck and success. I would listen

to the songs in my bedroom over and over again and practice singing and pronouncing the English lyrics just like the American singers on the record, whom I later decided I had idolized for all the wrong reasons. Once surrounded by Americans on the tour bus, in American family homes and on the stage, I was very much aware and furthermore contented to be the dark-skinned South American in their midst. That was distinction enough. I didn't miss home but it was a relief to know I would return there with the circus.

After regular encounters with the ghost of Father Federico in the five years after his suicide, I found it odd that he had not divined a single showing since my arrival in America. I hadn't stopped thinking about him and I certainly didn't abandon my mental pursuit of men, real and imagined, who resembled him. Always when I prayed, it was to him. And when I prayed, it was really only as an extension of talking to myself. I definitely never asked for anything. I had believed Father Federico when he told me it was his desire to move to a parish in Miami and for this reason I had anticipated he would eagerly accompany me in my travels through the American States. I've since realized that Father Federico had more likely been facing involuntary banishment to the U. S. by his superiors for conduct unbecoming a choirmaster and that he truly loved Caracas and had no intention of leaving it. Except for the indelible F on my chest and stomach that would always embody the Man and his Spirit, Father Federico never left the city he loved.

The American Southwest eventually sloped into the foothills of the Rocky

Mountains and for two months the tour traveled north where it was greeted by the most spectacular autumn. Caracas, I might mention, has two seasons. Until this tour, I'd never experienced a climate more varied than "mild with rain" or "mild without." The buses stopped for an afternoon at the ski resort of Vail on the way to Salt Lake City. The aspen trees there had transformed whole valleys into a Van Gogh yellow that nearly required sunglasses on an overcast day. The smells in the thin mountain air were earthier than I had ever experienced. I scrambled into a few shops to buy some sweaters and coats. Cold was a sensation I had never outfitted. The cast members had a laugh at my expense unlike my father who wasn't laughing when the bill for the credit card he had loaned me for emergencies, arrived for payment. The extra layers of clothing proved a good investment as we traveled through Utah and into the State of Idaho.

In no time at all, it was the first week of November. The tour busses pulled into a tiny mountain town called Payette, Idaho. It seemed quaint enough with its single main street walled by turn of the century buildings on either side, a river flowing through the middle of downtown and a "Welcome to Payette" sign nearly larger than the town itself. It was everything I imagined rural America to be. My host father in this town turned out to be both the mayor and the local Assembly of God preacher. He welcomed the circus with outstretched arms. We spent the afternoon, like each arrival day in a new town, setting up our stage, lights and sound before rehearsing segments of the show in preparation for the

evening performance. Payette was the first town that wasn't large enough to have a stage or a theatre so we planned to perform flat on the gymnasium floor of the school. This required some minor adjustments to the show, which were worked out during rehearsal. The cast had pizzas delivered to the school and began changing into show costumes a while later. I give these details not because they stood out from every other city or town we'd played in but because I had a feeling about this show in Payette, Idaho that I couldn't explain. It was November 9, 1979. Something was about to happen and I sensed that. I changed into my blue and white striped show shirt with billowy long sleeves and fabric panels that snapped together front to back under my crotch. This design was meant to keep the shirt from coming untucked during a rigorous performance but I think its real purpose was to enable the men to hit the high notes when clapping over their heads, which we did a lot. Buttoning the shirt I couldn't help but notice that the F on my chest and stomach had turned a very irritated red color as though I had been scratching myself hard but only along the precise lines of the letter. I began to think that perhaps I had eaten something and was experiencing an allergic reaction. I tried to rationalize that all of my skin was probably having a reaction and that only the F where I had no skin color at all made the reaction obvious. I wasn't itching and otherwise felt completely fine except for a little bloating from the pizza. I went to the washroom to relieve myself, the letter F was getting redder. I had a premonition that whatever this was, it had to be the foreshadowing of an event about to

occur.

When the lights came up for the show opener, I was shocked by the proximity of the audience. Because those in the audience were seated on the gymnasium floor at the same level as the performers. I could see actual faces and monitor reactions in the first rows. Normally the whole audience was washed out by the bright lights beating at angles toward an elevated stage and the only reason we knew they were there at all was by the sound of their applause after each number. Before the chorus of the opening number I spotted him, sitting in the front row with his father just left of center. His proper name, I declare now, must remain as unutterable as are the desires I have carried for him since the first moment I saw him. To acknowledge the power of his name and his spell over me would reveal an opening, a vulnerability even surer still, exploitable to the one hundredth degree by a squadron of doubts and inadequacies too numerous to fathom. In this accounting, indeed in all matters relating to him from this moment forward, I shall forever refer to him as El Único and leave it to your resourceful devices to arrange the necessary translation.

El Único developed a visible rhythm for the music almost instantly. His eyes, I couldn't yet tell their color, and his body absorbed every finite aspect of the performance and this I observed from my opening position on microphone standing behind two Miss California's in their own right. I was not yet stage front where he might see me watching him. I could see that he was completely unlike Andrés Sanchez and Julio Benetar who had been virtual copies of the

original Father Federico. By watching him, I could almost see what he was seeing. It was like watching our show on stage from where El Único sat in the audience. The song ended on an upbeat and the audience detonated with applause. El Único whispered something in his father's ear who laughed and then put his hand around El Único's shoulder and pulled him into a half embrace. I knew at that moment that El Único had come here with a purpose and that his father was here to support him. Of course! El Único intended to audition for the circus following the show. The Miss California's parted on either side and the spotlight trained on me standing at the microphone. I smiled sincerely and began to speak.

"Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen and welcome to Up with People!" I hyper-announced with perhaps a little too much enthusiasm and was not very mindful of my accent. That would warrant a show note from the show manager I figured. My Tucson training had been to look ethnic, not sound it. I couldn't care less about that now. Our eyes locked in that moment and from then on El Único's face followed my every movement. The stage lights dimmed and I disappeared to change into my 50's costume and to check the status of the Federico barometer emblazoned on my chest: redder than ever and temperature seemingly hot to the touch. My condition was worsening but I knew whatever was about to happen to me had everything to do with El Único so I was not afraid. I kissed my fingertips and placed them on the F before tugging a white T-shirt over my head with short sleeves permanently rolled up to expose my dark

arms. I raced back onstage whetting my lips for my first solo. The spotlight streaked my direction and the music provided my introduction. El Único smiled at me as though he were relieved to see me again. I opened my mouth but no sound came out of it; no notes, no silly American words, nothing. Fortunately, the dancers in front of me kept dancing, the band kept playing and the spotlight operator had enough sense to kill the light. I had wanted to establish contact with El Único and giving him my first solo of the evening was to be my way of saying, I'm here. Watch me, hear me, want me, have me. But instead, I said and I sang nothing. With the spotlight diverted elsewhere, I ran off stage with the dancers. In the costume quick-change room backstage, I had started to change into my disco duds for the next dance number when another dancer asked what had happened to my solo. I lied and told him the microphone wasn't working. It seemed plausible. It had happened before to others. We were an amateur operation. With my shirt off and turned away from the others, I noticed that the F on my torso had turned bright red and perspiration had begun collecting just there. As a thoroughly trained though somewhat reluctant Catholic, I supposed I should have been more alarmed by what was beginning to look and act like stigmata but I was in a hurry to get back onstage to recover the mission I had just jeopardized. I watched El Único from behind the speaker stack, waiting for my cue to strut on stage with the other dancers. I checked my satin white shirt to make sure I hadn't started spotting all over the front of it and took a giant gulp of air before bounding onstage.

The first half of the show was over too quickly but luckily I had been able to recover my talents and stage presence in spite of my nerves and an overactive birthmark. Oh. That's how I explained the F. Since Tucson, I had received questions from other cast mates about my unusual markings. Calling Father Federico's gift a birthmark, considering the circumstances, seemed appropriate.

I splashed water on my face from the drinking fountain and checked my teeth in the changing-room mirror. It was time to meet El Único and touch his skin for the first time. I would revel in the handshake making it last as long as I could endure the sensation without toppling over in a dead faint. I walked into the gymnasium. Two teenage girls that had been waiting to ambush me for my autograph jumped from behind the speaker stack. I used the diversion to disguise the beeline I had begun across the gymnasium floor. I sensed and then caught El Único watching me. It was a delightfully engaging three or four minutes. He didn't look away but smiled at me with a wink that caused my heart to quicken. I smiled back while misspelling my own name. The girls giggled and I'm sure I blushed. El Único's father must have been in the bathroom or outside smoking a cigarette. It didn't matter to me. What mattered was reaching El Único in time to have him to myself in the short span of a twenty-minute intermission before the second half of the show. I left the girls deciphering my writing and the instantaneous crush they'd formed on me. In a few more steps, I was intercepted by the director, Juan-Luis, who told me

he thought I might consider performing to the other 799 people in the Payette High School Gymnasium too. I asked him what he meant by that though I already knew. Certain that I had understood him perfectly, he gave me a stern smile and patted me low on the back. It was a reprimand borne out of jealousy I was sure. In this delay, a girl from the cast named Kathy had approached El Único. He spoke with her cordially, all the time watching me. Juan-Luis, intent on detaining me, went on to mention that he had just spoken to my host father the mayor of Payette and told him that he needed me to work with him after the show on the tour schedule. I doubted if this were true but I agreed with him just to get away. He had already tried this same stunt several cities before and the whole time asked me questions about my feelings for men verses women. I didn't trust Juan-Luis and I certainly didn't like him in the way he hoped I would.

"I suppose I should mingle," I offered and then continued my journey across the gymnasium toward El Único. I'd always found Kathy nice enough haven ridden on the bus next to her once or twice but at the moment, as she was monopolizing the one thing I wanted to myself, I wanted her dead. Okay, maybe not cut-into-pieces-dead, but dead just the same. I finally reached the two of them and at that moment the gymnasium lights flashed on and off signaling the end of the intermission. I wanted to scream in exasperation. Across the gym by the large double doors I could see Juan-Luis with his hand on the light switches. Even from where I was standing, I could detect a slight grin on the director's Mexican face. I suspected Kathy had lost herself in the deep

green eyes of El Único and had forgotten she had to change into a very complicated traditional costume from Poland for the International segment of the show coming up next. With my reminder, she excused herself in haste. El Único's father returned on cue and before I had a chance to introduce myself to his son, he was shaking my hand and congratulating me on a fine job of things. I thanked him graciously and expressed how happy I was that he was enjoying the show. Standing next to El Único and still not speaking with him, I thought the two of us might explode at the same time leaving quite a mess on the gymnasium floor. The lights flashed again.

"That's my cue," I told them both. I turned to El Único as his father took his seat. "My name is Armando," I told him with a most tentative smile. At last we shook hands and felt each other's skin and each other's strength. He told me his name and in that moment, I understood the universe. Needless to say, that moment passed and I have been confused ever since.

I raced backstage just in time for the band to begin the second half of the show. Almost without stopping I was onstage and dancing a very demanding dance with five other dancers. That first number following intermission allowed me to showcase my dancing talents and I always enjoyed showing off my training. Strangely, my jumps and leaps were higher than normal which threatened my timing but I knew the reason for this and managed to keep connected to the stage, the front row and the choreography. El Único's face showed his enthusiasm for performing. He seemed bound to the audience by

one thin cord of restraint and I knew by watching him that his turn in the circus was at hand.

At one point, several songs later, I realized that my time with El Único was limited to the few songs remaining in the show and the hour or two that followed every performance when half the cast packed away the equipment into the truck and the other half auditioned prospective talent like El Único. It was my night to work auditions.

The second half of the show went by much too quickly and the last song of the evening was up next. Waiting backstage for the musical introduction for my final solo, I grew anxious as usual. I blew breath down the front of my blue and white show shirt that I had snapped on and off at least a dozen times during the course of the two hour show. I could not seem to cool the F emblazoned there and wondered how many more degrees I had to reach before I blistered or my skin began to tear inside my costume. The first slow notes of the most important song in the show heralded my entrance onstage. The cast shuffled quietly into place behind me in the dark as I walked toward El Único and began my story. This time, words and sounds came from my body just as though Father Federico had placed his hand on my stomach to support my diaphragm. During the second verse, the cast cooed a chorus of ooh's and aaah's as the song rumbled out of my body to stir the audience in their seats. Even before I had finished the last notes the cast had begun a crescendo of ascending modulations and El Único and the rest of the Payette audience was on their feet

with applause. I could not contain my pleasure and holding the last note, the band and full chorus at bay until my lungs finally gave in, a smile began to spread across my face as a tear of endurance left my eye. El Único cheered as I lead the bows. My smile had collapsed into a fit of silent giggles. I had pleased him and he was moved. Automatically, the cast moved into an encore medley to recap the moments of the show. The audience remained standing and clapping. We were the biggest thing to ever come to Payette, Idaho and Payette, Idaho, I had a feeling, might still turn out to be the biggest thing to ever happen to me.

After the show was over and the lights came on in the gymnasium, El Único walked up to me. Feeling entirely over-demonstrative, my arms flew open for an embrace and as naturally as though we'd known each other all our lives, El Único walked into my arms and squeezed me tightly. He didn't pat me on the back as one might have suspected and he didn't rock uncomfortably back and forth. Solid as the trunk of a tree he stood there and his strength was constant and sure. I had earned that embrace just as surely as I had eared the audience ovation and I delighted in them both. I was beaming ridiculously but behind my grin I was studying every feature about this man from Idaho and I recorded every detail from eye color to hand size in my brain as though it were a library catalogue I would be researching later. I'm certain a full minute had passed before he pulled back but I didn't let go. Even more captivating than the greenness of his eyes was the length and thickness of his dark eyelashes that arched like celebratory streamers into space. His long, curly brown hair would

have coaxed an Adonis out of Carravaggio. He was speaking to me now but the words were arriving muffled, drowned out by his own beauty. I was dizzy by our proximity and knew I would have tumbled to the planked gymnasium floor had it not been for his grip on my arms. I might tumble yet and bring him down with me. I was close enough to smell El Único's breath and it was minted. I caught myself looking at his full lips with such longing that I'm sure I blushed. I wanted to take his hand and dash through the crowds and out the gymnasium doors into the harvested potato fields, or whatever they had in Payette and—

“Armando, this is my father, Jerry.”

“It was a spectacular show, —Armando, is it?”

“Yes,” I said, “and thank you very much. I'm pleased you enjoyed it. So you are from Payette, then?”

“No.” El Único answered quickly. “We live three and a half hours north of here in a town called Grangeville, Idaho. My father drove me to Payette to audition for the show. Payette is the closed town to us on your tour, you see.”

“Oh really?” I had to force myself to remember his father was still standing with us. “You think you're ready for this circus then, do you?”

His father answered for him. “I took him to his first show in 1967. He's seen it again twice since and it's all he has ever wanted to pursue.” El Único's father took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Since he turns eighteen next April, it's his decision.” He replaced his glasses on a nose identical to El Único's. “Well then, I suppose it's time for me to take my place in the background and let

you two talk. Again, I must say it was a spectacular show.”

“It was very nice meeting you, Jerry,” I told him. El Único’s father started to say how nice it was meeting me too, but he faltered on purpose before having to come up with my name again on the spot. “Well, I suppose I should get you to the audition coordinator. There is an application you should get started on and I have to change out of this sweaty costume.

El Único licked his full lips to speak. “You were an inspiration to me tonight, Armando. Your voice, your dancing,” he hesitated... “your smile. Everything about you only reinforces the reasons why I am here tonight.”

“You know what you’re doing then?” My age and my maturity obliged me to ask.

“I know what I’m doing,” El Único told me without blinking his eyes. “I just hope I can be half as good at it as you are.”

“We’ll see about that. Come on. I’ll introduce you to Adrienne.” I put my arm around El Único’s surprisingly broad seventeen-year old shoulders and squeezed my fingers into his flesh as I lead him across the floor.

“Gracias por todo,” El Único whispered in my ear as we walked.

“Hablas Español?” I asked him.

“Basta ir tirando.” Enough to get by, he answered me.

“I’m amazed. Tell me, how in—Grangeville, is it, that you can speak Spanish so well?”

“I’ve taken the language as a course all four years in high school and last

year, my family hosted an exchange student from Bolivia. Her name was Delia. She loved to talk and often didn't have time to translate for me. I either figured it out for myself or got left behind scratching my head."

"You spent a lot of time with her?" I was making conversation without really hearing the words or the tone in which I spoke them while wrestling with my sudden jealousy of Delia and anyone in El Único's world that had the opportunity to spend significant blocks of time with him. How I would have loved being the exchange student to teach him Spanish in his bedroom after school. How I would given anything to have more than one night; this night. And that is when it occurred to me that my night with El Único was more than mostly finished. On one hand of the clock ticking against me I had the perpetual inertia of the circus and its mandate to pitch tent in the next town and on the other hand, El Único's father was patiently waiting in the bleachers to whisk his son away from here, away from me. If I grabbed him now, stamped my feet on the ground and refused to let go, it wouldn't seem any sillier than the idea that there was a future for us after this night. This night with El Único was already ending. In a blink of his giant eyelashes, we would all be gone from this place and the gymnasium would be dark and smelly and in the middle of nowhere Idaho again. At that moment I caught a whiff of the diesel fumes from the idling tour truck outside the double doors. Soon, we would all leave this place exactly as we had encountered it. What then was the point?

El Único received his paperwork and I took leave to change into street

clothes before conducting the auditions. I hadn't been gone more than ten minutes but when I returned, Juan-Luis was sitting alone in the bleachers with El Único and they were laughing. I could see that El Único was nervous because he wanted into this circus so badly and wanted to do well in the auditions. I wish I could have whispered into his perfect pointed ears that he had nothing to worry about as long as he kept smiling and flashing his green eyes at Juan-Luis. I wish I could have been in a better position to guarantee his acceptance into the circus but Adrienne had informed me that I had been cut from the audition roster. Payette, Idaho was not to be a huge audition town as it turned out, especially for men possessing talent. I had been given the night off; the last thing in the world I desired.

For the first half hour, I went to sit with El Único's father to answer any questions he had about the circus. Together we stared across the gymnasium to the bleachers opposite us and I personally counted the number of times Juan-Luis found cause to touch, bump or otherwise contact with the physical El Único. It was one of those stupid tests. If he looked up and caught me eye, I would bathe in the redemption of fate. If he didn't, I would drown in the ugly cynicism of it. I said good night to Jerry and walked across the gym toward the tour truck. Juan-Luis had temporarily abandoned El Único in the bleachers to tell me I should still try to get a ride home with the mayor as he wasn't going to have a chance to work on the tour schedule this night after all. I turned to walk away from him when he added that he thought his audition might have to continue at

his hotel room as they would be locking the gymnasium soon. With the force of a wrecking ball slamming into my chest, my lungs passed a critical moment without a breath to inhale or exhale. I turned to see El Único, to read his face to see if this could be true. His head was lowered to avoid my judgmental gaze. El Único wanted into the circus too desperately.

Chapter Three

Caracas, 1980. I'd been back in the Soup Bowl less than 72 hours, my first year in the Circus was not yet finished and I was signing a contract to return

for another tour not because my heart belonged to the stage, not because I'd grown too big for the Soup Bowl but because staying in the three-ring spectacle would be my only chance to see El Único again. I realize this may represent an aspect of the plot to this story that the reader might have preferred I'd outgrown by this point and left behind in Idaho but it has only been one chapter. These things can take years and in the instance of El Único perhaps a lifetime to diminish. I am not a stone. I have a pulse of warm blood and a chamber in my heart for El Único. I now fear I will guard such until my blood flows neither warm nor cold and I have joined the stones of this earth. Until that moment, this plot and I will seek validation, proof and consequence from an optimism that may profit us nothing more than the gravest of disappointments. Whether or not one can ever accept such tragic odds, one must prepare for them. Father Federico taught me this. His memory reminds me still.

I learned in Panama City that El Único had been accepted into the circus and would begin in July in Tucson. I didn't hear this from El Único. My friend Kathy told me. Indeed, I hadn't heard anything from or really about El Único since that night in Idaho. I had written him a few post cards from different places in the months that followed. I had even addressed them to the address he had written on his application, but my pride and to some degree my disdain for what I assumed had transpired in the motel with Juan-Luís that night prevented me from sending them. This assumption had instantly destroyed my respect for the director and we were like drivers in a competitive stockcar race

after that.

I tried to put El Únco behind me and concentrate on the tour's stop in Caracas. We were in the Soup Bowl for three days with only one show to be held in the Poliedro before 20,000 of my countrymen. In addition to my regular duties in the show, I had been given three more songs in a special Venezuelan Medley and most of the emcee narration in the two-hour variety show performance. Not at all surprising in a predominantly American cast of performers, there was not that many Spanish speakers or singers in our group so the few that could carry the show in a language that the audience would understand did. A month before arriving in my hometown, I had suggested to the music director that traveled with us that the cast learn Canto a Caracas. I sang it for her one afternoon and one day on one of our long bus rides, the cast began to improvise the song. The band learned to play it and we rehearsed it over and over between shows and cities. At last it was decided I was to sing it in front of my hometown in the Poliedro. An anxiety that multiplied in the days leading up to this show required Father Federico and a thousand hands to support my stomach and to hold up my giant head which had been growing even faster than my anxiety.

Show time finally arrived. Every relative of mine living and every friend, student and teacher I could think to call in the days leading up were in the audience along with then Presidente Luis Herrera Campins and his wife. I had been waiting for many months to finally demonstrate to my father and mother

why it had been so important for me to be part of this circus. I also wished to settle a long-standing score with Father Federico who I had first suspected of having been displeased by my decision to leave Venezuela. Lately, because I had not sensed his presence since Payette, Idaho, I began to realize there was something more. At first, I wasn't sure what his abandonment was supposed to elicit from me but I was quick to link his last known manifestation with the coincidence of having met El Úncoco on the night the F on my chest turned to fire. In what was to be my first public singing performance since the night of his death, I wanted to hit my mark.

The show had been going so well. After the first moment on stage when I introduced myself, the audience would erupt every time I spoke, sang or danced. I was having the best night of my performance career. I felt like a national sensation. I have not felt this way since, not in my country nor anywhere else.

Offstage, waiting for my entrance to sing Canto a Caracas, Kathy walked up behind me and handed me a post card that had been folded in half. She whispered in my ear that she came across it as she was sorting the cast's mail and thought I might want to have it. I looked at the picture of a giant potato strapped to the flat car of a train. Greetings from Idaho, it read. I turned the card over. It was addressed to Juan-Luvs. I turned to give it back to Kathy thinking she had made a mistake but she had disappeared into the darkness of backstage. I angled the card so it was readable in the lights spilling into the

wings from onstage.

Dear Juan-Luis: I want to thank you for your post cards of encouragement. As you have probably heard by now, I have been accepted and will travel to Tucson in July. If you would be so kind, please pass this news and my best wishes to Armando. I know I make this request in every note I send you but I didn't have the opportunity to say good-bye to Armando after my audition. He was very kind to me and he is a great inspiration as a performer. Thank you Juan-Luis. I'll see you both in Tucson hopefully. At the bottom of the card was El Único's signature. I held his writing to my chest where my heart was beating well beyond its own capacity. I walked to center stage where I was bathed in two or three spotlights. As it had reacted all night, the audience roared and I had to wait almost a minute before being able to speak over them. In Spanish, I told the audience it was perhaps the largest honor of my life to be able to sing the next song to the people of Caracas. Then, with the post card from El Único folded inside the pocket of my show pants, I sang the song that had been written for them seven decades before. Tears rolled from my eyes before the song was finished and the audience jumped to its feet. I had performed it as proudly and as confidently as the day I had launched it over the city from the side of the ;vila. One of the spotlights left me and traveled to the box where El Presidente was clapping enthusiastically. I raised an arm with my palm open to the ceiling of the Poliedro to acknowledge him. I heard shouts of Bravo! normally reserved for opera performances. I lowered my arm, fearing I

may have evoked the memory and the ego of Eva Peron. My hand brushed the pocket in which I'd smuggled the postcard onstage. Leading the bows, I remember thinking it was a shame El Ún∇co had missed the performance of my lifetime. I had no notion then how shortsighted that lamentation would prove to be in the ultimate performance about to be staged.

The Circus left the Soup Bowl on the First of May, almost as quickly as it had pitched its tent, so to speak. No show after could compare to my night in the spotlight at the Poliedro which is why I'm not surprised to this day that I don't remember much of my first tour after we left the Soup Bowl.

A month remained on our tour before the cast, emotionally distraught and worn out after a year on the road and living out of suitcases, dispersed in a place called Huntsville, Alabama. I hitched a ride with some cast mates as far as Houston before renting my own car to complete a two-week sojourn through the Southwest to Tucson. Every mile along this route was deliberate and thought-out weeks in advance. Every mile was an achievement and a necessary step in the preparation. According to my plan, I would arrive in Tucson whole, edified, energized and El Ún∇co would not be able to resist a complete man. I could scarcely resist myself just scheming about it. I sang songs from my childhood with all the windows in the car rolled down as the fence posts and telephone poles blurred past me. Arias and folk songs mixed with the dust to exacerbate the desert heat that lingered to consume me should I slow my speed below 60 MPH. I drank water and fruit juice, ate no food and somehow never felt more

nourished. I detoured onto a dirt road if it interested me. I intentionally left the dirt road a few times because the terrain suggested I should. Telephone poles or the metallic glare of a semi-truck in the distance usually guided me back to my general orientation west but I spent one night sleeping next to a short oil derrick all the night trusting the morning would bring my directional senses back to me. Outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico completely awash in a blue sage sunset, I wandered onto a mesa just as the overture to *Così fan tutte* began in the natural earth bowl just below me at the outdoor Santa Fe Opera House. I lay on my back and watched the stars poke holes through the dusk while an orchestra carried me into an evening most enchanted.

I rolled into a Flagstaff Holiday Inn the next afternoon still so completely overwhelmed by my previous evening with Mozart, blue-tailed lizards and the firmament that I purposely postponed the anticipated elation of the Grand Canyon for the following day. All the while, I had tried not to dwell on the live-or-perish desire that El Úncoco and I be placed in the same cast to spend the next year together. I regularly reminded myself with a bite on my lip that this scenario had but a 25 percent chance of occurring as four casts with four separate tours came out of every summer staging. I figured my returning as a staff member and not just a regular circus performer might possibly sway an all out manipulation of the odds. I also knew one of the casts was slated to do an extensive tour of Mexico in the year to come and given my first language, it reasoned I would be assigned this cast. Thanks to a Bolivian National named

Delia, El Ún∇co happened also to be Spanish speaking which had to raise our tour odds. I so worked myself up spinning the uncertainty of our future into a scenario I could stomach, that I scarcely glanced at the Grand Canyon long enough to spit over the South Rim for good luck before racing south to Tucson. In my desperation, I convinced myself that arriving early gave me more time to befriend those in a position of making such cast allocating decisions. Returning to the Circus held nothing for me if it didn't hold El Ún∇co in the mix.

My staff position was one of public relations. I was to lead advance teams into cities where the Circus was scheduled to appear so that by the time it arrived, tickets were sold and host families were identified to accommodate the cast. It made sense in my perfect world that always being one step ahead of the cast would give El Ún∇co enough growing room to have his own experience while providing us with regular encounters through the year to construct our relationship and subsequent lives together. Father Federico hadn't surfaced, vaporized or otherwise manifested in my life for nearly a year but still I felt his eyes roll when it came to my lofty and groundless romantic machinations.

It was July 6th. Cast members were scheduled to arrive en masse that day from all over the world. I'd been through this very exercise myself just one year before and couldn't help but host this internal debate: was I cheating myself out of moving on with my life by allowing my needle to stay stuck in the same groove? It was about my needle, all right. Most of my decisions after the age of 14, thanks to Rosalita and Father Federico, pertained to my groin and

frankly lacked any measure of objectivity. After all, how could my obsession with El Un∇co hope to rise above the rising of my own barometer in such matters?

I had worked late the night before to clear my responsibilities in order to be everywhere I could imagine a new cast member might appear. I thought about waiting at the Tucson airport for all arrivals from Idaho, I mean how many could there have been, but I knew host families would be on hand, eager to retrieve their assignments for the next six weeks and I didn't want to get messed up in that. I bumped into a new performer from Caracas named Miguel who had auditioned for our circus after the show at the Poliedro. In my estimation he may have known half a dozen words in English so I knew he was going to have a rough start. I found him to be egocentric in the most irritating, youthful way. Besides, I had no desire in striking up a friendship, especially one based on something as occasionally superficial as nationalism. Fortunately, enough division existed naturally between the new performers and those returning in condescending and impatient staff positions that I probably didn't have to worry about that. I do think it bothered both of us a little, maybe a lot, to not be the only exotic, hot-blooded Latin Lover from South America under the Big Top. He was attractive enough with his Latin features topping more than six feet. He'd turn out to be a good dancer, look good onstage and would probably even make the girls scream just like I had in my day but I could honestly say for myself, I had no interest in him. Our conversation was brief. He had asked me for help with his English but before I could answer him he had bounded off to join

another conversation across the room. I knew Miguel's type. Rather than learn English, even a little, he would monopolize his foreignness to his maximum advantage. No doubt several would fall in line and perhaps even in love to assist him in the days and months to come and his popularity would define the Latin legend already mutating in his own mind.

The first day ended without a single sighting of El Unvco and my head ached so prevalingly from searching every room, street and meeting area on campus, I couldn't eat. I went to bed that night fearing his plans had changed and that I'd made the biggest mistake of my life returning to The Circus. The second day, I began making inquiries. I couldn't bring myself to ask Juan-Luvs if he had seen El Unvco. All the performers had been quickly assessed for singing, instrument or dancing talents and placed into group and individual workshops to begin learning the show. I scanned the lists with my finger and held my breath until my heart decided to beat again after I found El Unvco's name on the vocal sheet. This washed over me as one giant wave of relief but I had still not seen him for myself. My mind began to play horrible games with my heart. It tried to convince me I had forgotten what El Unvco looked like, that I couldn't possibly pick him out of a crowd. The second day ended as desolately as the first. That night I had a dream with El Unvco in it and I awoke in a sweat, convinced though somewhat fevered to know I'd never forget his face. The third day, I was scrambling out of the main office doors after checking the host family allocation roster to see in which part of Tucson El Unvco had been

assigned and smack! I ran right into him. The combination of seeing him again and the blow to my chest knocked the air from my lungs. When I pulled back from him, still holding his arms, he realized who I was.

“Armando!” he shrieked with delight.

“I cannot believe it is actually you,” I told him pulling him into an embrace that I sensed neither of us cared to end. There was then a rude clearing of a throat by a bystander and I stepped back. “Miguel?” I asked, surprised I’d remembered the Venezuelan’s name in my state.

“Oh, Armando. I’m sorry, do you know.” El Ún∇co tried to smooth over the introduction only to find one was not necessary.

“Yes, I know,” was all I said. And in one flash I did know. I knew it all. El Ún∇co had fallen for the affected helplessness of a Latin stranger in a foreign land just as I had predicted somebody would. I wanted to scream or explode. My insides kinked in rage but I masked this on the surface with a smile and a shake of Miguel’s hand.

Mira Armando! Hay una problema con mi familia, Miguel introduced his dilemma. There was a problem with his host family he told me. He went on to explain in Spanish that since he arrived the father has been drunk and screaming at everyone in the house. He asked for my help in relocating him to El Ún∇co’s family who had already said they would take him in at once. I could see the desperation in El Ún∇co’s face. I could see he had fallen for Miguel and all the stories he had told him. I could see that if I refused to intervene on their behalf

I would lose El Ún∇co forever, that's if I hadn't lost him already. I went back into the offices and made some phone calls. Miguel would be in El Ún∇co's house, perhaps his bed, that very night. It was at this moment I began to slip into an insanity I had never known. El Ún∇co hugged me. I felt the life was bleeding from me through every pore.

"In a hundred years I won't be able to express how much this means to me," he told me with a tear of joy leaving one eye. I smiled on the outside while it felt my skin was splitting down the long axis of the letter F to expose my entrails to the hot desert sun.

In the days that followed, I saw El Ún∇co everywhere and always with Miguel. It was more than I could take. I'd spent six months constructing a dream with every available scrap of hope I could put my hands on but now I realized I had somehow overlooked the nails to fasten it together. In an instant the dream had come crashing down around me and as long as I was subjected to watching El Ún∇co with someone else, I could not escape the rubble of my own devastation. I asked to be assigned early. In another 48 hours I was in Guadalajara, Mexico. There seemed no point in waiting around for the tour assignments to be made. El Ún∇co had made his selection. Miguel would charm someone else into fixing their cast assignments so they would tour together. Even if he and I were assigned to the same tour now, I'd only remind him of Miguel. Sickly, I wondered if Miguel reminded El Ún∇co of me.

As it turned out, El Ún∇co was placed in a cast of his own destined for

Europe, Miguel in another heading north to Canada, Juan-Lu▽s in the third tour and me in the fourth. Of all the scenarios that could have happened but didn't, I most dreaded the four of us trapped together in the same cast. Having returned to The Circus for one reason and having that reason voided by circumstances beyond my control, I didn't opt for a second semester following Christmas. I flew home to the Soup Bowl from Mexico City in time for the Christmas Eve Mass at Santiago Apóstol. It was the first time my family had attended church together since Father Federico's grand final▷. I was too full of poison and cynicism to get anything out of the service much more out of my system. I was heading into a dark period in my life, perhaps the darkest I'd ever know. Church was the last thing, in this world or the next, that I needed then. I returned to finish my university degree mostly so I wouldn't have to explain the profoundness of this vacancy in my life to anyone. For over a year I didn't sing or dance. I'd be surprised if anyone could produce evidence that I had smiled during this time.

In time, Miguel returned to Caracas and looked me up wanting to talk. I didn't know what I'd say to him but I agreed to meet. Through his need to commiserate, I learned El Ún▽co had quickly recovered from their Tucson fling to partner with another boy in his tour group but now even that had ended. El Ún▽co had returned to Idaho to begin University there. I thought about writing him a letter to let him know I often thought about him but I didn't want to lie to El Ún▽co. The truth was I thought about him constantly and I didn't want to

scare him with that confession either. Miguel seemed to be maintaining correspondence with El Ún∇co so it reasoned to me to maintain casual relations with Miguel regardless of how much his personality annoyed me still.

Two years and counting, I still had authentic, all-consuming pangs for El Ún∇co to the exclusion of any viable option in this life but to wait for him. I was no longer confused or distressed. I had never believed something was more meant to become reality and with this new faith I accepted what I now realize amounted to a vow of celibacy. Having never understood how Father Federico had given up everything for the church I discovered I now had a church of my own and I suddenly understood the sacrifices and devotion of my mentor completely. To know the pure sanctimony of faith without compromise was not only edifying but also extraordinarily numbing for me. I no longer felt the daily pains of this world: the toothaches or headaches or backaches or the aches of unrequited erections. I didn't experience the disappointments or frustrations or depressions that seemed such integral components of those lives around me. By worshipping quietly in my church, I kept a vigilant focus on my objectives. Everything else became incidentally anesthetized.

Late one August afternoon, I wandered into the Santiago Apóstol Basilica on a hunch I would encounter remnants of Father Federico there. I walked to the center of the giant tiled octagon, closed my eyes and tilted my head toward the narrow balcony 100 feet above me. When my eyes opened, sun was streaming through one of the tiny gables in the domed roof. There, in the center

of that celestial sunburst, balanced angelically on the railing, sitting on the backs of his legs with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands like some gargoyle cast in a Mesogothic time, was the silhouette of Father Federico. At once an all boys choir seemed to be singing from the shadows of the nave and then my own voice from its soprano days fell from the dome as though it had been trapped, reverberating around that cavernous space for the past ten years. I collapsed to my knees on the tiles and began to weep without control. I wept not for Father Federico. I wept not for myself. I wept for El Ún∇co who still had this very long journey of awareness and acceptance ahead of him. My calling in this life was to be there at the end, waiting for him. I had been anointed and cursed with this understanding. El Ún∇co would require a revelation in his life before he shared the burden I now carried for both of us. I didn't wish him this revelation before he was ready for it but I did wish me the patience to endure his infancy. When I rubbed my eyes dry, Father Federico was standing on the floor next to me. Without saying a word, he walked me to the doors of the Basilica and watched me walk down the outside steps to the street. It was his way of telling me I could always find him there. I'd somehow known that anyway.

Chapter Four

Maintaining cordial relations with Miguel did not come without its particular set of complications. In 1982, the year that followed his return from the tour, Miguel presumed I had an interest in him because I had suggested more than once that we should get together to share photos and swap stories from our time with The Circus. Of course I wished to edit down this exercise to only those photos and stories involving El Ún∇co but how to tell him that without hurting his feelings and exposing my only motive proved difficult. Finally, Miguel consented, inviting me to his family's home in the predominantly Jewish San Bernadino District of Caracas. Miguel was not Jewish, as the evening soon revealed.

I arrived on time to meet the rest of the members of his family getting into the elevator on their way out of the six-floor building where they lived. Miguel's older sister was competing in the Miss Venezuela contest that night and while I might have enjoyed attending the competition, Miguel had sternly sent his family off without us. Our conversation began in earnest and photos were presented only to be quickly brushed aside once Miguel tired of the pretense. He

brashly confided he had spoken to a surgeon about getting his penis circumcised. The surgery had been scheduled in another few weeks and Miguel wished my opinion in the matter. When I began to admit I had no feelings about it one way or the other, he undid his pants and presented the evidence on the table in a state of semi-arousal.

Look, I told him, this is not my expertise. I can appreciate the decision you have to make, but... He interrupted me by pulling his foreskin back to demonstrate the desired look. He told me all the men in America were cut and he wanted to be like them in every way. I suggested there were other ways he could emulate an ideal without surgery and that there were arguments for being uniquely different from everyone else. He wasn't buying. He was selling. He moved closer and invited me to touch him. I declined even though his proximity and his proposition were beginning to arouse me. I said something like I should be going and he tucked the goods back in his pants and apologized. We maybe talked another fifteen minutes about unrelated topics and I left. He didn't get what he wanted and his sister didn't win the Miss Venezuela pageant. It must have been a very disappointing night for every member of the family.

It didn't take me long to wrap up my university requirements to graduate with a bachelor's degree in humanities. I didn't know yet how I wanted to use my degree or if it would be possible to establish a career in the arts so I took odd jobs and continued to live at home. In Latin America, living in the family home was frankly expected of children well into adulthood or at least until they

married, so in this sense, I was neither odd nor a classic example of a Mamá's Boy. In other matters, such as my post-teen celibacy or my lifelong devotion to a man who probably couldn't identify me in a line-up of people he'd met, there were none odder, I suppose. To seem more normal, I had taken up with a modern dance company at university and I quickly found work to be steady in commercials and television variety shows. It was enough to satisfy my basic consumer requirements. I virtually had no expenses except my clothing and enough gas to keep the Nova in motion. I was, what some might term, low maintenance while others, including my mother and nagging but well-intended sisters, on more than a dozen family occasions, had classified as a monk of the mis-destined order. It sounds much more damning in Spanish when insinuated with Catholic overtones. *Pobre Armando es un cenobita del orden misdestino.* Trust me.

About the time Jaime Lusinchi, the country's first Democratic Action Presidente, prepared to take office, I began moonlighting at a radio station, 1340 on the AM dial. My job was to read the noon news or *Noticias Trece-Cuarenta Especial*, as it was known, in my deepest radio voice. I did some radio commercial spots in my spare time and actually liked the sound of my recorded voice. This evolved into some announcement work for television but when I didn't receive any offers to move in front of the television cameras, I began to develop a self-image complex. After several days of introspection, it was decided: on February 17, my 24th birthday, the Afro had to finally go. The result

was emancipating. The Monk had ears! The downside to this was accepting I was only five feet, ten inches tall but I quickly adjusted. Before long, I had dates too; well, offers of them anyway. Still very much under the spell of El Ún∇co I noted the interest I received from others but I did not act upon it. For the next year, I continued to write letters to El Ún∇co but never had the courage to send them. I am uncertain what difference it would have made as Venezuela has always had one of the most corrupt and inefficient postal services on the planet. I suppose I could have at least had the satisfaction of having sent them and at the same time been completely confident they would never leave the country, but instead, I tucked them inside a box I stored in the back of my closet with my old dance shoes from The Circus. It was the same result in the end, I figured.

I kept my regular appointments with Miguel. He had his operation and in spite of the excruciating pain that followed while the incisions healed, he eagerly offered to show me the results. Curious though I may have been, he respected my affected disinterest. Before long, Miguel seemed to understand I was using him as a conduit for information concerning El Ún∇co and often he would share a letter just received or the details of a telephone call just to get my attention before turning to other topics. I learned through Miguel that El Ún∇co had transferred from Idaho to the University of New Mexico to pursue a degree in Latin American Studies. At the same time, Miguel had landed a job as an international operator for CANTV, the Venezuelan telephone company and bragged about the number of long distance phone calls he was able to make

from work to his friends all over the world from The Circus. He claimed to talk to El Ún∇co two and three times a week and continually promised to arrange a surprise for El Ún∇co by patching me into one of their many conversations, but this never occurred despite many reminders. I asked Miguel about his feelings for El Ún∇co to determine the level of competition between us. Sometimes Miguel would speak longingly about their affair in Tucson and other times he seemed bitter that El Ún∇co had become romantically involved with a dancer from Florida very soon after leaving Tucson. It never figured into Miguel's sense of justification that he too had experienced a number of affairs, as he termed them, with men during his tour. El Ún∇co was always the one who had been unfaithful first. On this technicality, I sided with Miguel even though Miguel was the man with whom El Ún∇co had first been unfaithful to me.

Days before Christmas, 1983, Miguel phoned me from his job in a panic. He had just spoken to El Ún∇co. As Miguel explained it, shortly after arriving home from school for the holidays, doctors in Idaho had discovered a cancer and El Un∇co was going into the hospital for surgery. I know my skin turned white at the news because my mother knocked the soup pot off the stove onto the floor. Later, as she was scooping the abond∇gas back into the pot, she said she was trying to catch me before I collapsed but I did not fall. Miguel asked if he could borrow money from me for a plane ticket to Idaho. I lied and told him I didn't have any savings. I doubt he believed me anyway. It was common knowledge between us that I was working four of five jobs at once. I should

have been the one scrambling for Idaho. I should have been the Latino by El Ún∇co's bedside. Cancer. El Ún∇co was 20 years old. Twenty-year old men didn't get cancer. They got hangovers and maybe body lice in compromising places if they were truly unlucky, but they didn't get cancer. The thought made me itch and I kept on itching too. By the time I went to bed I had nearly scratched the F right off my chest except for the brilliant red and irritated outline that remained. I lay awake trying to come up with my response to this news. I thought to phone El Ún∇co's family in Idaho. I had met his father once. I could talk to him perhaps, —determine if there was something that I could do. I had money. I could be on a jet by morning. No, I argued in my sleep. I didn't have any established premise to be there. Miguel had met El Ún∇co's whole family when they traveled to Tucson for the dress rehearsal that I had missed by leaving early for Guadalajara. El Ún∇co's family, completely enamored with him by his own account, had also driven several hours into Montana to catch one of Miguel's performances when his tour came somewhat close to Idaho. Miguel had premise. He should go to Idaho. I had planned to phone him first thing the following morning to loan him the money his trip would require but when I called, his sister reported their father had already taken him to the airport. My insides were consumed by a jealousy I'd not known since seeing Miguel with El Ún∇co in Tucson two years earlier. Miguel might have suggested that we both go to Idaho. He might have phoned me with details as soon as he'd arrived there. I waited two weeks, then three. To combat my growing insanity, I began

phoning Miguel's family with daily inquiries about his return. At last I phoned and Miguel answered. The situation wasn't good he told me. Then he suggested we meet in person. Coincidentally, his family was going out for the evening. I suspected another of his traps but desperate for news, I drove across the city anyway. Miguel answered the door wearing a tracksuit like he'd just finished running or maybe a game of tennis. He was wearing no shirt and the jacket was unzipped halfway down exposing great tracts of his hairy chest. I tried very hard not to roll my eyes but he struck me as some south-of-the border Tom Jones. We sat at the dinner table. He clasped his hands in full command of the dramatic moment. I wasn't sure I was even breathing I was so anxious for the news he carried. His spirit is high, Miguel leveled with me, but El Ún∇co, according to Miguel and a bunch of doctors, definitely had cancer. The details coming from Miguel across the dining room table reported that El Ún∇co had already endured one surgery that resulted in the loss of his right testicle. A CAT scan soon after seemed to indicate a much larger tumor between El Ún∇co's stomach and backbone, a tumor too large to remove in one surgery. So, my precious El Ún∇co was beginning aggressive chemotherapy in an attempt to shrink the tumor to a more removable size. News delivered, Miguel went on to announce that El Ún∇co seemed very impressed with the results of Miguel's circumcision. Miguel even claimed El Ún∇co put the new, improved C-class unit through a very demanding oral test, though I found this hard to believe, given El Ún∇co's medical challenges and Miguel's predisposition to lie when it suited the

perpetuation of his own legend. Miguel said the two of them exchanged wardrobes, a tradition they had begun in Tucson two years earlier in order to make them feel closer together when wearing each other's clothes, even though they were thousands of miles and half a dozen countries apart. How special for Miguel, I remember thinking, eyeing the tracksuit a second time not willing to believe El Ún∇co would have actually owned something so pretentious. These were intimacies I was meant to share with El Ún∇co. This was a medical crisis to which I should have been responding, not Miguel. I was moving beyond jealousy to resentment and I was not pleased with the development. If I had license to resent anything it should have been my own inability to express what I wanted in life and to whom I wanted it from, namely El Ún∇co. Now he had cancer. My brilliant strategy to wait for him in silence until the moment he came around seemed tragically miscalculated now. El Ún∇co would have to know how I felt about him before it was too late. What was too late, I began to wonder? Losing El Ún∇co before I'd gained him would be too late I decided. I sat down to write him a letter. A dozen or so drafts later, my rambling was reduced to this:

I am a name, a face, and maybe a moment from your past you don't even remember. Through a friend we share, I have learned of your challenge with cancer and this has affected me more deeply than I can explain. I have always remembered you so clearly and so fondly as the smiling young man in the front row at Payette, Idaho. I could see then that you knew what you wanted and

you knew exactly how to get it. Now you must want to get well and I will believe that you know what you have to do. If there is any way I can help you, I want you to know I would be honored if you thought to call upon me. Writing this, I recognize that what you are experiencing is personal just as I know your recovery must also be personal. Still, I remain a friend in waiting if ever you find that is what you need. ·Armando.

Never before had 100 words said less but it was a start. I went through the recent photographs of myself to select the one snapshot that would evoke memory, recovery and surrender all at once. In a pile of 5x7 proofs from a portfolio shoot for the dance company, I found the one shot I felt might work. Taken after the Afro was exorcised, wearing tight gray jeans and a black ribbed T-shirt with short sleeves, propped against a railing in front of the new national theatre under construction, I might have been mistaken for a model. ·A model? Well perhaps if you were squinting in a dark room, say in a desperate mood, the pose wouldn't seem entirely out of place in a magazine spread. At this point in my life, all I wanted to be for El Ún∇co was an inspiration and perhaps a goal. I didn't have to be his boyfriend or his lover, a model or a dancer or a radio news announcer or even a Venezuelan. I would settle for a life without these things if only I could sit a while in El Ún∇co's front row. I didn't know how to communicate this to him except by waiting for him to realize it for himself.

I mailed my letter but received no response. For two or three months,

each night I would ask my parents for my mail with great anticipation until I had to stop asking altogether. The disappointment mounted against me until the very last of my hope was rung out of my heart like the wet towel any prospect for happiness in my life had become. I never mentioned my letter or my depression to Miguel but continued to see him at least once every month for the next year. These meetings always had two things in common and Miguel would occasionally reverse their order to try to catch me off my guard. First, sometimes second, he would ask if I had changed my mind about seeing the results of his now successful and much exhibited circumcision. There were times in my frustration, often late at night when I would be trying to fall asleep in my own bedroom that I would actually consider his offer. Fortunately, this sensation always seemed to have passed before I awoke or saw him in person or I would have certainly lived to regret my desperation. Second, Miguel would toss me a crumb of information from his latest conversation with El Ún∇co. On the inside, I salivated over every detail he fed me no matter how trivial it may have seemed to Miguel as this is what one does when one is relegated to the front row. On the outside, I struggled to appear as though I enjoyed Miguel's company when in truth I didn't like him as a human being.

El Ún∇co ultimately recovered from his cancer. After months of chemotherapy and two surgeries, he had returned to university in New Mexico early in 1985 and had begun to talk about taking a trip to Caracas to celebrate his recovery. Miguel mentioned that his ex-beauty pageant sister, now

entrenched in Caracas television, was trying to get El Ún∇co a walk-on part in the soap opera (we call them telenovelas) she was starring in and Miguel thought this more than anything would solidify El Ún∇co's resolve to travel to the Soup Bowl. I could not contain my emotions in that moment and in fact, excused myself to use the washroom at the other end of the floor Miguel's family home occupied. Behind a closed door, I walked nervously back and forth to release some of the excitement. After six years of devotion to this cause I realized I might finally know the reward of my sacrifice. Looking in the mirror at the smile on my face it was hard to discipline myself. Perhaps I had not sacrificed enough. Maybe I had only pulled back the first skin of life-long devotion only to discover there were a hundred layers to go before I reached the core of all truth. And what if my devotion were for naught and El Ún∇co never came around to realizing what I had done for him, for myself. What if El Ún∇co did not come at all? It wasn't working. I could not talk, rub or scare the smile from my face. There, in the mirror, it smiled back for the first time in many years. El Ún∇co was coming to the Soup Bowl. I punched my fist high into the air above my head.

In the weeks that followed, I vowed to separate and define the characteristics between Miguel and me, more for his education than mine. I knew that only one of us could emerge from the exercise worthy of El Ún∇co's affection. The trick was to excuse Miguel from the contest firmly but definitively. When I tried to distinguish my pining and meditative introspection on self and

life with Miguel's boastful circumcised exploits with nearly every man in Caracas, he became defensive. When I pointed out the notable satisfaction derived from saving myself and improving myself for one mate in this lifetime, Miguel could only scoff. Everything I was, Miguel was made to realize he wasn't. It would have been an unforgivably brutal exercise had I not been so gentle. Then, one afternoon, leaning over the rooftop terrace wall of his building and staring at the people below, Miguel asked if I had feelings for El Ún∇co. I answered yes. He left the terrace.

The next two months were torturous. The glove was on the ground and getting trampled by the two million inhabitants of the Soup Bowl. We both wanted El Un∇co; Miguel because he was bored and me, because I was ready. Strategically, Miguel was in a position to squeeze the pipeline of information surrounding El Ún∇co's movements to a trickle and he squeezed. He refused my phone calls and once when I saw him downtown, he pretended to ignore me even though we were the only two customers in the bank at the time. It didn't matter. I began to prepare. I took a leave of absence from the dance company and vacation time from the radio station so that I would be completely free for two out of the three weeks El Ún∇co would be in Caracas, according to my notes recorded from an earlier conversation with a then more information-wielding Miguel. I wasn't going to take any chances and then I took the biggest chance of all by confronting Miguel outside the CANTEL office where he worked. I told him that I would like to arrange two days with El Un∇co during his visit to take

him out of the city to my favorite beach. This beach, La Cata, is situated three hours over the rim of the Soup Bowl, through the jungle and over the coastal mountains on a primitive dirt road. It is one of the most isolated beaches in the country and by default this isolation makes it one of the most romantic beaches in the world. I wasn't even sure my green Chevy Nova could make it there and back, but it was a journey I had long dreamed of making with El Ún∇co. I was only asking for 48 hours. Miguel told me that would be impossible because El Ún∇co had been given the part in the telenovela and taping was going to be very unpredictable. Miguel said, with clear resentment, that he doubted he'd get any time with El Ún∇co now that his sister had arranged this opportunity. In the middle of feeling sorry for himself Miguel suddenly remembered he was angry with me. He accused me of double-crossing him, of using him to get to El Ún∇co. He told me not to interfere in his relationship with El Ún∇co, that there was a history there. I wanted to say there had been a whole promiscuous history since, too but I closed my teeth and said nothing. Miguel was desperate. I was ready. We were different, I kept reminding myself.

Knowing that El Ún∇co was going to be spending time at the television studio, I scrambled to get back on the dance company line-up. The troupe had a weekly contract to appear as part of the musical opener for a televised variety show. That would give me my excuse, not to mention a stage pass, to be in the studio. I also planned to arrange a chance meeting with Miguel's actress sister. She could reopen the taps on the information pipeline but in the meantime,

becoming friendly with studio staff would only improve my reconnaissance. Within the week, I knew the telenovela was called La Salvaje .the Savage. Miguel's sister was to play an enterprising domestic who was intent on bedding everyone in the master's household. I walked through the set after taping one day and managed to snag a copy of the script. Inside it was a recording schedule and a cast call sheet. I learned El Ún∇co's small role would be that of the American Ambassador's son. I even found in the script where his three lines appeared. Some part. On the call sheet, El Ún∇co was scheduled to shoot his scene in one afternoon two weeks from that day. 'Hardly worth traveling 6,000 miles for if it were not for the chance to see me, I reasoned intelligently. I didn't need Miguel. There was a scientific likelihood I no longer needed oxygen. El Ún∇co was on his way to the Soup Bowl and I was poised to intercept my destiny at last.

Chapter Five

I was at a peak, I determined while staring at my naked body in the full-length mirror in my parent's bathroom. I was fit. I was tanned, not that I could help that. I was confident. I was completely comfortable with my body, with my mind and with my heart. I wasn't competing with Miguel but if I were, I wouldn't have been the smallest bit worried. Last time I saw him he looked fat to me, certainly through his face and around his waist. I knew it was why he had eliminated me from El Únco's planned periphery. All the cosmetic surgery

in the Soup Bowl hadn't changed the fact that Miguel, while cute when he was younger, already in his mid-twenties was not at all aging well. I looked good for someone nearing thirty. I looked so much better than when I was with The Circus, which was the last time El Únco saw me, and it wasn't just the Afro either. I truly was one of those people who got better looking with age and I was more than prepared to revel in it, without becoming conceited of course. I thought a moment about Miguel's circumcision. I wondered if El Únco had expressed a dislike for uncircumcised men. With my fingers, I pulled back my foreskin and tried to nonchalantly model the difference in the mirror. It felt uncomfortable and looked completely unnatural to me. I let the foreskin return. I held my swelling dick against my stomach to examine my balls. They had always seemed small to me, but only in comparison to the size of my penis I supposed, which scarcely seemed to be in proportion to anything else on my body anyway. I was not small in that way. I knew that was what Father Federico had especially liked about me under the robes. He never said as much but he paid his special attention to no other boy in the chorus and there were other good voices too. I turned sideways in the mirror to examine my profile. Now that the Afro was gone and I'd become an adult, I appraised that my dick was my single defining physical characteristic and I was okay with that.

El Únco had arrived, at least by my best calculations. By now, he was one of the meatballs in the Soup Bowl and I concentrated every minute of every hour to find him. It was another week before his casting call at the studio but I

was sure he was in Caracas. I spent hours one night in the green Nova outside the building on Av. Los Proceres where Miguel and his family lived on the sixth floor. I monitored shadows on the ceiling and lights going on and off in the different rooms of Miguel's house. I knew the layout of the family house. I knew Miguel's bedroom window. When the silhouette of a person appeared behind the white rot ironed cage on the window of that bedroom, I was compelled as if by a force beyond the Soup Bowl, to leave the seat of my car, to climb on top of that green roof to watch, to commune and to be closer to that silhouette. A military soldier happened by on the sidewalk just as the roof of the Nova popped under my weight, causing him to jerk his machine gun in my direction. I jumped. The roof popped again. He yelled. I put my hands in the air. The silhouette disappeared.

The following day, I reported to the studio for a dress rehearsal of the opening dance number for the coming Saturday's variety show that was always taped live. I arrived for rehearsal early and left late hoping to bump into Miguel's sister in the many corridors that formed the maze that was Canal 2 or Channel Two Television. She must have been working in a different building that day. The next morning I was at the radio station running through the newssheets, marking the sentences for speed, diction, and pronunciation when I came across the story that would force a complete overhaul of my well-planned strategy. Miguel's sister, a seasoned character actress for Canal 2, was in an early morning car accident on the Cota Mil. After losing control of her white, 2

door Toyota Corolla, the car crossed four lanes of traffic, and careened off the Cota Mil onto a lower surface road before slamming into the rear tire well of a stationary city bus. The actress and her unnamed male passenger were taken to the Clínica Metropolitana with undisclosed injuries. The fate of the popular television and film actress is unknown at this hour. An hour later, when I read this story live on the Noon News, 1340 Especial, I had all the disconnected-ness of a professional radio news anchor. By the sound of my steady voice, I knew nothing of the people I reported about and probably cared even less. Radio did not allow for emotion or interpretation. That was for television and the movies. I left the booth and walked straight to my desk. I had read my final news before a two-week vacation but this reporter wasn't finished. I phoned the Clínica Metropolitana as a news reporter from Radio 1340 Especial, and asked to speak to someone regarding the actress from Canal 2. I was transferred to a spokesman from the television station that could only tell me that the actress and the passenger from the car were still in the hospital undergoing treatment for a variety of injuries. I asked if the passenger could be identified and the spokesman told me the authorities were still working on that. With the high profile that Miguel's sister maintained and the limited social circles she moved in, the chances of her driving around with someone nobody else could identify, seemed pretty slim, I figured. Something in my gut told me El Único was involved. I phoned Miguel but the housekeeper told me everyone was at the hospital. I asked her if El Único had arrived from the United States and she

said of course. On the way home taking the Metro, I thought about going to the hospital but I diverted to the Gran Sabana for an afternoon coffee and a walk down the giant pedestrian avenue of upscale shops that runs through the center of downtown. I needed to carefully think through my options. Even if El Ún∇co had not been the passenger, as a guest of the family, he would surely be at the hospital. Miguel would be there as well and an altercation between us would be guaranteed if I suddenly showed up there. I knew I didn't want to fight with Miguel in front of El Ún∇co so I kept walking. I stopped at a newsstand to skim the headlines. Caracas has a dozen newspapers and maybe two of them legitimate. The others exaggerate the opulence of celebrity in a country of beauty contestants that are sure to turn into actresses and the leading men in their lives who couldn't lead their way out of a one-tunnel subway with all the lights illuminated. It had scarcely been nine hours since the car accident and Miguel's sister was on the front page of four of the newspapers. La Salvaje of Canal 2 en Hospital, La Cota Mil es La Salvaje, Un Actriz y su Novio CRASH! I gathered the four newspapers in my arms and tossed seven thousand Bol∇vares on the countertop. I tried to read as I walked but the Gran Sabana was getting crowded in the mid afternoon sun. I ducked into the Metro and decided to go directly to the television studio. Someone there would have the full story. On the subway, I concentrated on the article that claimed Miguel's sister and her boyfriend were in the car accident. I hadn't known about a boyfriend in her life but I admit to not following her too closely after she'd bombed at the Miss

Venezuela pageant some years back. In Caracas at the time, a group of five young men calling themselves Chóvere had imitated the Puerto Rican original Menudo to become a pop-sensation in South America, well at least Venezuela's corner of South America. Their music was monotonously played on every radio station, including 1340 Especial and they had garnered a significant almost-cult following of the Venezuelan teen crowd. The group was a regular spotlight guest on the Saturday Variety Show at Canal 2. I had been introduced to most of the five in passing. One of the male dancers in my dance troupe named Carlos had been working with them on their choreography for the past year. Carlos seemed very tight with the group and made a point not to gossip about them, which indicated to me he was being paid very well. I didn't have any impression of the boys from Chóvere except that their cultural timing was impeccable and their imitation was authentic. That and maybe four out of five struck me as something other than heterosexual but much of that impression is a credit to the rumor mill that everyone at Canal 2 understood never left the studio. I was in the business myself, more or less, between radio announcing and dancing. What was projected, what was packaged and what was shown to the public often had little to do with the truth and everything to do with the Bolívar, Venezuela's national standard of currency. Chóvere's mass-teen following was undisputed, as was the financial success of the records they released in close succession. Their music didn't appeal to me personally but then I was about fifteen years removed from anything resembling the current fad. The group seemed young to

me, too young to appeal to Miguel's sister who was probably my age, but to each her own, I discounted.

I arrived at the studio to find it in chaos. Everybody was blabbing to everybody in direct contrast to the usually tight-lipped policies surrounding stars, plots and strategy. Talk had it that La Salvaje would need drastic rewrites, that Miguel's sister could be counted out of the cast for weeks, maybe longer. Nobody seemed to be too concerned about Miguel's sister's immediate health but rather delighted in the surge this would have on ratings and the anticipation of the release of the emergency-revised novela. In fact, a team of writers had already been sequestered in a vaulted room somewhere in the complex to work the magic solution that would capitalize on this tragedy. I asked everyone I saw if they knew where I might find Carlos. Carlos was well known around the studio. He had choreographed nearly every number put before a camera in the past ten years. He was mostly credited with the annual stunning achievement of creating the illusion that beauty pageant contestants were natural dancers. Carlos would know or would be able to find out what had happened to Karl, the now-purported boyfriend of Miguel's sister. Carlos wasn't in the studio and nobody seemed to remember seeing him. Then someone remembered. He was in Aruba with Chóvere filming a music video. But then, how could Karl, the group's lead singer, be in a car accident in Caracas with Miguel's sister? I seemed to be the only one asking that question and I realized I was asking it at the wrong place. I left for the Clínica Metropolitana. It was more than a

feeling.

The ten story hospital on a hill, not far from my home in the California Sur District and within view of the dread la Cota Mil freeway, was a testament to the Rómulo Betancourt years in the early Sixties. I only mention it because the government reform-inspired architecture of the period was about as minimalist as you could get and still qualify as a building. Finished in two tones of concrete, presiding over the ill-designed and poorly regulated freeway that kept it in business, the hospital practically bled Third World woes of chronic underdevelopment. Walking through the front doors into reception I became distressed that El Ún∇co might have been exposed to such blandness in a country so alive. If only he had been allowed to experience it with me, everything would have been different. I cursed Miguel's interference. He had no right to delay what was to have been the inevitable union of El Ún∇co and me. No right at all.

I flashed my Canal 2 studio badge at the nurse's station asking for Miguel's celebrity sister. Without hesitating, the duty nurse directed me to the 7th floor as she had likely directed a dozen official-looking television types before me. In the elevator my mind raced to invent an excuse for being there. At the same time, I primped in the chrome to erase the frazzled look I had taken on in my scavenger hunt for the truth through downtown Caracas. If El Ún∇co were in the building, I'd sniff him out like a bloodhound on the scent. Just before the seventh floor, I drew in a long breath, draining the car of all oxygen. The

elevator doors parted to reveal Miguel and his younger brother Julio waiting on the landing. My lungs evicted the breath in a rush that created enough velocity to move the hairs on Julio's head. Miguel, of course, immediately asked what I was doing there. I told him I had been visiting my aunt on the fifth floor who had just had knee surgery when she told me about the car accident. Of course I rushed upstairs the moment I heard. This, incidentally, was not the story I had cooked up in the elevator at all but it was dripping with genuine personal concern for Miguel's family so I stuck with it. Miguel told me his sister was fine and that in all actuality it was the studio that had an interest in making it bigger than it was. Miguel told me he figured I'd understand being in broadcast and television. I nodded my head and rolled my eyes to concur. I asked about the boyfriend who was in the car with her and Miguel and his brother shifted their stances with visible nervousness. Miguel told me Karl had some cuts but that he shouldn't be in the hospital for too long and that both his sister and her boyfriend would probably only be kept for observation for a few days. It was good for ratings, he told me. He was lying about Karl. His brother's averted gaze confirmed it. It was an awkward moment. I'd gotten what I had alleged to have come for and with Miguel and his brother departing, I didn't see how I could stay. I rode the elevator with them as far as the Fifth Floor and then staged an exit to visit more with my make-believe and convalescing aunt. Miguel thanked me for my concern. As soon as the elevator doors separated us, I made for the staircase to return to the 7th floor. I had to know what Miguel had to lie

about. I had to know that I already knew.

From the hallway I could see into the room where Miguel's sister lay propped in a bed, wearing a red T-shirt with the word Aruba in bold white letters. Her giant brown and red hair had been styled to accentuate a neck collar that had been required by her attending doctors. She was sipping something pink from a long straw while talking to others in the room who I could not see. She seemed in unusually good spirits from my observation. This was not someone who had been in a life-harrowing accident. I could not get over her hair that was as big as television required and I could see that she was well made-up, even from the distance where I maintained a degree of incognito. It occurred to me she might appreciate or get a kick out of the celebrity newspapers I carried in my backpack, but I couldn't fabricate the nerve to re-introduce myself under the circumstances. After a few more minutes racked with indecision, I left the 7th floor by elevator. I had not eliminated my theory that El Ún∇co was somewhere in the building but Miguel would not have left the hospital if El Ún∇co were seriously hurt and while he may have lied about Karl, it wasn't likely he lied about the extent of the passenger's injuries. I was satisfied I wouldn't be satisfied so I left the Cl∇nica Metropolitana.

A week passed and the fascination with the car accident eventually dissipated but not before photo spreads of the wrecked car and the neck-collared actress had perpetuated the studio star system in half a dozen full-color, full-horror publications undoubtedly bankrolled by the studio, itself. I saved these

papers and magazines just in case El Únco had not had the chance to capture the hysteria from wherever he was being kept. Miguel's sister repeatedly told the press that Karl was fine and they looked forward to spending some recovery time on Margarita Island once they were released from the hospital by their doctors. I didn't need to revisit the Clínica Metropolitana to know the celebrities hadn't spent 24 hours under a doctor's care, but for some reason, I returned the next day to the 7th floor to find that all trace of the actress and her entourage had been antiseptically removed.

Later that same week, I hung around the studio on the day that El Únco was to have taped his ambassador's son role, according to the original Cast Call Sheet. But by day's end, thumbing through the revised script for the day's shoot, I learned the ambassador's son had been written out and the studio hadn't wasted any time in finding another la salvaje. You had to hand it to our Hollywood-South-of-the-Border. They would never be caught option-less or a beauty queen short of a full pageant. I drove to Miguel's house in San Bernardino and stared at the shadows on the ceiling of their sixth floor flat. Time was running out. Miguel was winning. I can't come up with the words to explain the consuming defeat when a belief-system begins to crumble and the worshiper's faith is no longer sufficient to hold the pieces together. I drove home through the bottom of the Soup Bowl though I had no incentive to do so. I would have invented the motivation to run up the side of the Avila to sing my lungs out if I thought it would change anything but it was clear I had passed my

peak and missed my chance to prove my devotion to anyone, most importantly to myself.

With my parents at a symphony concert, I had the house to myself but as usual I never utilized more than my bedroom's worth of space. I gathered candles from all over the house and lit them in a dozen separate processions to my bedroom. I could think of no music sweeter than silence to commemorate the depression that was waiting on the doorstep of my resolve. I had failed to believe. I had failed to persevere. I had failed my honor and failed my life's purpose. I took off my shirt in the candlelight. I didn't deserve the monogram Father Federico had bestowed on my chest and yet it maintained a pulse and a glow and it exuded a discernable heat of promise that defied the desperation in which I found myself wanting to wallow. From the beginning, according to my intelligence, El Ún∇co was only ever coming to the Soup Bowl for a visit of three weeks and by my best accounting of time, from his perceived arrival date to that moment, I had to be on the verge of expiration of all opportunity, real and imagined. Sitting with my legs crossed on my bed, I took one of the candles and gingerly dripped wax on my chest and stomach until the letter "F" was encased, imprisoned in paraffin. I wanted to shock the spirit of Father Fedrico, to serve him notice that I was demolishing my belief system. I was shutting down my faith and replacing it with ice-cold cynicism. I shut my eyes, mostly because I was too feeling too much a coward to keep them open. I patiently coaxed my lungs to rest, my heart to pause. I didn't discourage the anger that was building

inside me and I didn't really mean to direct it at Father Federico or Miguel, but that was what I was doing. I began to concentrate my way into a more peaceful realm. The dried wax was gently pulling at my skin as I slipped into a meditation more profound than I ever remembered achieving. When I emerged some minutes later, the phone in my bedroom was ringing and the wax on the "F" had melted and trickled down both sides of my body. I picked up the phone. It was Miguel. In a desperate whisper Miguel explained he was phoning from his parent's room and that a going away party was underway for El Ún∇co. He admitted that El Ún∇co visit had been a disaster from the moment he arrived to the car accident with his sister right up to this, the eve of his departure. Miguel told me his attempt to rekindle the romance they had once shared had failed. He said that the controls he had placed on El Ún∇co's visit had backfired and had disastrously turned El Ún∇co against him. He confessed that on several occasions, El Ún∇co had inquired about me and asked for Miguel's assistance in contacting me but that he had not helped him out of jealousy and his rage from having been rejected. Then, to my further amazement, Miguel begged me to come to his house, to attend the going away party so that El Ún∇co would not leave in the morning never to speak to him again. I realized that five minutes had passed and I had not said one word during his oratory. Suddenly I didn't know if I was even capable of words. I cleared my throat. Miguel waited for my response. I could not formulate one. Half in my trance, half in shock, candle wax dripping everywhere, I stuttered. Miguel pleaded. Of course I told him I'd

be there as quickly as I could.

I leapt to my closet and grabbed the khaki pants and the faded yellow button down shirt that I had kept ironed for just such an occasion for the past three weeks. In minutes, I'd extinguished the candles, re-achieved my faith and my peak and was on my way across town in the green Nova. I arrived in San Bernardino to find a parking place directly in front of the building where Miguel's family lived. I touched the "F" on my chest in gratitude and knocked a piece of wax from my skin where it was then trapped inside my tucked-in shirt. In the rearview mirror, I practiced smiling again, checking my teeth and hair one last time. I walked to the entrance of the building that was normally an obstacle course of intercoms and wrought iron gates but found that for Miguel's party, security had been circumvented. I boarded the elevator and my heart began thumping madly. As the elevator ascended I actually grew concerned that with my heart beating faster and faster and if I didn't relax, I could pull a Father Federico and expire just as I finally reached the good part. I tried breathing deeper but that gave me the nervous giggles. Even before the elevator doors opened, I heard music and voices coming from the party. I slipped through the front door as Karl, Miguel's sister's purported and unscratched boyfriend, was leaving. I recognized him from the studio. He said hello to me in a manner that suggested he was interested in me beyond common courtesies but I could only smile. I made my way around the perimeter of the sizeable crowd crammed into a not-so-sizeable apartment living room. I didn't see El Ún∇co or Miguel at first

and I took advantage of this calm before an emotional storm. I passed by a mirror in the dining room and nervously attended to my hair without trying to be obvious about it. There, in the mirror, after running one hand through my hair, I saw him at the precise moment he saw my reflection in the same mirror. I turned around to locate him in the room and realized the crowd had separated down the middle of the apartment, almost as if biblically choreographed to do so, and we were left facing each other. In that instant, the room fell into a silence and nobody flinched. A glaze of tears coated El Ún∇co's moss green eyes to multiply the reflection of lights in the room until they seemed to replace all the stars in the sky above the Soup Bowl. He was wearing a turquoise blue polo shirt tucked into tight white pants that seemed to be made from the material of a parachute. A blush rose into his cheeks to reveal his Anglo ancestry despite a remarkably well-maintained Caribbean tan. I must have smiled showing every tooth in my head because I instantly felt silly, vulnerable and suddenly struggling to recapture some composure. Latinos don't like giving away everything with one look and always keep a reserve to manipulate circumstances to their advantage. I was in the same room with El Ún∇co. There was no other advantage to be had. We took steps toward each other. My arms extended. El Ún∇co rushed into them and we each squeezed the other until we were certain it wasn't a mirage. The moment may have been a minute and it might have lasted an hour but while El Ún∇co was in my arms, he wasn't boarding a plane and he wasn't someplace else. The duration of that moment would be whatever my

recollection required of it. Three years from now, perhaps when I hadn't seen El Ún∇co or heard from him again, this one moment would be remembered as having been no less than thirty solid minutes. A decade into my celibate and faithful future, maybe this moment would have lasted a few days. And when I reached my rocky end, just as Father Federico had found his on the railing of a narrow balcony high up in the Basilica dome, this moment would be my eternity. If devotion had its reward, this moment would forever be mine.

I couldn't help burying my nose in El Ún∇co neck where the scent of coconut, most likely from the sun balm he must have been marinating in, gave me every indication he might be entirely edible. Our contact was beginning to mutate sexually for me and I worried that my lack of social experience would manifest in some public scandal. Already, inside my carefully chosen clothing, wherever there had been a chard of wax trapped in my haste to dress had become molten again. Looking down at my shoes and the black tiles beneath our feet, I could see where the hot wax was finding an exit to dot the floor where we stood, just as Father Federico's semen had once consummated the moment we once shared for which he had been waiting for much of his life. With my hands on El Ún∇co's arms, I moved him a few inches away from my body, fearful that I would burn him or scar him or that he would sense the erection he had provoked. With my face millimeters from his and my minted breath fogging the eyeballs in both our heads, I thought I would kiss El Ún∇co for the first time. Fortunately, I thought again and remembered the fifty or sixty

people still waiting in suspended animation all around us. I licked my lips in consolation.

“Can I take you away from here for a moment?” I asked, staring at his lips.

“How long is a moment?” El Ún∇co asked seductively.

“Thirty minutes? A few days? Eternity?” I told him and El Ún∇co smiled.

Leading him by his elbow, we left the room for the hallway and the elevator beyond. I depressed the button with my shoulder, my hands still engaged. I was afraid to let go of my mirage, even for a second, out of a real fear it would dissipate before my eyes. The elevator doors parted to reveal my friend Carlos in the arms and lips of another guest from the party. I recognized the second man and wasn't the least bit surprised. El Ún∇co and Carlos exchanged familiar words, mostly reprimanding the other for being unfaithful, and then the couple surrendered the elevator to us. Inside, with the doors closed, we didn't hesitate to embrace a second time.

“I have wanted to make contact with you for three weeks, and now, on the last night of my visit to Caracas, you appear from no where.” El Ún∇co whispered, his breath so warm it tickled the tiny hairs inside my ear. I smiled, nuzzling his neck and scratching my ear at the same time. I pulled back so that my eyes could see his face but El Ún∇co was not letting go of me. As he spoke, I found it impossible to break the gaze I had transfixed on his puffy lips. “I didn't remember your last name,” he told me. “You know, I even called my

sister in Idaho collect," El Ún∇co chuckled. "I asked her to find the record album you signed for me that night after the show in Payette, but she couldn't find it in my boxes and boxes of things." El Ún∇co was talking to me. Those were his lips moving and it was his body pressing against mine in all of the essential places. All I could do was smile, stare at his mouth and remind myself to keep breathing. When I couldn't say any words back to him, he smiled and prompted me with a "what?" I smiled even bigger. His face moved into mine and his lips proceeded to engulf the smile I could not remove from my face. He pulled me even tighter. We were both quaking in the uncertainty of the moment that was becoming more certain by the second. I had spent five years pondering questions that were suddenly being answered so quickly that I couldn't compute them. El Ún∇co liked me. He seemed to find me attractive. He had been thinking about me. He had tried to contact me. El Ún∇co was kissing me! And that's when I lost the ability to think or do anything but quake. With a jerk, the elevator doors bounced open causing both of us to jump apart. It was too late, Miguel's sister's boyfriend, Karl and his companion, had already seen us kissing. They pushed past us into the elevator as we stepped onto the landing. Karl grabbed El Ún∇co by the crotch.

"I thought you said you weren't like that, marícon!" Karl launched spittle into the air as he struggled with his English. El Ún∇co shoved the pop singer past us into the elevator.

"Not for you, I'm not." El Ún∇co brushed his hands over his parachute

pants as the elevator doors sealed us from his attacker. I could see under the sheer fabric of his pants that El Ún∇co had been just as aroused by our elevator ride, as I'd become. I was incensed that Karl had grabbed him there but I could tell by the whiteness of El Ún∇co's face that he was even angrier than I.

"I'm sorry about that," El Un∇co told me. "Karl is, uh—I suppose Karl is angry with me because I refused an offer he made me a few weeks ago."

"And that offer was what?" It was none of my business but my jealousy couldn't be told that.

El Ún∇co led me out of the building. "Karl assumed he was so desirable that I was dying to sleep with him just like everyone else was. I told him he was mistaken and that I wasn't, you know—gay." El Ún∇co took my hand and held it in his as we walked along the street. "Now that he has seen us together, he probably just realizes I was lying to him."

I became panicked. Men didn't hold hands on the streets of Caracas where soldiers still carried semi-automatic machine guns and as much as I didn't want to care about anything else in the world at that moment, as much as I'd promised myself I wouldn't let anything diminish one moment in El Ún∇co's presence, I quickly maneuvered us toward my car. His grip was assured, confident and deliberate all at once. Like El Ún∇co, I'm sure, I feared actually letting go of his hand as much as I feared being caught holding it. I expected El Ún∇co thoughts to be scattered. Maybe he was even drunk. It was his going away party after all. But to my delight, El Ún∇co was so intensely focused on

me it was frightening. After tucking him inside the green Nova, I walked behind the car to enter the driver's door, shaking the dried wax out the bottom of my pant legs. A smile returned to my astonished face and I began to gather control. I hopped in beside El Ún∇co and instantly contorted my body in the bucket seat to face him.

"Who's this?" El Ún∇co respectfully touched the photograph taped to my dashboard, inquiring with a voice that cared and not one that distrusted.

I extended my finger to touch the photograph next to El Ún∇co's finger before taking his hand into my own. "That is Father Federico. He was my best friend when I was much younger. Now he is my own personal saint." With my other hand, I gently crossed myself having just realized that my personal saint had just delivered my lifelong wish. With an angelic face that had paralyzed in genuine awe, and with a tear clearly assembling on his long and curled eyelashes, El Ún∇co surrendered his faith into my safekeeping. In that moment I knew what he knew and El Ún∇co saw the depth and breadth of my soul because I willingly showed it to him. There was total trust between us. His face moved into mine and we resumed kissing. I found his touch and his taste so completely overwhelming that I took his hand and formed his palm and fingers around the erection in my pants. I want to believe I have no idea why I did this and yet I know that it was a response and my declaration that El Ún∇co moved me, had always moved me and I wanted him to know this and feel it too. He squeezed his hand with a man's pressure. I thought I could pass out from the

sensation. I stared into his pea soup colored eyes with tiny specks of bacon floating on top and I lost myself. It was the assurance of his grip that told me El Ún∇co could bring me back from the precipice, if he wanted to and if I would let him. He reached for my hand and guided it toward his chest, dragging it across his flat stomach and only slightly hesitating before introducing it to a declaration of his own. Our tongues plunged deeper into each other's mouths trying to lick the smooth surface of our suddenly tangible and interconnected souls. The windows of the green Nova began to fog. I wanted to drive El Ún∇co into the jungle and disappear with him there. I sensed he might have cooperated, forfeiting the life that waited for him in New Mexico, but instead El Ún∇co cleared his throat to speak.

"Armando." He stopped to touch my face with the hand he'd just removed from my pants. "This is not the way I wanted our reunion to happen. I had imagined it to be on our own terms." El Ún∇co's lips brushed my own. I opened my mouth slightly thinking we were going to continue what had at last started between us, when El Ún∇co pulled back. "I have to return inside to my party to show respect to Miguel and to his family. Can you understand this?" Our faces were almost too close to allow my eyes to focus and his words were suddenly too sharp to have not drawn blood. Our reunion had not lasted more than five minutes but there I sat, nodding my head, hoping not to shake the tears of disappointment from my eyes where they formed.

"Of course I understand." I said the words, biting my lip and suddenly

realized why my mother had to sometimes lie. I released my hand from El Ún∇co's white parachute pants.

“Watch over Armando for me, Father Federico” El Un∇co whispered, placing a kiss on the end of his finger and extending it first to the photograph and then to my lips where it surely blistered. El Un∇co reached for the door handle.

“Wait!” I didn’t know how I could detain him and yet I owed it to the gods presiding over the Soup Bowl and to my evaporating vow of celibacy to try. My eyes searched for an excuse. I spotted a crumpled envelope wedged between the seats. I reached for it, verified that it had my address on the front and I offered it to El Ún∇co. “We should work on becoming less strangers and better friends.”

“I promise.” El Ún∇co said, receiving the envelope and holding it to his chest. “You could come back inside and rejoin the party with me,” he offered as a consolation.

“I don’t think I am able to walk,” I confided. With that I meant to imply I had been completely slain by the fortuitous though brief encounter. El Ún∇co grabbed the erection inside my pants for a final squeeze.

“I don’t see why not. You have three legs.” He smiled devilishly before leaning into me hard for a last kiss. My arms wrapped around him as my brain scrambled to record every detail and every sensation in that instant. Then the car door opened and closed as El Ún∇co blended back into the night. I had the

feeling the meatballs would turn to dust in the bottom of the Soup Bowl before I experienced pain and elation in such equally devastating measurements again. Then I had no feeling at all.

Chapter Six

Weeks followed, as time often will in a void, haplessly leeching every optimistic nutrient from the latest entry in my tiny catalog of physical moments spent with my intended, El Ún∇co. With nothing to nourish this memory, its ribcage began to show once again and its cheeks caved-in to reveal the true emaciation of the most flimsy of fantasies. Soon, all earthly substance had been picked clean by a momentary lapse in faith and once again the rattling bones of my life's sacrifice began to taunt me horrifically. This must be my test! I screamed into my pillow one night after the contents of the day's mail revealed what would have otherwise been the very brink of my personal apocalypse. There, in my father's outstretched hand, was the letter I had sent to El Ún∇co at his university in New Mexico. The letter had been returned marked undeliverable. It had been two months since El Ún∇co had slipped over the rim

of the Soup Bowl. The only way I could reconcile all that I had missed by waiting, by believing-for nothing, in nothing all those years, was by becoming bolder, even more resolved in my devotion. I had sent the carefully hand panned letter after a full month of deliberation, to at long last tell him how I felt about him. Much of my anxiety in that last month had come from a fear El Únco had received the letter and hadn't been able to stop laughing long enough to let me know how much he had appreciated the joke. I had regretted posting the letter within seconds of it leaving my hands and yet there it was in my hands again. I didn't need to open the envelope to remember what I had written. The contents of that four-page letter were as familiar as my daily prayer to Saint Federico, as obvious as the air I breathe and as sure as the time that passes without understanding. I live convinced that I am a modern day Job and this certainly must be my test.

Because things never changed in the Soup Bowl, I continued dancing for television and commercials and of course, to pay the bills, which I had virtually none of, I reported daily to my primary job in radio announcing. My sister Nieves had a baby girl late in 1985 making me an uncle for the first time. It was nice to have the family's attention focused somewhere other than why, at the age of 27, the eldest son was still living at home.

The following year, 1986, marked my third of what was to be six seasons with Noticias 1340 Especial as the daily news anchor. And from the news desk that year, I reported in what others had called my sinfully deep voice that

President Jaime Lusinchi managed to hold onto power in Venezuela's capitol city slowly coaxing back international investment and increasingly moving toward industrial diversification. Eventually when the economy wasn't improving as much as he'd forecast he partially devalued the Venezuelan Bolívar. Even that did little more than soften the impact of external forces conspiring beyond his control. Miguel had been fired from his telecommunications job as an international operator after it was discovered where the company's profits were really going and suddenly he embarked on a giant travelling spree through Europe and the United States. Miguel's sister's boyfriend Karl quit the boy band and moved with his mother to Sarasota, Florida. Miguel's sister married the father of her unborn child three weeks before giving birth. My oldest sister, Magaly, had a blue-eyed baby boy they named Carlos-Jesus. My living at home was becoming yesterday's news.

I hadn't heard one word from or about the object of my life's affection in over two and a half years when at last I received a photo Christmas Card from El Únco on my thirtieth birthday in February 1987. It had been mailed to me from a new address in New Mexico long before Christmas but like most things, the delivery of mail in my country had been deteriorating under the Democratic Action Party who struggled to prop up the economy by slashing the budgets of essential services. I placed his Christmas card on the wall above the desk in my bedroom with four gold pins next to a photo of Father Federico and me and a plastic sandwich bag containing some pubic hairs encase in dried candle wax.

Don't ask. The shrine was growing while my faith was shrinking. Still, I prayed. That's what Catholics do, even the very bad ones who hadn't been to church since Father Federico's funeral. In the color photograph, El Ún∇co was pictured dressed in a sweater and jeans with a half smile, squinting into the sun while sitting on top of a wooden ladder at the entrance to what looked like an adobe cave in the side of a cliff. There was no letter but he had signed the card To Armando with love. I imagined a trace of sweat on the back of El Ún∇co's neck that I could press my lips against to receive all the liquid my earthly body would ever require. I also imagined that inside that adobe cave, I was laying naked on top of some furry animal skin, growing impatient with a lover who was much delayed. I itch from the thought of that animal skin even now.

Back to the news desk at Noticias 1340 Especial. By the middle of 1988, when oil prices worldwide had taken a sharp drop and had effectively cut Venezuela's government income in half, Presidente Lusinci's own Democratic Action Party staged a leadership vote that ousted Lusinci and returned former president Carlos Andrés Pérez to the head of government. While it appeared to many to be nothing more than a power struggle, it still marked the first time since I was born that the governing political party had held onto the presidency in a democratic election without assassinating or being wiped out by the opposition. I celebrated my 1000th news broadcast that season and was also featured quite prominently, along with 20 other dancers, in a one minute Pepsi-cola television commercial. I worried, at thirty, that this might have been the Big

Time as far as it concerned me and I had hit it vaulting stag leaps around an oversized soft drink bottle.

I turned 31 years old in 1988. I was as old as Jesus Christ and Father Federico when they died. I had thought about forwarding my three-year old, tear-stained confessional letter to El Ún∇co's new Denver, Colorado address according to the envelope that contained his latest photo Christmas card, this time pictured with another man at his side. Once again there had been no letter, no explanation, only the now-familiar and hastily inscribed salutation To Armando with Love. Instead of sending an outdated love letter (even though my circumstances and feelings hadn't changed I had to concede that perhaps the rest of the world had) I decided to do battle by selecting a photo of me. Maybe El Ún∇co just needed reminding, though with a man at his side, chances were he didn't need anything. Still, the hunt for the perfect photograph began rather frantically. I gathered every photo I could find in my parent's house and even snatched a Polaroid candidate off one of my co-worker's bulletin boards at the radio station. When the perfect picture didn't emerge and when the mock beauty pageant I kept staging on my bedspread with any combination of five new finalists each night failed to crown a winner, I phoned a professional photographer I'd met once during a photo shoot for the dance company. Embarrassed that perhaps I wouldn't be perceived attractive enough to warrant the pretense I was using, I asked if he would shoot a modeling portfolio for me. He seemed eager for the job, almost too eager in hindsight, but as I was eager

myself to make a photographic impression on El Únco, we set the date, I picked my clothes.

The night before the photo session and out of the blue, Miguel phoned. He said he had to see me. We made arrangements to meet in the lobby of the Hotel Tamanaco. I suggested the location because it seemed to be precisely in the middle between our two homes and because I wanted to scout the environs for my photo shoot, perhaps poolside I was thinking, though I hadn't decided just how obviously pathetic or Caribbean I wanted to appear.

I had waited for Miguel an easy thirty minutes beyond the time we had agreed to meet and finally, I had started to walk out the doors of the hotel to my car when I saw him smoking a cigarette outside the Pan Am Ticket Office. I yelled at him and he threw up his hands as though he'd been waiting for me. The night was particularly cool, not because Miguel was smoking cigarettes and leaning against an alabaster pillar but because a breeze had swooped down the slopes of the Avila to refrigerate the ab:ndigas in the bottom of the Soup Bowl. He certainly didn't look refreshed after his world tour. In fact, he looked like shit. I shook his hand. We weren't nearly close enough for an embrace. A handshake felt altogether impersonal between men who had shared men but an embrace would have seemed even more uncomfortable and what's more, forced. Miguel didn't waste any time in telling me that his doctor had told him he had AIDS. AIDS. Wow. I didn't know what to say. I'd not known anyone personally who had the disease though I'd heard about and even reported it myself on the

news. I had maybe seen it mentioned on the posters inside the Metro car on the way to work, but I hadn't actually seen it up close to shake its hand, anyway. Wow, I think I eventually said. My next utterance was undoubtedly, How? which couldn't have possibly been more irrelevant given the irreversibility of it all. He told me he had slept with many people in his travels but that there had been a male prostitute in New Orleans that had insisted on having anal intercourse. Evidenced by his own confessions, Miguel had test driven the tread on his circumcision around several hundred blocks and the news of the disease hadn't come as a surprise as much as it came like a bald and deflated tire. It's not to say he wasn't terrified. His brown eyes twitched and blinked to hold back gallons of HIV-infected tears and the trembling of the cigarette as it raised and lowered in jerks from his chapped mouth, revealed his state. I went suddenly flush. This news was going to require an embrace. It was 1988 in South America. I didn't know how to embrace a man with AIDS. As far as I knew, there had to be less than a dozen cases on the entire continent. In my own celibacy, which in this age, five maybe six years into a world epidemic, was ignorance in its most dangerous form, I didn't know how the disease traveled between people. My sister Nieves had just had a baby girl. My older sisters Magaly and Nieves were both pregnant and expecting within a month of each other. Why my concern went immediately to the unborn children, the only true innocents, when they weren't even there outside that Pan Am ticket office, was the rationale of a panicked man. The blue glow of the sign above us made Miguel's face appear

more sunken than it probably was. My words came out terribly awkward but I told Miguel I would see what I could do about finding him some help and then I left hastily for my car without hugging the man.

Coincidentally from the news desk at Noticias 1340 Especial the next day, The World Health Organization establishes its Global Programme on AIDS to deal with the pandemic. The disease has now spread to every continent and the incidence of infection is on the rise throughout South America. Health authorities in Venezuela estimate as many as 1,000 people may be infected. So, what did I know about anything anyway? I didn't think for a minute that my broadcast of the latest statistics was the sort of company Miguel's misery necessitated but I did make some phone calls under the auspices of reporting a story. I found a clinic not far from downtown that was seeing AIDS patients and dispensing medications smuggled from the States. I passed the information on to Miguel and then didn't speak with him for months.

I waited outside the new National Theatre, an architecturally stunning accomplishment for a third world though rapidly developing country, named after the famous turn of the century Venezuelan pianist, Teresa Carreño. My hired photographer was late and I was becoming more nervous by the minute. It was a hot day in March and my head was beginning to sweat and this threatened to damage my hair that had been styled into perfection before leaving the house. I had been having a particularly attractive day, as far as my self-esteem was concerned. I could be a model, I thought, dabbing the sweat on my forehead

with a shirt from one of three changes of clothes. The photographer, named Horatio, finally arrived to plant a kiss on each of my astonished cheeks. I so scarcely remembered him from his work with the dance company that even a handshake would have been excessive but we soon got started. Using the Teatro Teresa Carreño as a backdrop, I struck a variety of masculine poses wearing a tight black shirt and equally tight gray jeans. Horatio kept chanting the words, *que bello* which translated, meant "how beautiful." By this time, I was too into a model's fantasy world to be phased by his idle flattery. Okay, Horatio told me, I want to try something with you. He moved in close to pose me half sitting on a concrete wall and in that proximity a free hand began rubbing the crotch of my pants rapidly. Hey! I protested. What are you doing? I demanded. He told me he was just trying to accentuate my positive attributes. I remember smelling old cigarettes behind his minted breath and brownish teeth. The friction was working though his charm was not. My jeans were becoming tighter. That's enough I told Horatio with a smile perhaps more inviting than reprimanding. I pushed him away and he continued the shoot. A roll of film later, I ducked into the lobby of the theatre to change clothes in the Men's bathroom. I dallied a moment in the stall inspecting my positive attribute that was still half-aroused by the attention paid it. Instantly, I found myself with a full erection. To my shock, Horatio found me with it too, having suddenly forced his way into the stall. I whispered loudly to get him to stop but his hands and then his mouth were frantically attending my attribute. It had been so long that

the sensation actually qualified as a religious experience and I surrendered, to Horatio's delight.

He phoned me a week later to deliver the proofs, and proof it was. My attribute in gray jeans was highly photogenic. I offered to pay Horatio for the photography but he insisted it had been his pleasure and one he hoped to repeat. I let him kiss me on each cheek and then we parted. I walked straight to the post office, bought an envelope, copied El Ún∇co's address from the Christmas card envelope I now carried in my billfold at all times and posted the photo to Denver via air mail.

Not much later, riots broke out across Venezuela in response to an unpopular decision by old President (new again) Carlos Andrés P▷rez, to raise bus fares. The riots turned to massive looting in downtown Caracas and the military responded rather hotheadedly by slaying over 200 civilian meatballs in the streets of the Soup Bowl. I had heard the gunshots and had even seen some of the commotion from a distance but retreated to my bedroom in our comparatively quiet neighborhood to wait out the confrontation. This was about the time that I decided I needed to get out of Radio as the news of the day was making me too cynical and too untrusting to be, act, or sound objective any longer. I gave my notice to the station the following morning. Coincidentally, there was a letter from El Ún∇co waiting in my mailbox when I returned home that day.

Querido Armando, it said. I shouldn't be using the excuse of having received

your amazing photograph for writing you after all this time but the purpose of my letter has many purposes. You look wonderful and of course my memories of you are refreshed and perhaps stronger than ever. I will be coming to Caracas next month to spend some time with Miguel, who as you may have heard, is sick. When I discovered I had cancer many years ago, Miguel's family paid for him to visit me in Idaho. My family wishes to return this kindness by paying for me to visit Miguel in Caracas. I arrive August 16, 1989 for ten days. I would like to spend as much of this time with you as is possible and I will phone you once I am in the city. With much anticipation, yours truly. and it was signed with El Ún∇co's curvy signature. I was breathless. My chest heaved then started burning. I tore my white button-down shirt open and saw in the mirror of my bedroom that the F-shaped scar on my chest had turned crimson red. I collapsed on my back atop the single bed I had slept on since I was a child and panted while the spiritual seizure passed. Father Federico didn't knock me out as often as he used to but when he did, Saint of Saints, he did a number. El Ún∇co was headed back to the Soup Bowl! It could have stopped my heart.

Chapter Seven

I finished my three week notice to leave the radio station and

managed to work in a few dancing gigs, one for television and one for a Venezuelan movie premiere. Thanks in great part to Horatio's photography in my portfolio that I had passed onto the dance company manager to circulate, I had been hired to be one of four "male model" escorts for the Miss Venezuela Pageant. Being a beauty pageant freak, it was kind of a sick dream come true for me. Televised from the Teatro Teresa Carreño, it was my biggest audience (if you didn't count the Pepsi-cola commercial still playing on television and in movie theatres) since my earlier years with the aforementioned traveling circus tour. Had I ever come a long, long way from being that scrawny muchacho with the Afro?

I fell in love with the Teresa Carreño as a building and recognized that it truly functioned as the pulsating heart of the Caracas cultural scene. I decided then and there I needed a job in that theatre and began to make inquiries during the pageant week. I was eventually directed to the theatre's stage manager who was coincidentally searching for an assistant. I gave him my resume and we met for coffee. I thought it might not hurt that I had dancing, singing, acting, radio and modeling as my real credits but because these occurred typically onstage and the job I was applying for happened backstage, I was still an unknown risk for the stage manager named Gustavo. I assured him that I had the detailing and the brain for the job and that nobody would work harder given the chance. My acting, at least in the interviews, was convincing and I was hired. Overjoyed and gratified that I was to be professionally engaged in a theatre, my first official

act was to lie to Gustavo telling him I had to complete a two week notice at the radio station and that I wasn't available to begin my new position for another two weeks. El Inico was arriving in the Soup Bowl in a mere 48 hours. My schedule needed to be absolutely clear so there was no question that my bills and my career would have to wait. Gustavo assured me he would make use of the two weeks to prepare for my arrival. Leaving the coffeehouse after the interview, I panicked when it occurred to me that Gustavo might actually make a point of listening for me on Nocticias 1340 Especial in the next two weeks. Later that morning, while cleaning my room and listening to 1340 myself, I heard my voice on at least three pre-recorded commercials. My voice was still being used in the intro to the Noon News and my singing voice could still be recognized, at least by me, on a laundry soap commercial. I was technically covered.

As though I was already managing my personal stage and cast of characters, my parents announced their exit Stage Left for Vargas State to visit their newest grandson, courtesy of my prolifically breeding hermana, Nieves. They would be gone for one month. I had the house to myself. For the next 24 hours I attended to every detail of the set from lights to props to sound. I rehearsed El Inico's entrance a dozen times trying every variation of lighting and costumes. The night before the morning he was due to arrive, when I couldn't get to sleep, I stayed up ironing everything in my closet just in case I had the opportunity to appear spontaneous. As I was standing there, ironing naked, the slowly growing collage of his photos pinned above the desk in my bedroom

caught my eye and I half snorted an uncontrolled laugh in my excitement. At that moment, a breeze burst through the curtains of my open window and Father Federico's photo flew off the shelf and onto the rug at my feet. I set the iron down and bent over to retrieve the tiny frame but lost my balance and fell into the leg of the ironing board. This sent the steaming iron hurling from its resting position. The appliance hit me first on my bare chest. Instinctively I tried to catch it to control the damage but burned my fingertips before deflecting the iron across my stomach onto my manhood. I sprang to my feet in one tenth of a nanosecond with the reflexes of a house cat. I thought I might have been spared serious injury but a frantic inspection and the delayed pain of several sites confirmed that I'd sustained a few direct scorches. I looked up from the gray pink singed skin of my penis to see Father Federico smiling back at me from the prison of his picture frame. ¡Maldecir los Santos! Damn the saints! I yelled at him when it became clear that one burn in particular was going to disqualify me from engaging in sexual contact should the opportunity present itself. I unplugged the iron and dashed down the hall to my parent's bathroom for an ointment of some kind. I rummaged through the medicine cabinet for an antibiotic cream that would speed the healing and hopefully not sting when applied. I decided on an aloe-based concoction that instantly soothed the rawness to the degree that I thought I might induce sexual arousal to measure my pain tolerance threshold. As I worked more of the cream into my hands and between my legs, I began to swell stretching the burned skin beyond comfort. I

abandoned the experiment terrified by the analysis. El Inico came into the Soup Bowl about as often as Jupiter eclipses the sun and I had so wanted everything to be perfect not to mention functioning for the duration of his visit. I looked into the full length mirror at the white cream smeared everywhere and that's when I saw it. After fumbling with the iron, fresh burn marks now precisely retraced the vertical and the horizontal bars of the letter "F" scar that I had carried into adulthood. I redirected some of the excess cream to these burns until my body looked decorated for some tribal rite of passage. I returned to my bedroom, lay on my back and sobbed.

As luck and the demands placed on El Inico's schedule would have it, it was two full days before he'd found a free moment to phone me from a payphone adjacent to a downtown construction site. I had been alternating therapies between cream and exposing my wounds to open air every few hours since the unfortunate ironing incident had occurred. One more day and I felt I could at least count on a scab to take the sting out of matters. I rationalized that with my equipment eventually rising to full erection parallel to my stomach, the burn wouldn't be as visually noticeable if, say, we were to have afternoon sex in broad daylight that is. I chuckled out loud at my presumption that sex would be inevitable and began at once to relax.

"Hi Armando, it's me." I switched the phone to my right ear to hear El Inico better over the jack-hammering machinery.

"Ho-la," I greeted him fondly. "Bienvenido a Caracas."

"Gracias," he offered. "Listen. Things are getting pretty tense at Miguel's house. Can you come and get me...take me away from here for a while?"

"Of course. Where are you?"

"I'm outside the Bellas Artes Subway Station, on the corner at a blue payphone between the orange metro sign and a yellow traffic light. I'll be standing beneath the Metro sign, how's that?" El Inico was yelling into the phone.

"I'm on my way," I responded, hanging up the phone. I ran through the house and into the driveway where I jumped into my green Nova to catch up to my heart that had sped ahead through the streets of Caracas without me.

El Inico was waiting beneath the thirty foot Metro sign. He looked very much like an American model in a magazine ad leaning against the rigid subway map while dark skinned Venezuelan's milled past him. I pulled out of the flow of traffic across the boulevard from where he was standing but I didn't honk my horn at first. It was a delectable treat, after so many years of abstinence, to be in a place where I could just watch him in stillness. I popped what must have been the two hundredth mint I'd ingested since leaving the house and checked my teeth in the mirror. I tapped the battered photo of Father Federico on the dashboard before remembering the tips of my fingers were still sore from the burns left by the iron mishap for which I'd been blaming him. Now you behave, I warned him. Tranquilo, tranquilo, I whispered. At last, I sounded the horn. Like an animal's attention instantly trained on the sound of a twig snapping in

the forest, El Inico's head turned to identify my green car out of the hundred cars in his immediate range of vision. He straightened from his lean to stand on both feet, shaded his eyes in the bright sunlight and began at once to smile. He navigated his way across the scarcely moving intersection. Without moving my lips, I asked Father Federico for his blessing over this reunion. I opened the passenger door for El Inico and he glided into the seat next to me.

"Please take me away from here," he said without first saying hello. I pulled the car into traffic at the first opening, noting the distress El Inico's expressive face and wishing I didn't have to concentrate on traffic. "I'm sorry," he said after we had traveled half a city block, placing his hand on my leg and unknowingly squeezing the lowest iron burn on my body. I winced beneath my smile, reaching a hand to squeeze the skin and muscle on the back of his neck. "Buenas tardes, Padre Federico," El Unvco said with perfect Latino diction as he touched the photograph on the dashboard. "Thank you for looking after Armando as I asked you to do." I smiled. He adjusted in his seat to lean his head on my shoulder as I drove.

"Where should I take you too?" I asked him, speaking for the first time since he had entered the car.

"Take me out of the city through the jungle to the sea," El Unvco said using the most serious tone in his voice that I had ever heard. "There, we shall spread a blanket on the beach, lay on our backs next to each other and point out the figures of animals we see in the clouds overhead."

"Alli nos fícarsemos las figuras de los animales en los nubes del cielo," I echoed his poetry with a direct translation into my language, adding "y pasar las últimas días de nuestras vidas juntos y alegre."

"And pass the last days of our lives, together and happy, indeed," he translated back to me in a resolute whisper. "Oh!" he revised "juntos, alegre y quemado del sol."

"What do you mean by that," I asked my El Inico.

He turned to me and smiled saying "if we are to spend the rest of our days laying on the beach together and happy, we will also be sunburned." I hadn't stopped smiling, holding his eyes with my own for as long as I could without crashing my car.

Finally, I admitted that I wasn't exactly dressed for the jungle or the beach and that perhaps we needed a more immediate plan. El Inico confessed that he didn't have the time for an elaborate, full-scale escape from the Soup Bowl and that he might be able to get away with being gone from Miguel's side for two or three hours tops. "How about we start with coffee so I can concentrate on staring at you instead of traffic and we'll plan from there." El Inico nodded without saying a word.

"Miguel's gone crazy," El Inico announced after a contemplative silence that lasted three and a half city blocks. "I don't think I've ever seen somebody become so completely bitter and accusing and confused. His disease is everybody's fault or at least he'll make certain that it's everybody's problem. He

blames me for not keeping him safe and protected in a relationship. He blames the doctor that talked him into getting the circumcision that prompted his world slut tour. He blames his parents and his brothers and his sisters for not caring enough or for caring too much that others will find out he has el SIDA. Undoubtedly he blames you for taking me away this afternoon, but I really hope that is what you are doing. You are taking me away, for a few hours anyway, right?" El Inico's head tilted toward me until it found my shoulder where he nuzzled my neck with his nose.

"I'll take you away until you start blaming me too," I said.

Without lifting his head, he continued talking, softer now that he was closer to my ear. "Why don't I ever make this journey to Caracas with the only intention of seeing you? Why must I always be preoccupied with other motives and obligations that force me to squeeze you in between engagements I more than often dread?" I didn't have an answer for him. It seemed obvious to me, even though it may have only been occurring to El Inico, that we needed more time together than his schedule ever seemed to allow us. It would be of some comfort to me in the progression of our relationship if he finally appeared to be recognizing this.

In the interest of my time with El Inico, a second of which I couldn't bear to waste, I drove us to my favorite coffeehouse, Café Brioche. It was just outside of the downtown congestion and from a table outside on the patio, we could see the Ávila. It was a beautiful day made only more beautiful by El

lnico's presence at my side. The sun was probably too hot for coffee but I ordered it anyway. El lnico, ever the Americano, ordered ice tea. With the glass in front of him and after a long sip through the straw that came with it, he exhaled long and steadily. I watched his shoulders and his chest relax for what must have been the first time in several days.

"There," he announced.

"Better?" I asked him.

"Perfect."

"Y-e-e-s," I told him, for he was, —perfect, that is. For a very easy moment, we held each other's eyes and just smiled. The sounds of the Soup Bowl, with 4 million abóndigas, diminished as though a studio mixer had gradually faded them under the increased volume of sparrows happily chirping as they picked at muffin crumbs and flakes of croissants beneath the tables around us. Soon nothing but El lnico's beauty competed with the humid stillness of the September afternoon.

"How long has it been?" El lnico thought to ask.

At first I smiled at him. "You mean, since I first kissed you on June 29, 1984? Five years and 249 days, give or take a few hours." El lnico set his glass of tea down then reached his hand across the table to first pat, then grasp mine in his.

"Then since the first and, in the interest of accuracy I might add, also the last time we kissed, it has been five years and 249 days too long. I don't think I

realized until this moment how much I've missed you." I noticed El Inico's eyes were swimming behind a film of tears he kept heroically under control. He meant what he said. Automatically my own eyes began blinking and I wanted to knock the table away between us and kiss him again, right in the middle of the outdoor patio at Café Brioche.

"You're just saying that," I accused him nervously, knowing at last that he wasn't just saying anything; that he understood very clearly that something special existed between us that was still undeniably alive five and a half years later. I took a sip from my cappuccino foam. He reached up from holding my hand to dab some foam from the corner of my lips before retracting his finger to his lips then his tongue.

"Have you been seeing anybody in all this time?" he asked me.

"I've had some dates, nothing too serious. I've been pretty busy with my work and dancing," I offered, almost as a virgin's excuse. I knew El Inico had boyfriends. He sent me photo Christmas cards each year of him posing with someone else. I didn't want to talk about that. I didn't want to talk about Miguel either, but I inquired anyway. "How is Miguel's health?"

"He's a mess. He has herpes it seems, everywhere. He also has what they are calling thrush. Maybe that's herpes, too. I'm not sure. It's this infection where sores coat the inside of his mouth and throat making it really painful to swallow. So as a result, he doesn't eat and for the most part he's just wasting away."

“Qué horrible,” I managed to mumble, mostly to myself.

“I went with him to his doctor yesterday, way out on the south side of the city by the military base or school or whatever that place is. I met with Miguel’s doctor. He told me that basically his hands were tied by the system, that he had no access to AZT or to the other drugs being widely used in the States, so all he can do is try to treat the herpes and the other symptoms as they came along. I even asked if I were able to source AZT if I could send it to Miguel or to the doctor’s office and he assured me it would be seized by customs, most likely before it ever left the States and certainly before it reached Caracas. He did say that the only hope he saw for Miguel was if he were able to get a travel visa to visit his brother in New York State, then maybe he could access medical care there. But there’s a problem with that too.”

“A problem, why?”

“The United States has issued a quarantine and will not allow anyone with AIDS to enter the country. Miguel looks so emaciated and he— he’s, you know, so meaty in his passport photo, it’s doubtful he could make it through the interrogation. I have to hand it to him though, he’s brave enough, maybe just desperate enough to give it a try.”

We both finished our drinks and smiled, this time uneasily given the heavy topic of conversation. “How much time do I have left with you today?” I asked him with a catch, maybe cappuccino foam, stuck in the back of my throat from having listened and not spoken for so long. It made my voice crack and I

sounded as vulnerable in that moment as I truly felt.

“We have some time.” El Inico assured me.

“Vamos?” I suggested we leave Café Brioche. He nodded and I left something ridiculous like twenty thousand Bolivares on the table under my empty cup. Who could pay any attention with such distractions?

We still hadn't discussed any options for passing the next few hours but I was driving a direct route to my empty but fully prepared house anyway with but one thing on my mind. El Inico began humming a tune I hadn't even thought about in a decade. It was a song from the traveling circus I used to perform as a solo and in fact had sung in the show the very night El Inico had seen me for the first time in Payette, Idaho on October 6, 1979. The urge to break into a duet with him right there was only overcome by the sheer corniness of the vision it conjured in my head, the two of us traveling along in my shiny green Nova through the streets of Caracas singing circus tunes. I felt El Inico's extraordinarily long eyelashes brush my neck below the ear and while it tickled almost beyond my ability to withstand it, I didn't flinch or in any way discourage it. I couldn't get over that he was sitting right there in all his perfection, in the same car I'd driven to and from work everyday of my Soup Bowl existence. Despite my internal celebration of just being in his presence, I simultaneously realized it would be over far too quickly and I began grieving. El Inico finished humming and kissed me on the ear just as we passed the Basilica Santiago Apóstol. I touched the photo of Father Federico out of habit just as I did every

time I had occasion to pass by there and closed my eyes in mini-prayer. A car to my left blared its horn just as I must have crossed the line. I jumped in my seat, bumping my shoulder against El Inico's head. He pulled his body back into the passenger seat space and attempted to subliminally check his seatbelt, having not had the best of luck in Caracas traffic in the past. Embarrassed, I apologized claiming with a grin that I must have been distracted. Eventually, his head found its way back to my shoulder where it stayed the rest of the motorcade route.

"Well it's not the jungle or the beach, but this is the house where I live. Sometimes it helps me think more accurately about somebody or something if I have an image of their everyday surroundings in my head."

"No, of course. I'm glad to finally see where you grew up, where you live," El Inico said unfastening his seatbelt once the car had stopped in the drive in front of the two story home. We walked to the front door and I turned the key only to instantly hear the sound of vacuuming inside. I felt like a bank robber who, upon entering the bank after hours to score a major heist, discovered a security guard still on duty. I allowed El Inico to enter the door before me and over his shoulder I could see Carmen, our housekeeper, who was supposed to be away on Margarita Island on a shopping spree with her grandchildren. Her 54 kilos couldn't have presented a larger obstacle there, vacuuming the stairs leading to the bank vault that was my bedroom on the second floor.

“Carmen, ¿Qué pasó con tu viaje a Margarita?” The older woman didn’t hear me over the sound of the vacuum. I barked her name and waved my hands to get her attention. This startled her and she fumbled for the off switch on the vacuum, losing her balance. The vacuum was sent tumbling down the flight to the landing and Carmen half-fell and half-sat down on the up-step behind her.

“¡Ay, Dios mio! Hijó, dame un attáque!” She screamed at me in her embarrassment, followed at once by laughter. “Pardona me Señor. Tienes un amigo-friend.”

For a moment, I didn’t know how to respond to her. It was interesting that she chose to add the English-ism to her statement. This was most likely prompted by El Inico’s lighter appearance, but it seemed to give an almost dirty connotation to my bringing a male to my family home while the family is known to be away. My fear of course was that this might offer a strobe of insight to the circumstances of my station in life, still single beyond rational explanation. Of course the surprise and guilt on my face wouldn’t go very far in dispelling the popular notion, however unspoken it happened to be around this house. I rushed to make a formal introduction to establish my decade-long friendship with El Inico. Whether or not Carmen bought the sentiment, she announced she was finished with the cleaning and would be leaving us soon. I didn’t believe for one minute that after all my doting on the matters de casa in anticipation and preparation for El Inico’s much-awaited arrival, she had found one square

centimeter left to clean.

Having been away from the radio station for over a week, I couldn't know that there was a general worker's strike in effect on Margarita Island that surely had disrupted more than Carmen's and my plans. El Inico had moved toward the bureau where family photos were displayed in about a hundred chrome and gold frames. To allow time for Carmen's exit, I introduced him to the Kodak version of my family. Overdue for some measure of physical contact, I pressed the front of my shoulder against his backside. He held his back muscles rigid to equalize the pressure I exerted without pushing me away. When Carmen left the room, I started speaking directly into El Inico's left ear choosing softly spoken words that launched my heavily minted breath to mingle with the field scent of his shampoo or hair gel.

"Bien, hijó." Carmen squawked in her peasant dialect. "Ciao mi amor." She told me with a wink. "It was my pleasure to meet with you," Carmen enunciated in her best Miami-trained English for a charmed El Inico.

"Mucho gusto," El Inico replied formally. I heard his stomach growl I was so close to him. The front door shut behind us. I let out a huge breath onto the back of El Inico's neck and his stomach growled again, this time as though it may have been in distress.

"Está bien?" I asked him putting my arms around his waist from where I stood behind him.

"My stomach's upset actually. I've been thinking for the last hour that

Miguel may have actually poisoned me. No, I'm serious. When he discovered I was taking a break from him earlier today he very likely assumed I had made arrangements to see you. I think he slipped me something."

"You have to be kidding me," I maintained as I kissed him on the neck.

"No. There was a bottle of eye drops next to a glass of tomato juice he had poured me. I wouldn't put it past him. He is that bitter." El Único turned around to face me in my arms. He looked uneasy. "I think I need directions to your bathroom," he said frankly and unembarrassed.

"Venga!" I said taking his hand in mine and leading him up the stairs past the vacuum cleaner crash Carmen had elected to completely ignore in her haste to leave me alone with my amigo-friend. My parent's bathroom was the closest to the top of the stairs and I deposited El Único there. In my bedroom, I readjusted my growing erection inside my jeans careful not to disrupt the scab left from the ironing incident. I caught a glimpse of the photo of Father Federico looking over a stack of books on my desk and wondered if, like Miguel, I had a terrorist sabotaging this reunion too. Down the hall in my parent's bathroom, I tried to pretend I didn't hear the many agonies of diarrhea echoing off the tile and linoleum only to scoot down the tiled hallway to where I was trying so much not to hear them. I had counted on those same infallible acoustics for any number of impromptu vocal performances I put my family through in the earlier days of my singing career. I turned on the special mood music I had pre-cued and raised the volume to hopefully encourage El Único to relax in what must

have been for him a most uncomfortable and drastic situation. I heard the toilet flush more than once and realized the universe must be conspiring against us. I left my room and walked toward the washroom. "I'm going to run to the pharmacy to get you something to settle your stomach. I'll be back in ten minutes."

A puny voice slid a thank-you under the door and I bounded down the stairs, retrieving the many vacuum cleaner attachments in my descent. The pharmacy was just down the block and around the corner. It wouldn't normally take ten minutes, but I chose to give El Inico that time, a gift whose sacrifice he might never be able to comprehend unless someday he understands exactly how precious my time with him is to me. When I returned closer to fifteen minutes later, I encountered him in my bedroom naked but for a towel tucked around his waist as he shook his head to dry his curly brown hair.

"Cariño—" I called him softly as I moved to encircle his waist with my arms. He had showered from necessity and the smells of my own soap and shampoo on El Inico's body, were delightfully disorienting and I felt as though my legs might give. "Do you feel better now?"

"Mucho mejor," he whispered with freshly minted breath of his own. I placed the white pharmaceutical bag on my desk in front of Father Federico's photo. Four eyes: two brown and two green, were enough for the moment and in almost sleepy unison these four fluttered as our mouths opened and after five years and 249 days, met at last, —yes

at last. My brain somersaulted through oblivion as the hundreds of miles of blood vessels and veins orchestrated a reversal in the flow of my blood. El Inico pressed his chested mass against me. My feet shuffled imperceptibly to brace my ribcage against his. White skin was softer than brown I remembered thinking as my hands explored his body like separate lunar modules combing the surface of a newly discovered moon. Indeed I felt weightless, tumbling, fumbling and tethered to nothing more than the sustaining gaze of his green eyes, while remaining desperately reliant on his resuscitating mouth. My hands moved to his face until I cradled his head. My kissing intensified as he began to unbutton my pale green shirt. My whole body shuttered as his arm grazed a nipple. El Inico delighted in the destruction of my façade. I felt positively powerless as the machismo I'd maintained for much of the past decade crumbled away with each touch and every warm breath of his mouth against my body. I couldn't stop him now if I knew a meteor was plummeting toward us in the next seconds to crush us dead. He gently outlined the letter F on my torso with a gentle flicking of his tongue. He didn't pause long enough to question the marking before he was on his knees, his face pressing into my pants. I continued to hold his head in place as though I would succumb to zero gravity if I dared let go. He moved his head from side to side rolling his forehead and then his cheekbones and then his chin against my erection with such sustained force I thought I ran the risk of passing out as a consequence for experiencing too much sensation. I winced each time El Inico rubbed his face against the scab that had formed since my ironing

mishap but I couldn't allow him to stop and in fact I pressed his face into my crotch even harder. His mouth opened wide around the outline of everything that made me a man and his hot breath wriggled through the weave of cotton fibers to set me ablaze. I couldn't stand. I was going to collapse then burst into flames and leave a crater where I fell. My eyes were spinning circles in their sockets and steam must have surely been issuing from both ears. El Inico unzipped my pants and lowered the front of my underwear. Like a cat with a housefly, he caught my full extension in his mouth in one lightning gulp; no teeth, no struggle. I was completely inside El Inico where I feared the fire would quickly spread to consume us all. A breath was caught in my throat that I couldn't take in or let out until he made the next move. For seconds that must have equaled the greater part of a minute, El Inico didn't move and in that moment I feared he'd impaled himself. I let my hands fall from each side of his head to make certain I wasn't asphyxiating him without being aware of it. His eyes narrowed in a smile and his golden-ringed pupils held my eyes in a doped trance. I realized I'd been caught with my mouth agape and I slowly closed it into a more reassuring smile. Fully relaxed with all of me inside his throat, El Inico began to experiment with some motion. In that instant, he gagged and I reflexively and somewhat apologetically withdrew. El Inico slapped me on the ass and gave me a reprimanding look before recapturing every inch of my attention. My head fell back onto my shoulders. No one had been able to do that before, not even the highly professional Rosalisa, and suddenly El Inico had managed

the feat twice in as many minutes. He struggled with my khaki pants until moving me back to sit on the edge of the bed he was able to get them, along with my underwear, off my feet. His towel dropped in the process to my delight though he used his head and upper body to prevent me from grasping what my arms stretched almost inhumanly to reach. El Inico mastered motion without choking and went to work with no objective but attaining my satisfaction. In what passed like super sonic seconds, I felt as though I might be near the verge of climax. I struggled to turn the tables on him before it was too late but found him to be stronger than I. Ultimately, he relented or wore down and I pinned him on my bed with a forearm across his upper chest. For a moment I did not breathe as I waited for confirmation from vital nerve endings that my orgasm had been averted. The moment passed. I was still in the race and a smile gradually overtook my face.

“I know this is not a moment for words,” I whispered to him, smiling, “but right now, I am full of words, but I think none of them can describe how beautiful you are or how wonderful you make me feel.” El Inico grinned with lazy eyes that had already acquiesced to the other, more compelling senses of touch and taste where the act of sex was concerned. He was beyond words—flattering, insulting or otherwise.

I positioned myself to hover above the two muscular plates of his over-developed chest that formed a fault line nearly splitting him into two halves. I dallied at each of his nipples, waiting for him to surrender his resistance. My

tongue swooped in to explore what my eyes had discovered. El Inico had a vertically directed scar that ran from his sternum, past one side of his belly button and into the top of his pubic hair where it disappeared. The scar was smooth and hairless. Almost comically, hair grew on either side of this dividing line as though some pesticide had been applied using a piece of masking tape. There were two other, smaller, diagonal scars, on one side of the main bisector. In a way, El Inico had his own monogram, the result of a number of surgeries, two for cancer, I learned, and one for his appendix. I lifted my head away from the close-up work to realize all of a sudden that El Inico also had a letter F on his torso except that in his case, the letter was upside down and had been left by surgeries instead of meddling saints. I had never undergone surgery and yet, our markings were nearly identical. I resumed my tour by tongue, tracing each of the three lines of El Inico's letter F before introducing myself to the El Inico I had never known. He was circumcised, though coming from North America I wasn't surprised, and thick just like his physique. I had not gained a lot of experience with oral sex though it intrigued me. Because of my penis size and other's fascination with it, I had received a disproportionate share of oral attention and this fascination usually ushered me into orgasm before I had the chance to reciprocate. I wanted everything to be different with El Inico. It was my turn to obsess over details and I relished the control. El Inico moaned and wiggled under my care while I savored the taste of his skin and grew light headed in the sweet musk between his legs. Under his erection, I explored his

scrotum with my nose and mouth. I encountered one of his testicles and assumed the other must have become lodged inside him. I began rooting around with my nose like a forest pig on the scent of a truffle I knew was there but just hadn't yet found. El Inico gave into giggles.

"You're wasting your time," he finally told me when it became apparent, I wasn't giving up the hunt. "I only have one left, you see." I pulled my head from between his legs, my mouth and cheeks glistening with my own saliva. "When they found cancer, the doctors took one" he whispered gently. "That's what this scar is from." El Inico pointed to the top bar of his upside down letter F. Maybe it was my English. I did not understand his words and must have been giving him a puzzled look. "Look," he wiped my face with his hand, using his other hand to guide my head to his mouth, "Everything else works just fine. I'm just missing one of my balls, that's all." My face went flush with embarrassment but when El Inico kissed me laughing, I forgot all about it. The truth was, I could have discovered he had a vagina and it would not have made one bit of difference in my world where I had already vowed to love him without condition, as long as we both should live. It was El Inico after all; The Only One. –So now you know.

Chapter Eight

In my state of abandonment, I wondered almost hourly what could be going through El Único's head?

In all fairness, Armando had never asked if I was seeing anybody. So it

wasn't lying, not to anybody really. I could not dispute I had become very stingy with information as an adult. This was further compounded by the secret that I was a certified flunky from the world of monogamy. I didn't get it. Monogamy, that is. Or maybe it was that I didn't get it enough. I knew it was safe and best to disclose only what was specifically asked at the time it was asked. I don't know why he didn't, but Armando didn't ask.

As a matter of fact, I made a terrible liar. The dozens who had caught me at it could attest to that. From my first visit to Venezuela and our unresolved fondling spree in his car, there had been this unspoken understanding between Armando and me that the very next time we were in the same room, the two of us would engage in sex. There was something completely primitive and hormonal about this pact. I would have bet my life on this promise. As sure as the sun rose, as sure as my plane touched down on the runway and just as sure as we would be alone again, there would be sex between us. As we have discovered, not even stomach cramps accompanied by runaway diarrhea in its most debilitating, third world form could stop what had to transpire. Armando could have been married with six children before I saw him again. He could have become a priest or a quadriplegic. It wouldn't have changed what both of us knew had to happen in order for us to complete our destiny.

Now that the sex was over, I'm looking at destiny a whole lot differently. I had been expecting, for the better part of six years, for that sexual act to complete me; to once and forever erase the confusion over who I was meant to

spend the rest of my life with and finally make all things clear for the first time. High scoring though the encounter itself had been, it just didn't turn out to be the epiphany I'd been counting on to see me through to the next stage. I supposed on many levels, Armando and I were no longer unresolved. That's one objective achieved. Being unresolved had seemed safe, exotic and chock full of potential. Now, at last, we both possessed all the information we needed to make the truth and dare decision in our lives. It was time to decide. Truth be known, did we dare?

In the end, I found it more intriguing to be tripping over my fantasies in the dark than to suddenly feel this accountable with carnal knowledge in broad daylight. Unsure of myself, I pretty much left Caracas just as I'd arrived, having been asked nothing, having said nothing.

Back home, I was already skating my way through the final months of Relationship Number Three, knowing full well that like all my relationships, it had a prescribed obstacle course with a provocative beginning, a bunch of obstacles that, by the way, I would eventually proclaim insurmountable, followed by a definitive, if not catastrophic, end. I had hoped that seeing Armando, having sex with Armando, would provoke that end. It was no secret among my family and friends, thanks in large part to the smear campaign I'd commenced, that I wasn't living with the ideal man for me. Big fucking deal if he was a Federal Agent, a U.S. Marshal to be precise. It may have been novel in the beginning. I could even make myself believe it was thrilling still to hear of the drug busts, Mafia

convictions and recaptured prisoners, but it wasn't what anyone would call true love. That much I knew but until something better came along—well, no doubt the world over is familiar with this particular rut. From these depths, it was easy to idolize the perfect Latin Lover who seemed to be content to wait his whole life just for me to arrive at the realization that there would be nobody for me in this world but him. I could hold a litmus paper to this notion and it would probably read True Love, True Love. That's how badly I wanted Armando to be the answer to everything and the provocation for me to finally do something about my doomed and cyclical love life.

The sex had been stupendous! There was no question. Armando was just as hot as I'd dreamed my whole, post-pubescent life he'd be. His body naked was precisely how I'd surveyed and recorded it in my mind five and some years earlier when feeling him up through his clothes. It might not have been sex at all come to think of it, but actually making love. Days later I still had the smell of him on my skin and for hours after I hadn't been able to take my fingers away from my nostrils. As a matter of fact, I had a smile on my face that I thought would never go away and my heart hasn't beaten quite the same since leaving Armando's bed. But I still didn't feel provoked to change my life, somehow. For now it seemed noble to refuse to believe that in the end, it had just been the sex. Empty perhaps, but noble.

I'd been away from The Fed, as I oft referred to my paramour du jour among my circle of confidantes, for seven days. Just as soon as I returned from South

America, the Fed and I were slated to move from Denver to New Orleans so he could assume his new position working with Naval Intelligence and I could have something exciting in our relationship to get another few months mileage out of a doomed heap destined for breakdown. I had stopped in New Orleans en route to Caracas, to interview for a position with the Westin Hotel there and had been hired on the spot to be the evening hotel manager. I had been working in hotels since college. Professionally, I was capable of more but the money had been sustaining so I made it a career. With Armando forever in the back, more recently promoted to the front, of my mind, New Orleans was a transfer in the right direction and a helluva lot closer to Caracas than Denver had been. When the time came to flee to him, and somehow I still knew that day of enlightenment would come eventually, it would be so much more manageable a leap already being in the same time zone. I wonder what Armando would say if he knew how I thought about him and the future. I also wonder if he ever thinks about these things. Well, on with my life. There's always Armando. I couldn't ask for a better insurance policy.

¡Qué ladillia! I imagined these to be El Único's thoughts.

Chapter Nine

I had every sentimental intention to leave my bed and my room precisely the way it was rendered after El Inico and I defied gravity, broke the sound barrier (certainly of these four walls) and shattered all semblance in the universe as either of us had known it. I wanted this to be a shrine to best all shrines, a monument dedicated to all great things that come, –all great things to come, that come? At times my English grammar fails me, but Carmen, her faith and

her curiosity had doubled back to straighten my room, in every sense. A stray rosary bead on the floor could have well been my undoing had I not all but levitated back into my room after dropping El Inico at Miguel's building. Bless her little corazon Católico. Carmen had been cleaning and praying or exorcising or whatever ritual she felt our sins required. I picked up the solitary wooden bead on the threshold of my bedroom door and rolled it between my fingers. Ever loyal to this family Carmen would no more tell my parents what she suspected than she would allow one piece of evidence to exist that they might happen to discover on their own.

At the time, I couldn't know El Inico and I wouldn't have an opportunity to repeat this performance during the fleeting days of his bedside vigil for Miguel. We met two days later to go to a movie but the movie was so bad and he was so distracted, we left the theatre and ended up having another talk, kiss and grope session in the Nova outside Miguel's building. Though it had been another in a bulging catalog of my good-byes to El Inico, I wasn't crushed. I had yet to come down from the high of our consummation in my bedroom for his absence to have already summoned the storm clouds of depression surely waiting on the horizon like a Tupperware lid waiting to snap itself to the rim of the Soup Bowl. My body still shuttered in climactic aftershocks drenching my shorts anew each time I recalled the act that had transpired in this room. Neither a smell nor a wrinkle remained behind thanks to Carmen's hygienic, not to mention homophobic, hypochondria. It didn't matter as long as I could close my eyes and still feel him

pass under me like a rapid series of ocean swells that rocked my boat but miraculously did not capsize it. It didn't matter as long as the most basic music of his groans and the breathing of his almost heroic resistance, muffled under the weight of my body didn't leave my ears. It didn't matter just as long as we both remembered how long we'd waited and how dangerously close we must have come to electrocution by our own hormones, sweat and semen. And I promised myself it didn't matter how long it would be before we could make love again as long as we never forgot the smells, the tastes, the sensations, the movements, the sounds, the involuntary spasms, the clumsy and frantic elbow to the head and the mistimed knee to the groin. It didn't matter as long as we cherished the vision of the sun filtering through the sheer curtains of my converted childhood bedroom; the aroma of my mother's Saturday Mass perfume mixing with the lingering stench of the diarrhea it was hastily meant to conquer; the agony of salty sweat moistening my ironed and broken skin, the innocent discovery that our abdominal scars, when matched belly to belly, had El Inico's head facing one direction and mine the other, our faces suddenly, so unintentionally in each others organs we laughed uncontrollably; --it was all a part of the indelible scene and the intricate choreography of making love with El Inico.

Not even a week later, just as I knew it would, the lid of my depression clung to the rim of the Soup Bowl so much so I could scarcely breathe. My life contorted into its most manic disposition yet. I wasn't certain I would emerge

from this despair and on more than one occasion, Mamá suggested I see the family doctor when I seemed so hopeless I couldn't coax color into my negro face.

Before leaving Caracas, El Inico had phoned to tell me his last days spent with Miguel were an exercise in futility. Though he'd tried to impress upon Miguel the same visualization techniques that had helped El Inico overcome cancer six years before, his patient was unwilling and unresponsive. He said that he hated to say it but once Miguel was gone and all the bitterness in his world vanquished he would actually enjoy visiting Caracas. I knew what he meant by that even though it might have sounded like he hadn't enjoyed any of his time in Caracas during either of his two visits to the Soup Bowl.

I hadn't seen Miguel myself for close to a year. I knew more about AIDS now, or sida, as we called it in Latin America. I knew that everyone who had it died and I knew that there were almost always horrible physical changes that people went through before the end. It couldn't be easy going for Miguel or for El Inico. I asked Father Federico to make it easier on them somehow but since he and I weren't really on speaking terms after my love making Olympics with El Inico, I didn't know if my praying would help the situation much.

I didn't know where I stood with Father Federico. I am certain he would have preferred me to remain pious to his memory but if he required that of me he should have taken my hormones with him. That's how I felt about it. I wasn't even of the age to understand his feelings for me so I shouldn't be held

accountable to them or to him now. Still, I couldn't deny then or now that part of Father Federico is with me. Several times while making love with El Inico the image of Father Federico's face replaced that of El Inico's. Sure it is bound to sound far fetched but in one instance I was moving into El Inico's face with my eyes locked on his green eyes but when I pulled back the green eyes belonged to Father Federico, and it was his dimpled grin smiling back at me in dumbfounded wonderment, not El Inico's. I shut my eyes quickly to banish the image, and just like that, I was with El Inico again. Then a little later, El Inico turned from his stomach to lay on his back and it wasn't El Inico's body! It was the quite nearly hairless body of Father Federico. To relate this on paper forces a long repressed childhood confession that I had indeed seen Father Federico completely desnudo, -naked. In his defense, if a grown man having relations with a child is permitted a defense, I had asked one day if I could see him without his clothes. I think I must have been twelve because I was having a very difficult time coming to terms with my physical development. By the time of Father Federico's suicide, all my physical issues from form to function had been resolved thanks in part to Rosalita and in part to Father Federico's understanding and his selfless fulfillment of my countless inquiries.

"¿Y porqué quieres me ver sin ropa, Armando?" His authoritative voice cracked with the innocence of angels when he asked why I wished to see him without clothes, but the ever so slightly recognizable and upward tilt of his mouth let me know that he was willing to comply with my request and that he

didn't need a reason.

"Because," I told him speaking the English he had been teaching me, "I am confused about some things." I was a very frank twelve year old and a student of the universe that could not be refused. He locked the door to his windowless office and obliged me without reproach. "Now, I see," I told him.

"Yes, you do," Father Federico acknowledged the obvious, reaching for his pants.

"Espera!" I told him to wait. Awkwardly, I began taking off everything I was wearing, saving my underwear, albeit flirtatiously now that I think about it, to the last. We were standing twenty feet apart, my back against a floor to ceiling bookcase. I stepped out of my underwear. "Pues, ¿este es normal, si?" I began walking across the heavily ornamented room toward him, anxious to have my normalcy confirmed. I had convinced myself that I wouldn't stop growing in the man department and that eventually I would have to have some kind of an operation so I could walk again. I was three times larger than any boy I had seen in my school, a giant compared to my younger brother, Roberto and from what I could tell from a room away, only a few centimetres smaller than the fully grown Father Federico. I needed a closer comparison but by the time I reached him, despite his commands for me to stop and to not come closer, he had doubled in size right before my astonished brown eyes. I began swelling up too, which I think happened forty, maybe fifty times every day when I was twelve years old.

“(Armando José!” He used both my names for emphasis and it worked. I stopped dead in my naked tracks. He fumbled for his clothes and ordered me to get dressed. I did. He very firmly instructed me that I was not to mention this to anyone, and of course I didn’t. It was many months before Father Federico relaxed after that. With each day that passed, and I saw him every day in choir practice or on one of a thousand occasions when I had spontaneous need for spiritual counsel, he trusted me more. I wanted very much to see him desnudo again but I could wait. I had memorized every detail of our first encounter, so much so that when I actually never got another chance to see him that way, the image remains frozen and pristine in my dreams, in my fantasies and it would seem in my physical encounters with every other man. Father Federico had, without the slightest exaggeration, a perfect male body in the Roman classic sense. He exercised. I knew that. I tried to mimic his regimen but I had to eventually recognize that alas, Father Federico was a Mesomorph according to my Mr. Universe magazines and had it easier than I, a mere, narrow-shouldered Endodorph. I couldn’t have become the dancer I was with Father Federico’s body type but that didn’t stop me from obsessing over him. As I’ve already recounted, he was virtually hairless with only a minimal patch above his man implements and under his arms. His skin, as a result, was nearly translucent and as smooth as cake frosting. Even on his angelic face, where a man is supposed to have hair, Father Federico could scarcely grow a trace of a moustache above his rose colored lips though he groomed what he had every day. The thin line of

his eyebrows and almost an absence of eyelashes made me think once that he might have been in a fire until I accepted that even before his suicide, Father Federico was an angel among us and angels, as we can assume, have no use for hair. And that's where his body differed from El Inico's. El Inico also came equipped with a mesomorphic build that he carried oh so well but El Inico was hairy, fuzzy really. Short, black wisps of hair spaced every centimeter or so across the curvaceous expanse of his chest looked as though they might be growing back after a recent full-body shaving. Oh, that chest! I close my eyes and remember tracing my finger through the hills and valley of his muscles, hard as pavement there, and thinking what fun it would be to have a matchbox car of my boyhood to drive across such spectacular and varied terrain. When I came to his belly button, I would park my matchbox car and walk along the slightly raised rim of the crater before following the scar forming the vertical axis of his upside down letter F that continued from the crater into the thicket of his manhood. After that, I would probably lose my license to operate a matchbox car while impaired.

I raised my hand to my nostrils. The smell of El Inico was wearing off and I began to dissect my room almost forensically for a cell or a hair follicle that had belonged to him. From his vantage on the bookshelf above my built-in desk unit, Father Federico seemed to have arched the fold of one of his hairless eyebrows in disbelief. But then he didn't remember how I reacted in the months after he left me, to understand that this depression was nothing by comparison.

I reached for the frame and kissed his glass face. Father Federico had been the first. In all his magnificence, El Inico could not eclipse that.

With El Inico's visit behind me, though the aftershocks rumbled on, I began work as an assistant to the stage manager at the Teatro Teresa Carreño. Architecturally imposing and often compared to the Sydney Opera House for its distinctive character, the premiere cultural complex of Venezuela sits in the bottom of the Soup Bowl adjacent to el Parque Los Caobos and across from the ultra-Sixties slab and drab Caracas Hilton. The teatro is comprised of giant concrete monoliths and walls of glass set at angles against each other atop what must be the largest parking garage in all of South America. Opened in 1983, the complex houses a main theatre, la Sala Rios Reyna that seats 2,400 and the Sala Jose Felix Ribas, an intimate, semi-circular concert hall that seats 400. My new job was to attend meetings, take notes, wear a remote wired head set and microphone at all times through which I was expected to coordinate the theatre's stage hands and technical staff to meet the needs of any traveling or in-house show, opera, ballet, event or concert. In my first week on the job, we had back-to-back concerts in the main theatre: Brazil's reigning queen of the Portuguese torch song, Maria Bethania and Spain's pop music sensation, Miguel Bosé. Fortunately, both acts were centered around solo artists with small orchestras and didn't require a lot of stage managing. So in a matter of weeks, I grew accustomed to having screaming in my ear, no free nights to myself, and the best seat in the house for every show that appeared at the Teresa Carreño. It

was a form of cultural imprisonment but it passed the time and kept my brain engaged. The theatre was named after Venezuela's very colorful piano virtuoso of the last century who went through four husbands and placed her daughter up for adoption when the world touring schedule grew too demanding. In my opinion, I think she just lacked a good stage manager. I was beginning to appreciate my role.

When Vivaldi composed his Four Seasons, he must have certainly been referring to Opera, Ballet, Symphony and Broadway as this seemed to be how I marked my years that followed. Being married to the theatre wasn't a cliché, it was the way of my life. Spending every night tucked away in the bosom of bright lights and applause until well after midnight when my frog green Nova was often the last car to leave the mega-subterranean garage, became my own vow of celibacy. The theatre, never a jealous or doubting lover, knew where I could be found each and every night, with headphones and any one of fourteen clipboards at the ready (two for each night, one for each theatre). There simply wasn't time for an affair of the heart or groin nor the energy to conjure up even half a respectable fantasy that one day there might be time. It was the perfect avocation if I truly had my mind made up to wait for El Inico. Wait for El Inico to do what? Now, that was the question.

Miguel's situation, after an altogether impressive comeback that spanned a year and a half, seemed to implode all at once and on November 13, 1991, I learned through theatre acquaintances close to his actress sister, that he had

died a day or two before. El Inico, making full use of the time since leaving Caracas, had moved to New Orleans, endured eight months of the French Quarter Hotel Scene before he talked the Federal Agent boyfriend of his into moving back to Colorado where they broke up a short time after. As far as I knew and had been lead to believe through a sudden appearance of Denver-originating correspondence, El Inico was actually single. I had received a flood of letters and postcards to this effect (a flood being two, maybe three) and even one or two phone calls imploring me to visit him but my theatre schedule, in the middle of the Wagner Ring Cycle, had me engaged until two days before Christmas. While the applause and shouts of Bravo trailed behind me as I walked down the long hallway from the stage to my office after that night's curtain, I rehearsed the announcement I had to deliver to El Inico. It was an announcement, I might add, I think all of us were surprised not to have heard long before now:

Hola Carino. Soy Armando. I'm fine and you? That's good. Listen, I am calling to let you know that Miguel has passed away a few days ago. Yes, finally. I know. His family is having a funeral on Saturday. If you want, I can go there to represent you and your family. I could also arrange for some flowers to be there from you if you wish. Of course I can. White roses—yes, of course. Okay, now wait... Let me repeat that back to you. "Vaya Miguel con nuestro amor: Jerry, K-a-r-r-y-l-l-e, Krista and Jeffrey." Yes, of course with your name too, Tanto! I agree. It is good that his suffering is over. I don't suppose there is

any chance you could come to Caracas for the funeral is there? No, of course they'll understand. I have been told the family would like to keep the service very small and quiet. Nobody wants to talk about how he died. It's a curse you know for Latino Catholics to discuss such things. Yes— I miss you, too. I would love to visit you but my schedule right now...Yes. I promise to think about it. I couldn't get away until Christmas Eve with the theatre schedule. O-kay. Yes! I will look into it. Ciao mi amor.

Oh, God, I thought, unhooking the remote signal pack from the back of my pants. That is not at all what I expected from a phone call where I had to tell him Miguel had died. El Inico practically begged me to visit! At this moment in my life, having been buried in my career for so many months, not being able to know how the next visit between us might ever happen but always believing, trusting... Now, suddenly he asks me to promise to try, promise to think about it, he said. I was thinking. I was thinking I could leave my car in the theatre garage this night because I felt like running to the top of the Avila and back! I began walking down the long hallway back to the stage to begin the process of closing down the evening while the audience emptied from the giant theatre and the opera cast scrubbed bold-lined make-up from their faces to become regular Soup Bowl citizens again. I was going to do it! I decided in that minute. I would go to Denver to spend Christmas with El Inico. Up ahead, they were calling my name but I shouted for them to "wait a minute, I'll be right there." I ran back to my office and poked the numbers on my telephone, my address book still

opened to the page that detailed El Inico's extensive migration history.

Ho-la. I'll do it! I'll do it, I said. I will come to visit you for Christmas. No. As long as you're sure? Then I'll be there. Count on it! I have to run. Ciao!

What was I going to tell my family, my nieces and nephews who'd been talking about Christmas almost since Easter? Shit! Was I doing the right thing? I raced down the hall to the stage. Did I have a choice where my heart was concerned? I would have to discuss this with Father Federico on the way home.

The next morning, I forced myself out of bed before Noon. Usually, with my production schedule, my work day began at two or three in the afternoon and ran long past midnight so it was a special effort to be up by the time most of Caracas was going for lunch. Parking anywhere near Plaza Venezuela at midday was a fool's game so I hopped the Metro about six blocks from my house and got off at Sabana Grande to walk from there toward the Plaza where I knew there was a city ticket office for United Airlines. I'd made a habit of watching the airline ads in the weekend edition of El Mundial just in case El Inico ever called for me to come to him on a moment's notice. I figured I should always be ready so I already knew that United Airlines was the major airline operating between our two cities, just as I'd known it was Delta Airlines between Caracas and New Orleans. It seemed ridiculous that I would automatically know this but then some would say it was ridiculous for me to wait my whole life for one man, too. I booked my flight and paid for the ticket on the spot.

It had been a rough start to a week of long days and longer nights having moved from Wagner to technical rehearsals for Othello with only a two day break between. The staging of Othello was an ambitious nightmare with whole prows of ships entering from the wings plus a lightning bolt comprised of 400 light bulbs on rapid relay that was timed by my cue to one beat of a timpani drum one minute into the overture. The effect blew the circuit breaker every time it was fired so I had one shot per show and if I couldn't be precise, at least I wanted to be earlier than the thunder rather than later. There would be only six public performances of Othello so lightning just needed to strike the same place six times. Only in the theatre, I reasoned, would such impossibility be given a chance. My problem so far in these technical rehearsals was not timing the lightning but fighting my urge to look directly into it when it flashed as it rendered me stumbling and blind offstage for several minutes. A full cast rush entrance from both wings onto the stage followed the lightning affect. My fear of course was being swept onstage blind, in my black turtleneck/black dress pants ensemble adorned with headset and clipboard, along with the hoards of 14th Century peasants and townfolk. Once trapped there, I would be forced to endure the fifteen minute opening chorus, while Othello consults with Iago over the capture of Desdemona, all without looking the least bit out of place.

The good thing about wearing basic theatre black for my job meant that I could go straight from work to any funeral. Today it happened to be the funeral of Miguel Lobo, long-time acquaintance of mine and one-time lover of El Inico. I

wasn't going to this funeral for me. I would be there for El Inico and I would be there for Miguel's family who needed to know that Miguel had friends in spite of la sida. Granted, I hadn't been much of a friend to Miguel, even when he made it easy for me by asking for help. For me it had never been a question of Miguel just asking for help. Miguel had been my competition for the affection of El Inico. I had known that for over ten years. If I hadn't been very careful, I might have helped Miguel get what Miguel was after, and in that regard, I was too busy trying to help myself. Being the good Catholic boy I've always been, I never wished Miguel evil, not even when he came to me for help in Tucson with the obviously smitten El Inico in tow. I was too shocked at the time to be anything but assisting, but I learned that day that Miguel Lobo and I worked toward our objectives differently. Now, on the day of his funeral, it wasn't relief, or victory or defeat I was feeling. It was the satisfaction in knowing that my objective was still out there and I was still working toward achieving it someday. Miguel was fresh out of somedays and that put everything solemnly into perspective for me.

I couldn't drive into the San Bernardino District of Caracas anymore without remembering the pick-ups and drop-offs of El Inico at Miguel's family home. The church, which was not much more than a chapel really, wasn't easy to find. I don't know how many times I drove past it in both directions before recognizing one of Miguel's cousins on the sidewalk outside. I had no choice but to park four blocks away and double back on foot. Miguel's cousin was already

inside by the time I reached the front door of the church. Even before I opened the thick planked door, I could recognize the melody of Ave Maria playing inside. Not until I opened the door did I realize it was a recording of my voice and the Santiago Apóstol Chorale del Muchachos from twenty years before. I was not aware that a recording existed or that one had been taken and the shock of hearing what I'd never heard slammed head-on with my memory of what happened that night. The recorded music began its crescendo and my voice started to climb...High D...High E...High F...I reached for the concrete font of holy water to steady myself. High G. Any second now. I knew what was coming next. I seemed to be sustaining the note forever until I realized the recording had to have been remixed to cover the screams and gasps that had been spontaneously conducted into the debut of this opus fatale. I squeezed my eyes tight shut. My visual memory was overriding what my ears remembered next and as I held that note, I saw play out on the inside of my eyelids, the image of Father Federico arching so gracefully into the thick, musty air of the cathedral dome, illuminated only by the hundreds of candles burning below. Reaching as high he had vaulted, Father Federico, with his arms stretched wide like Icarus, craned his neck far back as though human flight might be achieved, and without flinching a single muscle, he curved then straightened his spine, before gently plunging without fear beneath the balcony railing and out of my line of sight forever. I squeezed my eyes tightly.

I felt a hand clamp on my arm just above my elbow. "Por favor,

sientate." I jumped. The priest smiled in what I'm sure he intended to be a calming way. "Empezaremos en breve." It was an impatient Catholic smile, and not the first impatient Catholic smile I'd received either.

"This recording," I asked him, "where did you get it?"

"It's from La Misa Saltando."

Stunned, I sat in the first row from the back. "The Leaping Mass," I pondered, first feeling more than just a little spooked and then feeling really exploited. Miguel's Mamá, who had tried so much to keep all things under control, began sobbing most uncontrollably. I didn't really know anybody in Miguel's family. His actress sister would probably pretend as though she'd never seen me before though we'd worked together plenty on the same projects in television and commercials. Miguel's younger brother was handsome enough to have remembered him, but I didn't. I had to remind myself that I wasn't there to be recognized or acknowledged or to launch a lawsuit over the unauthorized recording of my voice. I was there for El Inico. Beyond the closed casket, for which I was always grateful, was the spray of white roses I had ordered on behalf of El Inico's family, positioned in the center with the other floral offerings angling back on either side. It was a moderately ornamented box that the body of Miguel occupied, almost upstaged by the symbolism, pureness and yes, perhaps the irony, given Miguel's less than pure life, of the brilliant white roses. For me, the bouquet placed El Inico front and center. For El Inico, the roses gave him a presence. For Miguel, all anyone could hope is that these roses and

the small group of people assembled in front of me, gave him some comfort in Purgatory, as we quite oddly and automatically believed his soul to be suspended until our supplications on his behalf were considered.

“Bienvenidos a todos. Me da descanso en buenos pastos, y me guarda junto a arroyos tranquilos. Si mi salud decae, El me restaura. Me ayuda a hacer lo que más resalte su honra.” The priest gently closed the Bible he was reading from and walked in front of the casket to stand before the parents of Miguel. “Today we remember the life and the love that was Miguel,” he told them in Spanish. “Nos suplicamos.”

That was our cue to stand and recite in unison: Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos, santificado sea tu nombre. Venga tu reino y se cumpla en la tierra tu voluntad como se cumple en el cielo. Danos hoy los alimentos que necesitamos, y perdona nuestros pecados, así como nosotros perdonamos a los que nos han hecho mal. No nos dejes caer en tentación, mas líbranos del mal, porque tuyo es el reino, el poder y la gloria para siempre. Amén.

The next twenty minutes were painful as the priest, clearly at odds with the way Miguel chose to live his life and the manner in which he died, read awkwardly from notes prepared for him by the family. The priest was not particularly good at concealing what was obviously his inner struggle between delivering the blessing of exaltation while thinking secret thoughts of condemnation. It didn't matter what the priest said or was going to say next. Miguel's mother and now his sister, was going to cry through the service

anyway. It was not difficult to imagine my own mother in the same horrific situation, except for the reality that in my vigil for El Inico, I was not about to be exposed to enough gay sex to contract a common cold much greater the disease that took Miguel from us. I tried not to let the thought make me smile in the middle of Miguel's funeral but at the quickly ripening age of 35, my abstinence was becoming a ridiculous notion. During my Catholic Minute of Silent Prayer, I vowed that I would make something of my upcoming visit to Denver or finally accept that El Inico was not attainable and go out and catch myself a really good and long overdue cold.

The week following Miguel's funeral was an intense series of errands that had me running up one side of the Soup Bowl and down the other. My tasks took me shopping for a new wardrobe in the many and upscale shops of La Sabana Grande. I had been to Denver once before while travelling with The Circus and it had been miserably cold and snowy. I remember it being so cold that my nostrils would freeze together when I inhaled through my nose when standing outdoors. Since you couldn't actually shop for winter clothes in the Soup Bowl, I purchased layers and layers of clothes that would never fit into my suitcase which meant I'd have to wear them there. I was so excited about my upcoming trip that I donned this pervasive smile almost to provoke somebody into asking me why I was so happy. It was difficult for my parents to understand why I had to be away from my family this Christmas but then it never seemed to occur to them that Christmas in general had never been an

easy time for me since Father Federico's death. They were of the opinion that if they could somehow manage to act as though nothing had ever happened, everyone else should be able to act accordingly. It was different for my parents. Father Federico had allowed them to forget what had happened. He didn't have the same policy where I was concerned.

I made a point of stopping by the rectory next to the Basilica to inquire about la Misa Saltando and the recording it had, well—launched. I hadn't been back to church since the incident so I was not at all surprised when I did not recognize any of the dominating church characters from the stage of my youth. I was given a cassette of the recording along with a laminate card depicting an alarmingly handsome image of Father Federico and a brief description of what the Basilica had clearly hoped to spin as a modern day milagro. Apparently, several eyewitnesses had attested to seeing Father Federico's soul separate from its corporeal trappings and ascend out of sight into the upper reaches of the octagonal dome before his earthly body slammed into the Basilica floor. It's unsettling when your own memory serves you so differently than the revisionist outcome of the day. I added the small, plastic card to the shrine on my dashboard and popped the cassette into the player on my way home.

Pulling into the short driveway in front of our house, I noticed a large envelope propped against the front door. I remember thinking that it might have been some paperwork for my father or perhaps some of my travel documents. As I walked up the concrete path, I recognized the orange and

purple letters of Federal Express and my pace quickened. The package had obviously originated in the U.S. I lowered my shopping bags to the porch and sat down in front of the door. The envelope was from El Inico. Who else? I ripped the tab off the cardboard packaging and extracted a single sheet of unfolded paper. A banking check clung to the page by static electricity then fell away. I picked it up from my lap and noted that it was made out to me for one hundred dollars in U.S. funds. I scrunched up my face and turned to the letter that I was sure would explain the check.

Querido Armando:

First, I will explain that the check I've enclosed is to pay for the flowers you arranged on behalf of my family for Miguel's funeral. I cannot express to you how important it was to all of us, to be represented there and we have you to thank so very much. That was the easy part of this letter. I am not sure how to convey what I have to tell you, so I will just begin.

In the last week, I have met somebody. I know the timing of this could not be worse with your planned trip to visit me, but these things can't always be avoided. His name is Vincent and I have no idea where this might lead but I know that I already have feelings for him that I want to explore. He is right here, after all. Everything seems so intense for me right now and I don't think that it is the best time for you to visit. I know how much we were both looking forward to seeing each other and I know that I probably should have never gone out dancing the other night because I always meet somebody when I do. Still,

this does not change our friendship or the feelings I have and will always have for you, Armando.

I am certain that you are disappointed by this development but I hope that you will not be angry with me. I have decided, after much thinking, to not be angry with myself. How could I be angry if I'm about to fall in love? I am going to accept what life gives me and right now, life has given me Vincent and Vincent has given me new life.

I hope that you can understand and support me as the dear friend you are to me. I trust that you will be able to get your money back from the airline ticket. I must tell you how very sorry I am that this news comes to you so late but I am sure you will be able to make plans to spend Christmas with your family and that they will be relieved to have you at home.

O-kay, Armando. I want to get this letter to you quickly so I will send it overnight. I wish that I could have told you this by telephone but I was not convinced I would be able to find the words or bear to hear the disappointment in your voice. I wish that I could be stronger for both of us right now but I must admit that all my strength and confidence are weakened by the shock of finding myself falling in love again. Life is full of surprises. I'm sorry that this is one of those surprises for you.

Con todo mi amor...

My arm holding the letter dropped to my lap and I sat there, on the porch for over thirty minutes staring at words blurred by tears. I wanted to feel

compelled to drive to the Basilica, climb the narrow, switch-backed staircase to the balcony ledge high in the dome to give up on El Inico just as Father Federico had given up on me. I wanted to scream in hysterics or beat myself in the chest and in the head but I found for the longest time, I could not move from the porch. I could not think. I could not feel. I could not be.

Chapter Ten

Be. How to be when your world has ceased its spinning and the rising sun has lost its allure to inspire the next breath. What is existence if it isn't the marking of pain and the brutal passing of time?

I could have adopted a more positive attitude, I suppose, but what would have been the point in that? The reality of my moment was despairing. To fake any pretense otherwise would have been wasting energy and resources I didn't have. Even in my lowest moments, I was practical.

I read El Inico's letter only once and placed it back in its envelope. The money order I cashed in the days that followed. Money was never personal to

me and as the check had been issued by a bank El Inico's name or signature had not even been required. It wasn't worth saving like one of El Inico's strands of hair might once have been. I was moving on this time, tal vez como un tortuga con patas de plomo, but I was moving on.

I did not act on my first compulsion, I'm sure to the relief of the janitors responsible for cleaning the basilica floor, but it had taken exactly two hours and forty-five minutes for my second compulsion to be ratified by my vengeful and desperate soul. I hopped in the Nova and went cruising for a cold.

I was in a self-abusing, self-destructing mood that I had a feeling needed to run its course before the next, hopefully more constructive phase, could begin. El Inico, it seemed, could not be without a relationship for more than one or two weeks. I had never had a relationship to know what all the fuss was about, so Phase Two, I hoped, would explore this option.

I headed for the part of Caracas known as Las Mercedes. Each social, medical, cultural, ethnical, commercial, industrial, political, educational, spiritual, agricultural and martial interest had its very own district seemingly dedicated to its function in the Soup Bowl. The different districts began as little more than haciendas once known as quintas. The Jews stuck to San Bernardino. Good theatre, museums and galleries were confined to the area around Plaza Venezuela. Really choice shopping was concentrated along the Sabana Grande. Los Palos Grandes was becoming the centre for the evening café scene. If you were looking for clubs, dancing and if you were lucky, –sex, you headed for Las

Mercedes to find it.

I had started too early in the evening and on the wrong evening at that as most places don't really get going until midnight and seldom did this happen on a Tuesday, but you can't always plan your compulsions. I had taken the time to shower and groom because what was the point in trying if I didn't think I'd have the opportunity to make the impression my compulsion demanded? I'd thrown in about a thousand push-ups for good measure so it was clear I was prepared to work at catching this cold and that perhaps I wasn't willing to settle for just any old cold. I had selected one of what I called my modeling outfits complete with sport coat and narrow tie as young, hip Caraqueños were married to a progressively formal dress code. Throughout my evening's preparation my recurring thought had been, dressing up is fun and I was going to do more of it. I was quickly finding the conviction to do more of everything I had denied myself in pursuit of my ideal, El Inico. My stance would eventually soften from retaliation to realization but it made for good energy and I made use of it while I had it in the pipeline, so to speak like my father who was in the oil business.

Homosexuality was and still is so repressed in Venezuela that a gay man often has twice as much success connecting with another gay man in a straight disco than by patronizing a known, though discreet gay establishment. My plan was to resort to gay clubs only when desperation and impatience managed to topple my flimsy objective of contracting a decent, well-dressed and well-educated cold. I don't think it is ever in anyone's plan to find somebody as

desperate as they are, at least not in the beginning of an offensive.

After a forty minute drive from my home in California Sur, my first stop and prowl was at Primer Piso where Av. Paris meets Calle New York at the edge of Las Mercedes. It was just after ten o'clock on Tuesday night so I wasn't surprised when I didn't encounter a line-up outside. I walked down a hallway painted with black lacquer and lighted from the floor to a bar near the opening of a large dance room with several dozen tables where a few dozen young people smoked and conversed in pairs or small groups. I ordered a trago de Polar which is a draft of the official beer of Venezuela, already wondering if I would stay long enough to use my second draft coupon that came with the 8 thousand bolívares cover charge I had just paid at the door. I reminded myself how early in the evening it was and momentarily considered catching a late movie nearby and trying again later in the evening when I hoped the place might have matured to a crowd in its thirties. I didn't have the patience or the brain capacity for a movie though and could only concentrate on getting laid so I moved to a vacant table and began to eliminate the group of contestants down to a very small handful of potentials. Very quickly it became pathetically obvious that nobody had noticed my arrival and nobody had noticed me sitting alone at a table. I pitied myself more than those I'd just disqualified because they were young and the young could always arrange to find sex, just as long as they hadn't foolishly given it up until they were too old to get it. I was thirty-three years old. It was four days before Christmas. I had planned for weeks to

be in El Inico's bed in 72 hours. My life had transformed into un infierno viviente and I didn't know what I had done to deserve such a merciless damning. I finished my Polar in a gulp and rose from the table to leave.

"Hola." A young and confident boy blocked my exit. "Soy, Ramón. ¿No estás saliendo?" he asked with widened brown eyes.

"No. I am not leaving," I told him in English trying to erase any trace of an accent, though I don't know why I adopted this pretense.

"Are you from Miami?" he asked me in perfected English of his own.

"No," I admitted with a smile that gave away everything including the tab to my zipper. "Soy Armando." I reached out my hand.

"Mucho gusto, Armando." Ramón was thin, slight of frame with blond hair and brown eyes. He reminded me of one of the many portorriqueño incarnations of the Menudo boys from the Seventies and Eighties. He wore a bleach white T-shirt beneath a black suit coat and pants. His facial skin was so perfectly clear I could see no evidence that he shaved and his teeth seemed to have been formed from solidified and homogenized milk. Strangely, it was everything boyish and apparently under age about him that attracted me the most. "¿Cuántos años tienes?" I suddenly had to know.

"Please, let's speak English." Ramón smiled as a black light above us flashed with the music to turn his teeth and T-shirt luminescent purple. "I'm 22," he answered. I did the math. He was born in 1969, —a year I actually remembered. That wasn't good but still, it was devilishly tempting. "You?" he

returned the question I think to make small talk.

"Thirty-three," I answered with a wince, pending his acceptance or rejection.

"My older brother is 33," Ramón responded. "Are you here with anybody?"

I smiled. He was getting to the point faster than I was prepared to take us. "No, nadie," I slipped back into Spanish. "¿Dónde vive en la ciudad?"

"You're speaking in Spanish again," the young man with the milk teeth told me. "Do I make you uncomfortable?"

"No, of course not," I objected and I lied. "I just think it sounds a little pretentious when two Latinos speak in English, that's all. So— I forgot my question."

"I live in Maracaibo to be completely honest with you. I am only in Caracas for the week visiting the brother I mentioned before."

"Where's your brother now?"

"Why? Do you think you might be more interested in him than you are in me?" Ramón never stopped smiling, which I found interesting and alarming all at once. He also maintained very close facial proximity for two men who were supposed to be straight or at least straight acting in a straight club.

"Who say's I'm not interested?" Fine, I thought. I'm the older one. I should be in charge here. "Would you like to take a walk?"

"Only if it's to your car," Ramón negotiated.

“Why?” I asked. “Are you more interested in my car than in me?”

We left Primer Piso and began walking the two or three blocks to my Nova. I was getting excited to be alone with Ramón and I did my best to conceal my erection with my hands buried deep in my pants pockets. All of a sudden, Ramón pushed me into the dark space between two buildings. With my hands engaged, I didn't have much balance to resist him. I opened my mouth to speak or to protest but Ramón's mouth was right there, on mine. He forced his tongue past my teeth as his hands struggled with the zipper of my pants. I was groaning inside his mouth with my eyes alerted and opened wide. His hands were inside my pants only as long as it took to get me outside my pants. He dropped to his knees and began getting to know me a little better. I kept watch through the narrow rectangle of light that shown between the walls of those two buildings. Was it possible that we had slipped through a crack in the Soup Bowl that none of the other 4 million abóndigas had ever discovered? If I disappeared deeper into this darkness, could I discover a way out on the other side? Under the care of Ramón, my erection grew and grew until it became as large as the Obelisco de la Plaza Altamira. It swelled so large that it pressed us right into the walls of those two buildings until we couldn't breathe and we couldn't move. Ramón did not stop though we were both at peril of being squished out into the street, my erection wedged, trapped and throbbing between those two stone and concrete buildings. I tried to slow him down with my hands on each of his ears but in the darkness I could not see what I was doing. Since the blood had

drained from every vein in my body to engorge my pene, I couldn't feel my hands and arms to know if I was regulating him or if I was now masturbating with Ramon's head. He began to sputter and spit and then all of a sudden, the thin boy with the perpetual smile was washed into the street flailing in a fit of milk rapids that spewed from between the two buildings and raged toward the gutter as though a fire hydrant had been severed at its fittings. I panted then collapsed to sit on the backs of my lower legs, my body still pinned against the wall that had managed to withstand my sizeable urban expansion.

It was minutes spent like a junkie in an alley after a transcendental fix before I felt able to emerge from the fissure I'd discovered in the Soup Bowl. On the sidewalk, standing in the lights of traffic and store windows of la Calle New York, I discovered my wallet and the boy with the perpetual smile, were both missing. "¡Coño!" I cussed out loud. "¡Coño!" I'd set out to catch a cold and now I had to catch a thief. I returned to Primer Piso where there was now a line to enter. I walked to the front of the line to the doorman and showed him my beer coupon from earlier. He let me pass into the black lacquered hallway. I searched the tables and the men's washroom for Ramón, if that was his name, but found nothing. I asked the bartender who had served me earlier if he remembered the thin boy I was talking to but he admitted a little to gruffly that he didn't remember me. I surrendered my beer coupon and nursed my pride and my trago de Polar at the same time.

Primer Piso was now crowded with several boys Ramón's age and size

though sex wasn't as much on my mind as it had been earlier. I now worried that someone was wandering the alleys of the Soup Bowl with my identification, my home address, my credit card, my television studio pass and my last paycheck from the theatre still not cashed. Oh, and a tiny photo of El Único taped to the back of another photo of Father Federico that I had cut from my yearbook of time spent at Liceo Leonardo Infante, could now be added to my list of losses. "¡Coño!" I grumbled into a raised beer glass. I went to the baño to piss away the after-semen and heard a voice that sounded like Ramón's in the stall next to me. I bent down to see how many feet I could see under the wall but only two were visible. Still, the voice whispered and still it sounded like Ramón. Bravely, I stood on the toilet and looked over the wall. I found myself head level with Ramón!

"¡Ladrón marícon!" I accused in a raised voice. "Mira, Chamo," I addressed the poor bastard giving Ramón a blow job. "Verifica tus bosillos porque tienes la pene de un ladrón en tu boca mientras él tiene la cartera tuyo en su mano.

Ramón pushed his partner away and tried to get down from the back of the toilet where he had been standing but I grabbed his jacket and held him there while his partner checked for his wallet. It was nice to be able to admire Ramón's tool of the trade, exposed, hard and glistening with what was likely not the first saliva of the evening's shift. The man extracted a wallet from Ramón's pants that were still bunched around his ankles. "Eso es mio," I shouted. The

stranger lifted my billfold and raised his embarrassed face for the first time to meet my eyes. He was gorgeous, his mouth still moist and a tiny stream of spit pooled in the corner of his puffy lips. "Gracias," I said rather seductively, given the horrendous compromise in which we all found ourselves in that very tense moment.

"De nada," he answered a bit automatically with one corner of his mouth, the corner with the spit trail, raised into a smile.

"Y la cartera tuyo?" I reminded him of his own wallet.

"Si, aqui es." He produced a second wallet from the deep pockets of Ramón's nightly uniform and disguise. I released my hold on the little thief's jacket and the other man shoved him into the wall where he scrambled to get his pants back over the now failing erection he'd used as a prop. In a flash, Ramón bolted out of the stall and into the crowded nightclub leaving his two victims to repair in front of a double sink and a mirror.

"Soy Max," the puffy lipped stranger said to my reflection in the mirror as we washed our hands. He dabbed at his mouth with the back of his wet hand and blushed all over again. It was the oddest of situations to meet somebody but Max happened to be my idea of just the right kind of sniffles, fever, sore throat, and congested chest I'd set out to catch in the first place. I reached out my not yet dried hand to shake his.

"Soy Armando. Mucho gusto." I grabbed my wallet that I'd set on the basin while I washed and tucked it into my inside blazer pocket. It's not where I

normally carried it but I'd been reminded a person couldn't be too careful in the Soup Bowl. "¿Me permites a comprar un trago por ustead? I asked if I could buy Max a beer.

"Si puedo compar lo segundo por tí." Max smiled a counter offer I was more than anxious to accept. Were those really his blue eyes or might they be colored contacts? I suddenly sneezed twice in a row. I knew it was the onset of something truly viral.

"Salud!" Max offered with a pat and a squeeze on my shoulder as he lead me out of the washroom. El Único-who?

The Primer Piso was packed and noisy but we managed to find an empty table on an elevated stage away from the dance floor speakers where we could talk. Max didn't look like El Único or Father Federico. He didn't speak English though he was fluent in Portuguese having spent two years of university in Lisbon. He was a civil engineer by schooling but a fitness trainer and aerobics instructor by day profession. He had held a lucrative engineering position with the government and had been instrumental in a redesign of the highway between San Fernando de Atabapo and San Juan de Manapiare before Operación Zamora attempted an overthrow of the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in February of this year. Because part of Operación Zamora's agenda had been to construct a Junta de Reconstrucción Nacional under a military installation forming the ruling party, and because the military has historically gone out of its way to eliminate homosexuals from its ranks in all levels under its jurisdiction,

Max had resigned his post. In the end, the overthrow had failed almost on the very day it was begun but as the highway was nearly completed and his work on that project was done, Max left the interior to disappear into the nightlife of Caracas until the government situation stabilized. As if that was ever, ever going to happen! According to him, he had plenty of money tucked away and didn't have to work for a while but boredom quickly took hold. His daily workouts at a downtown gymnasium to pass the time happened to evolve into a job offer and a new career path that excited him like civil engineering never had. Max didn't think he could go back to engineering. I didn't think his eyes were really blue.

I told Max my excuses for having gotten this old, having remained single and having still to rely on the nightclub scene to find my life's intended happiness.

Max told me, "No esperas," don't despair. "Puedes encontrar alegría en un puesto del baño público." You can find happiness in a public bathroom stall. Then he said to trust him, he knew. I wasn't certain if he was referring to me or to Ramón or to another bathroom encounter altogether, but I knew better than to have this point clarified. I wanted to tell him I could trust him more if I knew the true source of his blue eyes, but on this point I also chose to wait.

After a second beer, I realized that we had both left our billfolds on the table between us, perhaps as a nonverbal sign of our willingness to trust again. Max suggested we leave Primer Piso and go somewhere for an espresso. I started to suggest Café Brioche but stopped myself and mumbled an excuse that

it was too far away. Being too far away had never bothered me the other hundred times I'd gone there for no other reason than it reminded me of El Único. This night, I didn't want that reminder. I didn't want to have to reference anything I experienced to be in relation or comparison to him. I told Max wherever he wanted to go was fine with me. We left Primer Piso to discover we had both driven. I suggested we both drive and meet someplace but Max did not want to risk being separated in traffic. I offered to drive and he made me promise to bring him back to his car, no matter how the evening ended. I unlocked the passenger door of my Nova for my suddenly unexpected date. I paused a moment before opening the door. ¿Y qué paso si no termina el noche? I asked what would happen in case the night didn't end.

Max smiled at me with a wink of his very blue eyes. "Entonces, querrás a saber cómo le gustan mis huevos." I laughed. He said, then I'd want to know how he liked his eggs.

"Ojala en mi boca," I told him seductively. Translation: I hope you'll like your eggs in my mouth. I opened the door and he climbed inside. Walking around the back of the car to the driver's side, I checked my sport coat for my wallet and finding it there, I patted it for good luck. When I was inside, sitting next to puffy-lipped, blue-eyed Max, I noticed his hand on the dashboard, his finger figuratively brushing the hair in the photo I had affixed there. I looked at his face and watched in complete disbelief as Max spoke the words,

"Mi Padre Federico."

Capítulo Once

“Necesitas hablar,” te dijo.

“Sí.”

Y con esto, condujiste mi Chevy Nova del color verde de limón o de la rana, dependiente en la luz, al través de las calles de Las Mercedes, sin ninguna palabra más hasta llegamos al Aroma Café en frente a Le Monde de l'Image. A lo primero, Max no mueve y se pareció a ser en choque. Sabiendo mi mente y cómo lo funcionado, ya realizó que yo no fui El Único en la vida del Padre Federico. Pero no supe todo el cuento.

En el interior del Café, pensé por mis adentros que pude mantener el control pero los ojos azules y los labios a ráfagas del Max reflejado que le dominó el miedo. Quise abrazarle pero el cliente del Café no fue mezclado ni indulgente. En vez de esto, dije el obvio. “Como yo, fuiste parte del Coro de los Muchachos del Santiago Apóstol.”

“Y tu eres Armando Amatista, —el niño con la voz del oro.”

“Más o menos, sí. ¿Y la noche de la Misa Saltado—” Súbitamente, hemos caído en una película muda de negro y blanco. Detrás de las pestañas de Max, a dónde en otro tiempo existe ojos tan azules, sean ojos negros y incierto. En silencio, sin subtítulos y un escenario, fuimos confundido por nuestra fraternidad y la revelación de un Padre común.

En fin, habla Max. “Fui allá, cantando hasta rompido mis pulmones, encima de las tejas frías del piso de la Basílica, cuando salta el Padre más precioso del mundo. No había creído en Dios desde entonces.”

“Ni mi tampoco,” lo admitido por primera vez. Viene un camarero para tomar nuestro orden de dos cafés au lait. Los ojos del Max encierran con los del mío y continua la película muda. Si Max estuviera allá en la noche de la Misa Saltado, encima del piso de la Basílica, él vio todo que no pude ver. Todo, incluyendo el fin inquietador. Tuve ninguna palabra para comprender las cosas horribles que vieron los ojos azules de Max, pues continua la película muda entre nosotros. Los cafés llegaron y tomamos un minuto de silencio extra para recibirles y por mí, para ajusté con azúcar. No pude saber en este momento que Max fue pensando en la misma cosa que me ocurrió. Si fue yo y Max, tal vez Padre Federico tuvo otros muchachos del coro también. ¿Qué pasó a estos muchachos? ¿Qué pasó a nosotros?

Max toma un sorbo del café con cuidado y carraspear su garganta. “¿Hizo Padre Federico te llama el apodo El Único?

No fui cierto pero le dije automatico "Nó." El silencio que sigue traicionado todo. ¡Claro que sí! Cuando fuera mas joven y mucho antes de la noche de la Misa Saltado, Padre Federico me llamó esto y sin sabiendolo, di el nombre a mi novio de ficción como Padre Federico lo hubo dado a mi. Y ahora, aprendo que Max tuvo el nombre también. ¡Coño!

"Tus ojos me dicen que fueras un El Único en los tiempos del Padre Federico también," Max me dijo con lagrimas evidente en sus ojos tan azules. "Entiendo todo."

"¿De veras, —todo?" Extende mi mano atrás de la mesa a tocar su mano. El responde con un apretón fuerte que no absuelva los pecados del Padre pero unido los muchachos de La Misa Saltado. Se me hace aqua de los ojos. Tiré el cuerpo de Max hacia dentro mis brazos en el centro del Café. ¿Qué hace Padre Federico ahora? Me preguntaba qué seríamos de nosotros con esto conocimiento.

"Le extraño mucho," dije Max. "A veces, no se cómo yo nunca recuperado y a veces, no creo que he recobrado en todo. Fue un noche horrible y imposible a olviddar."

"Padre Federico es imposible a olvidar."

"Especialmente cuando fuera uno de Los Únicos, ¿verdad?"

Nada mas pude negar sus ojos, y finalmente, yo rendido la respuesta para que Max estaba esperando. "Sí," lo dije. "Uno de los Únicos, como tú."

"Estoy tan contento a encontrarte."

“Y mi también, sinceramente.” Algunas segundos pasado y juntos, exclaramos

“¡Gracias a Padre Federico!

Nos continuado hablando de cosas ancianos de años ninguno de nosotros hiciémos recordado, pero hicimos. Y cuando hemos tomado bastante café a nunca poder dormirse, proclamamos que estuvimos cansados, a provocar el próximo movimiento del baile entre nosotros. Directamente, hay la problema de dos coches y las promesas por la mañana a ser verdadero y agradable a revolver el otro a su coche y su vida prior. Y la pregunta obvio del momento, fue adónde fuimos. Como todos los otros adultos no casados, nostros dos vivido con nuestros padres. Y por eso, fue necessario a obtener sexo en callejuelas y baños y Chevy Novas, tan fútil fue nuestro exitencia homosexual.

“Tengo un amigo,” me ofrece, “quien trabaja el turno campsanto en la mesa frente de la Caracas Hilton. Es posible que hay una cuarto libre por el noche, si quieres tratar allá.”

Max responde, “Y yo tengo las llaves del gymnasio donde trabajo.”

“Claro! Tengo las llaves del teatro. Eso se puede interesante con la escena del Lago Cisne.” Nos reído. “¡Escuchandonos!” Yo dije. “Lo parece que estamos gestionando un negocio commerciante. Solo quiero pasar mas tiempo contigo. Para mi, no hace tener a ser sexo.”

“Sinceramente, ni por mi, también. Mira. Mis padres saldrán por Portugal en el sábado que viene. ¿Te gusta ser mi convidado por la cena en mi casa este

sábado que viene?”

“Lo será mi placer, Max. Y ahora, mi permites a toma Ud. a tu coche.”

“Gracias, señor.”

La semana no progreso tan rápido y en facto, lo movido como un tortugo con patos de plomo. Los nuevos pensamientos de Max toman todo el espacio de mi mente y los pensamientos que tuve una vez de El Único sean forzados afuera, al través de mi nariz y mis orejas, para acumular a mis pies como la basura de ayer que me olvidé a tomar al calle.

Trabajé como una maquina humano en el teatro. Estuvimos en ensayos últimos por un espectáculo ambulante de El Lago Cisne, con el gran abierto en la tarde del domingo que viene. Afortunadamente, sigiendo una dia completa para el último ensayo en el sabado, el teatro fuera oscura en la noche, pues fui libre por cena con Max. La compania de ballet estuvo de Chicago y mi Inglés fue en demanda. Si no estuviera por eso, no hablara ninguna palabra en Inglés pues me recuerde de El Único. Con Max fresco en la escena, no quise nada a mitigar mis esperanzas. En mi cuarto en la casa de mis padres, tuve se doblado los fotos de El Único y hay solo un foto del malogrado Padre Federico mirado cuando planché mis selecciones de vestidos perfectos por cada ocasión con Max de ojos azules. Y este vez, no hay ser accidentes de planchar ni intervención de los santos (a no ser que haya estado demasiado tarde). Hice semblante de no reconocer la verdad como nos encontramos, pero puedo preguntar porqué. Y

cada hora de cada día, pregunté porqué.

El sábado vino y todo fue horrible en el teatro. Nada fue correcto con el grupo ambulante. Nadie parece a comprender Inglés o Español, ni las palabras universales del teatro. ¡Aquel desastre! Por el tiempo salí mi trabajo, estuve listo por un sanatorio. Tomó treinta minutos a llegar en casa a dónde mis pantalones y una camisa azul estaban planchados y esperando. Fresco del baño y mirando muy guapo, di un beso a Carmen, la criada quien fue como mi madre secundaria y la Iglesia Católico en la misma cuerpo. Como mi madre porque ella me quiere todo la alegría del mundo y como la Iglesia porque ella trata a protejirme de todo la alegría del mundo. En el caso del mío, todo la alegría vendría con el amor de un otro hombre; algo que mis madres ni mi Iglesia pueden comprender.

Conduciendo al través de la ciudad en la dirección de la Avila y la casa de Max, empecé a suplicar al Padre Federico por su bendición sobre la noche que viene. Si hay razón para Max y yo a encontrar, quiere a saber esta noche por cierto. Con la Navidad solo seis días en el futuro, no hay tantos oportunidades para ir de compras. Lo sería perfecto a empezar relaciones con Max durante mis vacaciones retribuidas, especialmente con mis planes piores revocado de pronto.

Había estudiado las direcciones que Max me ha dado por teléfono y por eso, aprendí de memoria la ruta en mi mente. Solo la locura tremenda del teatro con el grupo desde Chicago, me evité de practicando la ruta actual en las noches anterior de esta cita con mi amor destino. Atravéz al Barrio San

Bernadino a donde vive la familia de Miguel, conduje arriba en las faldas de la montaña Ávila hasta el Centro de Caracas aparecido como una planeta lejos distante. Mientras contando los números de las casas, me fijé que las casas llega a ser más grande y más caro con cada bloque yo viajé. Fue obvio que este Distrito pertenece a la gente opulento. No me hube preocupado con la posición económica de los padres de Max. Había sido impreso bastante con los factos que Max estaba un ingeniero civil y mas que el tiene interés en migo, un bailaror viejo quien trabaja en la oscura del teatro. No me hagas alguna diferencia, pero icoño! Fija en los dimensiones del mansión de Max! Me paré el coche y corté las luces en la afuera de una cerca de hierro negro. Tan rápido corrió mi corazón.

“Venga!” dije la cerca en la voz de Max. Vi una camera debajo de un plantador de arboles miniaturas. Sonreí y automatica abrió la cerca. Max apareció en la puerta para dar un bienvenido y un abrazo que arrugado mi camisa. Con sus manos y con mejillas rojas, Max planchado mi pecho de vez en cuando sus ojos azul brillantes desnudame. Tal vez los ojos de Max siempre aparecieron como esto pero porque esto es mi cuenta, en este caso los ojos de Max desnudame. Por instinto, me relamí mis labios y afectado un actitud seductivo y porque esto es mi cuenta, Max no pudo me resistir. Arranco Max mi camisa arrugada. Botones toman vuelto y mi piel negro reflejado las estrellas encima de la Escudilla de Sopa como una vía láctia independiente que fue lista para exploración. Abrí mis ojos a descubrir que estuve llevando todo mi ropa y

Max estuvo caminando adentro la casa grande sin migo. Corrí detrás de Max como las aromas de la cocina me venció. "¡Santo Max de la Cocina! Todo huele estupendo!"

"Y mi también?" dijo Max.

"Hmm, no se. Alto!" Atasca Max y tendió sus brazos por un inspección. Moví adentro el y acaricié su garganta con mi nariz. "Hueles perfecto, comestible, adictivo. Te extraño esta semana pasada. No pensé que este Sábado podido llegar."

"Ni mi tampoco," murmurado Max en mi oreja, besandome suavemente. "¡Mierda! Mi calabaza!" gritó Max con manos a su cabeza antes de desapareciendo adentro la cocina. Minutos mas tarde,Max presentó un vaso de cristal fino lleno de Port, directamente del Rio Oporto en Portugal, según mi huesped con ojos azules. "Te pones cómodo y espera cinco minutos mas y la cena será lista."

"¿Puedo ayudarte?"

"No, gracias. Estoy preparando la especialidad de mi casa, -en realidad, este plato es la signatura de mi familia por tantos generaciones, -possible por siempre. No sé por cierto. ¡Salúd!"

Tomé un sorbo del vino de Oporto y cerré mis ojos en placer completo mientras que el torrente de sangre de la Península Iberia transforma mis entrañas al dentro un horno del diablos. Estaba sonriendo detras de mis ojos cerrados y a despecho de mi mente faltando. Los olores de la cocina empezado

a ser tan mucho por mi estomago vacio por resulta de nervosidad y mi entrenamiento del cuerpo. Por este razon, el vino de Portugal fue directo a mi cabeza. Reconocí la voz de María Bethañia en el fondo y mientras yo pensé que las palabras Españoles sonido mejor en los canciones que los de Portugueses, nadie puede discutir con confianza el contrario que las mujeres Portugueses estuvieran las cantoras superiores. María Bethania, Mercedes Sosa, Zizi Possi, aun Sonia Braga estaban en medio de mis favoritas de todo tiempo. Y ahora, con el vino de Oporto, los olores y la oportunidad a ser con un hombre autentico estaban tanto apabullante a sorportar. Me senté en la sofa así como de una onda calor atacaó mi cuerpo. Tomé un aliento largo, y entonces un otro. Cuando abrieron mis ojos, estaba Max.

“¿Estás listo para cenar, Guapo?”

¿Guapo? Omite la cena. ¡Que coquetón! “Sí” te dije, sabiendo que necesito comida en mi estomago antes de tratando actividades físicos. Seguí Max a dentro la sala a donde queda una mesa espectaculo con flores de colores de naranja y amarilla que forman una guirnalda alrededor de una calabaza enorme. Tantos candellas dan la luz minimal para hacer el humor perfecto. Max tiró una silla y gestó para mi a sentarse. Finalmente, estamos juntos y solos. Max levantó su vaso de vino. “Por nosotros,” el dije y comenzamos la cena que consiste de tres cosas: una sopa de Portugal que se llama Caldo Verde, sigue por un ensalada de mejilliones y el plato principal con origenes en Argentina que Max se llama Carbonada a la Criolla. Cada de estos

platos merece descripciones en detalle pues yo pedí a Max por las recetas. Porque ha preparado por este noche especial de antemano, Max tuvo instrucciones, paso a paso, incluyendo las recetas completas, en dos páginas de notas. Max me ha dado estas notas como un recuerdo de la cena con él. Las notas siguen:

Mi Cena Con Armando

21 de Diciembre, 1991

Viernes

(Recuerdo a comprar flores, candelas y vino de Porto)

Sabado

(Limpia la casa!)

PRIMERO: Caldo Verde (La sopa mas común en Portugal)

1.25 litros de agua

4 papas, de tamaño regular

Sal (a sabor)

Mitad de un col pequeño (desmenuzado fino)

30 mil. Aceite de oliva

Pimienta negra (molido nuevamente)

Trae la agua al punto de ebullición en una cazuela larga. Añade las papas y la sal a sabor. Cubriere la cazuela, reduciere el calor y cociere las papas hasta que estan a tiernos. Tome las papas y puré los antes de regresa a la agua. Añade la col desmenuzado, el aciete de oliva y

pimiento a sabor. Trae la mezclada al punto de ebullición y cociere sin la tapadera por cinco minutos. Ajusta el condimento y sirve. Da 4 porciones.

SEGUNDO: Ensalada Mar de Selva

(Salada de Mejillíones com Molho de Pimenta e Limao)

1 docena de mejillíones frescas en las conchas y limpiados

1 docena de gambas (sin cabezas y patas)

1 Mango, cortar en pedazos

6-8 flores de cebollanas

2-4 hojas de plátanos

Con un mezcladora, proceso la siguiente:

4 chiles verdes, cortar en pedazos

1 cebolla de tamaño regular, cortar en pedazos

1 diente de ajo, cortar en pedazos

1 pedazo de sal

125 mil jugo de lima

Toma porciones iguales de la pasta de chilies y lima y ponga en el centro de cada hoja del Plátano en una montañito. Arregla las mejilliones y gambas alrededor de estos montañitos y añade las pedazos de Mango. Envolve los mejilliones con la hoja del plátano y coser juntos las tapas de las hojas con los tallos de los cebollanas. Ponga los paquetes sobre una percha elevada adentro un gran jarro de agua caliente con una cobertera. Echa vapor por 15 o 20

minutos a permitir las conchas de los mejillones a abrir.

PLATO PRINCIPAL: Carbonado a la Criolla

60 mil aciete de oliva

1 cebolla, de tamaño regular, cortar en pedazos finos

1 kilo carne de vaca, cubicado y sin grasa

3 tomates, palidecidos, pelados, sin pepidas y cortar en pedazos

1 hoja de laurel

1 pedazo de orégano

1 cuchillo de pasta de tomate

1 pedazo de azúcar

1 litro de caldo de vaca

.75 kilo batatas, pelados y cortar en pedazos

.75 kilo patatas, cortar en pedazos

.50 kilo calabaza, cortar en pedazos

Sal a sabor

Pimienta negra (molido nuevamente)

3 melocotones pequeños, pelados, picosos y cortar en medio

peras pequeños, pelados, y cortar en

orejas de maíz, cortar en pedazos 10 cm de ancho

Zapallo (un tipo de calabaza de las Antillas), corta una abertura tan grande a pasar tu mano para hechar cóncavo por retirando todo los contenidos.

Trae el aciete de oliva a un temperatura para cocinar en una cacerola.

Añade la cebolla y fríe hasta volverse moreno. Empuje la cebolla concinado a un lado del cacerola y añade el carne, asado ligeramente por todas partes. Añade los tomates, laurel, orégano, pasta del tomate, azúcar y el caldo de vaca y revuelve a mezclar. Cubri y hervi a fuego lento por una hora.

Treinta minutos antes de sirviendo, ponga el zapallo en el horno y cocer a la temperatura de 180°C. Cocer la cobertera al lado del zapallo para permitir a cocer la interior del zapallo.

En la cacerola, añade las batatas, las patatas y pedazos de calabaza. Añade sal y pimienta a sabor. Cubri y cocine por 15 minutos. Añade los melocotones y las peras, cubri y cocine por 10 minutos mas. Añade el maíz y cocine por 5 minutos mas.

Traslado los contenidos de la cacerola al zapallo y cocine 10-20 minutos mas con la cobertera en cima del zapallo atrapando los sabores. Los contenidos se quedarán caliente en el zapallo por 20-30 minutos despues de sirviendolo.

(En este punto, incluiría la receta por el Flan de Arroz al Limon, pero Max y yo omitido el postre para los dulces carnales).

El sexo con Max fue un desastre de proporciones comicos. No somos solos y el vino de Porto tiene la culpa de esto. En el principio del baile todo fue bien pero subítamente la cara y el cuerpo de Max transforman, primero en la imagen de Padre Federico y despues en la imagen de El Único. Luego, Max tiene

la cabeza del El Único y la cuerpo de Padre Federico. Minutos mas tarde, estuve adentro el culo de Max pero en mi mente, no estuvo el culo de Max pero de Padre Federico y el estuvo llevando el vestido y el crucifijo de un padre. No pude desviar mis ojos mientras la luz brillante del crucifijo fue disolviendolos. Grité la palabra "¡Salvame!" —recogiendo que estuve atornillando el culo del eterno Iglesia Católico. No puede cerrar mis ojos porque lo haga menor. Por un rato, estuve haciendo amor con un El Único quien tuvo el pene de Max y el pecho sin pelo de Padre Federico. ¡Aquel Frankenstein!

Cuando salí la casa de Max, estuve perplejo y no cierto con quien había sido. Yo recuerdo que alguien me aconsejó que nos podemos reunirse a la Basilica Santiago Apóstol por la Misa de Nochebuena en dos dias. Pues, en dos dias, me vestí todo en negro, pantalones, zapatos y gabàn, excepto de una camisa blanca abontonado al arriba, porque no pude pensar de algo mas apropiado por el aniversario número veinte-uno de la Misa Nochebuena original, —la Misa Saltando.

Llequé a la Basilica temprano a quedar en la afuera para la llegada de Max. Estuve muy intranquilo y a pesar de hube usado tanto desodorante, estuve sudando adentro mi coraza negra. La Basilica fue llenando hasta los bordes y no vi nada de Max. Las notas largas y vibradas de los cañones del órgano viajado al través de las piedras a crujido mi alma y activado mi complejo de culpa Católico. Hasta veinte-uno años que habia sido a la Basilica o cualquier iglesia. Aún creí en Diós. En Venezuela, no tuve otra opción. Los sacerdotes y

el arzobispo formando un desfile a lado del lugar a donde estuve de pie, quedando por Max. El procesional estuvo para empezar y el arzobispo me dije

“Dios te bendijo, Armando.”

“¿Cómo me conoces? Pedí el arzobispo.

“El Señor conocéis todo”

La música cambia y al instante reconocí el arreglo original de Padre Federico de la Ave María. Empujé hacia delante a entrar la Basilica antes de el procesión. En el interior, el aire estaba denso con los olores de parafina y lo estaba como pasando por miel. En el interior, todo movido en una velocidad reducida y en seguida, vi los muchachos del coro ya ebozando el piso octagonal debajo de la boveda de la Basilica. Una voz de un muchacho solo ha sonado desde el balcón en lo alto y increíblemente, la aria encantado empieza. Desde a donde estuve a pie, ví la imagen de Max desapareco en la entrada estrecho que inclinado arriba una escalera hasta al balcón. Moví al través la multitud de fieles por la escalaera. Atravesando el piso octagonal, choque contra un muchacho del coro quien tuvo ojos tan azules, podia ser Max como un niño. Sonrió el muchacho y entonces murmuró, “!Mira, Armando!” El muchacho apuntó con su mano arriba al balcón. No pude mirar.

“¿Quiéne eres?” te dije con sorpresa. No hay una respuesta. La voz de la solista empezó a llenar la boveda de la Basilica. El muchacho con los ojos azules empezó cantando con el coro, quedando sus ojos sobre al balcón. Cuando vino tiempo por la nota mas alta de la aria, el muchacho con los ojos azules empezó a

reír como un demonio. En este momento, me fijé sangre sobre mi camisa blanca que formado la letra F y no puede aguantar la tentación a mirar arriba. Allí, encima de la barandilla del balcón, con brazos extendidos, fue un hombre en el vestido de un sacerdote. En el momento exacto, cuando la solista alcanzaba por la nota G Mayor, desde el piso octagonal de la Basilica, yo grité las palabras,

“¡Max, NO!”

Chapter Eleven

“We need to talk,” I told him

“Yes,” Max agreed.

And with this understood, I drove my Chevy Nova, green like a lime or a tree frog depending on the light, through the streets of Las Mercedes, without another word between us until we arrived at the Aroma Café in front of a neo-furniture design studio called Le Monde de l’Image. At first, Max didn’t move

and he seemed to be in some state of shock. Knowing my own mind and how it functioned, I had already realized that I was not the only “El Único” in Father Federico’s life. But I didn’t know the whole story.

Inside the Café, I thought to myself that I could maintain my position of total control but the blue, blue eyes and puffy lips of Max revealed that I didn’t stand a chance against such lethal weaponry. I wished to embrace him, to let him know I was pleased to reconnect with him after all these years, but the clientele of the Café was neither mixed nor indulgent. Instead of this, I stated the obvious, “Like me, you were part of the Coro de los Muchachos at the Basilica Santiago Apóstol.”

“And you are Armando Amatista, the boy with the voice of gold.”

“More or less,” I conceded. “And the night of the Leaping Mass—?” All of a sudden we found ourselves in a silent movie of black and white. Behind Max’s long eyelashes, where in another time might have existed eyes of pen ink blue, were eyes so very black and desperately uncertain. In this silence, without subtitles or a script, we were confused by our brotherhood and the revelation of a common Father.

At last, Max spoke. “I was there, singing so hard my lungs nearly broke, standing on the cold tiles of the Basilica floor when the most precious Father in all the world, leapt for Heaven from the railing of the dome. I haven’t believed in God since that moment.”

“Me neither,” I admitted for the first time. A waiter came to our table to

take our order of two cafés au lait. I don't believe either of us had any intention of sleeping this night so we didn't hesitate to order caffeine for security. The eyes of Max locked with mine and the silent movie continued. If Max was there on the night of the Leaping Mass, he saw everything I refused to see; everything, including the disturbing end. There were not words that would help me comprehend the horrible things his blue eyes had seen that night and so continued the silent movie between us.

The cafés arrived and for some minutes longer we had an excuse to continue our silence and at least for me, to add sugar to the strong coffee. Just when I thought I could not know what Max was thinking, it seemed to occur to both of us in exactly the same moment that if there was Max and me, perhaps Father Federico had other boys in the chorus with whom he had confided sexually. What happened to those boys? What became of us?

Max carefully took a sip from his coffee and cleared his throat. "Did Father Federico give you the nickname, El Único?"

To be honest, I wasn't certain in that instant but I answered automatically, "no." The silence that followed betrayed everything. Of course, when I was much younger and long before the night of the Leaping Mass, Father Federico had called me this and without really thinking about it, I had given the name to my own fictional lover, now in Denver, just as Father Federico had given it to me. And now, it would appear that Max had the special name as well. Fuck!

"Your eyes tell me that you were an El Único in the times of Father Federico too," Max told me with tears just evident in his eyes so blurry blue. "I understand everything."

"Really?" I questioned him. "Everything?" I extended my hand across the table to touch his hand. He responded by grasping it with a strength that didn't absolve the sins of the Father but rather united the boys of La Misa Saltando. This epiphany brought tears to my own eyes. I pulled the body of Max into my arms in the center of the Café. I wondered what Father Federico was doing right now given his influence over us still. What would become of us with this knowledge? Why had we come together again after all these years?

"I miss him so much," Max confided. "At times, I don't know how I ever recovered from that night and at times, I believe I haven't recovered at all. It was a horrible night and impossible to forget."

"Father Federico is impossible to forget," I thought to correct him.

"Especially when you are one of his Los Únicos, right?"

No longer could I withstand his eyes and finally, I surrendered the confirmation for which Max had been waiting. "Yes," I said. "One of Los Únicos, like you and like me."

"I am very happy to meet you again," Max said.

"Me too, sincerely." Seconds passed before it dawned on us to acknowledge the coincidence and together we exclaimed, "Gracias a Padre Federico!"

We continued talking of ancient things of years neither of us could remember though remember we did, and when we had filled ourselves with enough coffee to never sleep, we proclaimed that we were tired, somewhat perfunctorily, to provoke the next Technicolor, Surroundsound movement of the five senses ballet that was already self-choreographing between us. Directly, there was the problem of our two vehicles and our denial of the morning that would surely come when these separate cars would return us to our prior lives. The second of our dilemmas came with the obvious question of where we could go at this time of night given that like anyone our age, in all of Latin America, who hadn't yet married, we were adult men still living at home with our parents. And for this, it was necessary for us to obtain sex in alleys and public bathrooms and Chevy Novas, so futile was our homosexual existence.

"I have a friend," I was the first to offer, "who works the graveyard shift at the front desk of the Caracas Hilton. It's possible there is a free room for the night, if you care to try there."

And Max responded, "I have the keys to the gym where I work."

"Of course!" I anted. I have the keys to the theatre. And sex could be very interesting on the set of Swan Lake." We laughed. "Listen to us," I said. "It seems we are negotiating a business transaction. I only want to spend time with you. For me at least, it doesn't have to be about sex."

"Sincerely, neither for me. Look. My parents are leaving for Portugal this coming Saturday. Would you like to be my guest for dinner at my house this

coming Saturday?" Max was suddenly all formal and manners with his hands clasped behind his back.

"It would be my pleasure, Max. And now, if you'll permit me to take you to your car."

"Thank you, sir."

The week did not progress very rapidly and in fact, it moved like a turtle with legs of iron. My new thoughts of Max took all the space in my brain and my thoughts of El Único were forced through my nose and ears to accumulate at my feet like yesterday's garbage that I'd forgotten to take to the street.

I worked like a human machine at the theatre. We were in the final rehearsals for a traveling production of the ballet, Swan Lake, with the premiere scheduled for Sunday afternoon. Fortunately for my dinner plans with Max, after a full day in final rehearsal on Saturday, the theatre would be dark Saturday night, a rather unusual scheduling occurrence. The ballet company was from Chicago and my English was in demand. After receiving the bomb of my cancelled invitation to Denver, I had placed an embargo on the use of English as it only reminded me of El Único and of how angry and hurt I was. If it hadn't been for my degree of fluency in English, the curtains would never open on this production. Besides, with Max fresh on the scene, nothing was going to diminish my hopes.

In my bedroom, in the house of my parents, I had covered the many

Christmas Card photos of El Único with black construction paper and only one photo of the evil Father Federico remained staring at me while I ironed my selection of perfect outfits for each possible occasion I could spend with Max. This photo I only allowed out of deference to his connection to Max with the blue eyes. This time, there would neither be ironing accidents nor an intervention of the saints (that is if they hadn't already intervened to bring Max and I together). I could not deny the truth of how we'd come together but in the larger scheme of things, I could ask why. And every hour of every day, I asked why.

Saturday came and everything went to hell at the theatre. Nothing went right with the traveling dance company. Nobody seemed to understand English or Spanish nor the universal jargon of the theatre. It was such a disaster and less than a day before the show opened. By the time I was finally able to leave the job, I was ready for a sanitorium. In Saturday afternoon traffic, which in Caracas, moves at a much slower pace, it took me thirty minutes to reach my parent's house where my pants and a dark blue, long sleeved button down shirt were pressed and waiting. Fresh from the shower and looking quite handsome, I gave a kiss to Carmen our housekeeper who was like a second mother to me and the Catholic Church all in the same body; like my mother because she wanted for me all the happiness in the world and like the Church because she would do everything to protect me from all the happiness in the world. In my case, all the happiness would come with the love of another man; something neither my mothers nor the Church could comprehend.

I drove across the city in the direction of the Avila and the house of Max and began to pray to Father Federico for his blessing on the night that was coming. If there had truly been a greater reason for Max and I to encounter each other after all the years, I wanted to know it tonight for certain. With Christmas only six days away, there weren't that many shopping days left, at least not for someone you loved. It would be perfect to begin a relationship with Max during my paid vacation, especially with my prior plans for the holidays suddenly revoked.

I had been studying the directions that Max had given me by telephone and because of this, I had all but memorized the route to his house in my mind. It was only the tremendous schedule of the theatre and the demands of the ballet troupe from Chicago that kept me from practicing the actual route in the nights preceding this date with my destined lover. Across the San Bernardino neighborhood where Miguel's family lived, I drove into the foothills of the Avila from where the center of Caracas seemed like a very distant planet in the galaxy I could see from my rear-view mirror. While counting the numbers of the houses, I began to notice that the homes were becoming larger and more expensive with each block I ascended. I can't say as though I was preoccupied with the social standing of Max's parents. It was impressive enough that Max, himself, had become a civil engineer and even more impressive that he had an interest in me, an old dancer that worked in the dark wings of a theatre. So the size of his parents house really made no difference to me but fuck! Look at the

dimensions of that mansion! I stopped the car and cut the headlights in front of a black rot-ironed fence. My heart was beating so fast.

“Come in!” said the fence in the voice of Max. I spied a hidden camera in the bottom of a planter full of miniature trees. I smiled at the camera and automatically the fence began to open. Max appeared in the doorway to give me an unbelievable welcome with a hug that wrinkled my shirt. With his hands and reddened cheeks, Max ironed the shirt on my chest at the same time his brilliantly blue colored eyes undressed me. (In reality, I suppose the eyes of Max could have always seemed seductive like this but because this is my story, they undressed me. Instinctively, I licked my lips and affected a seductive attitude of my own and again, because this is my story, Max found me irresistible. Max tore my wrinkled blue shirt from my body. Buttons took flight and my black skin reflected the stars dangling high above the Soup Bowl like an independent milky way that was ready for exploration. In fact, I opened my eyes to discover that I was still fully clothed and Max had gone into the grand house assuming I had followed him. I ran to catch up to Max when the aromas of the kitchen enveloped me. “Saint Max of the Kitchen! Everything smells stupendous,” I declared.

“Even me?” Max asked bashfully.

“Hmmm, I’m not certain. Stop!” Max obeyed and reached out his arms for inspection. I moved into them and nuzzled his neck with my nose. “You smell perfectly and addictably edible.” Max allowed his body to bounce in a

chuckle. "I missed you this week. I didn't think Saturday was ever going to arrive."

"Me neither," murmured Max in my ear, kissing me softly there. "Shit, my pumpkin!" he shouted with hands suddenly flying to his head before he disappeared into the kitchen. Minutes later, Max emerged to present me with a crystal goblet filled with Port, directly from the Rio Oporto in Portugal, according to my host with eyes of blue. "Please make yourself completely comfortable, wait five minutes longer and our dinner will be ready."

"Can I help?" I asked.

"No thanks. I've prepared the specialty of the house. In reality, this is the signature dish of mi family for many generations, perhaps forever. I don't know for sure. *Salúd!*" He raised his glass to mine.

I took a sip of the wine from Oporto and closed my eyes in complete pleasure while the torrent of blood from the Iberian Peninsula transformed my insides into an oven of devils. I was smiling behind closed eyes in spite of my now dispatched mind. The odors of the kitchen became too much for my stomach, empty from fasting out of nervousness and tight from the hours and hours of body training in preparation for this night. For these reasons, the Port went directly to my head. I recognized the voice of María Bethañia in the background and while I thought that Spanish words sounded better in songs than Portuguese words, nobody could dispute with confidence that the Portuguese female singers were indeed superior; Bethañia, Mercedes Sosa when

she sings Portuguese, Zizi Possi, even Sonia Braga were among my favorites of all time. And at this moment, with the official wine from the Oporto River trickling past my lips and tongue, the smells from the kitchen and the opportunity at last to be with an authentic man, was almost too much to bear standing. I leaned against the end of the sofa as a hot wave attacked my body. I took a long breath and then another. When I opened my eyes, there was Max.

"Are you ready to feast, Handsome?" he asked me, first gently touching a finger to the back of my hand.

Handsome? Skip dinner. What a flirt! "Yes," I said, knowing that it was necessary to put food in my stomach before attempting other physical activities. I followed Max through the living room to where he had set a spectacular table with flowers the colors of oranges and banana candies that formed a wreath around an enormous and steaming pumpkin. A few candles gave a minimal light to set the perfect mood. Max pulled out a chair from the table for me and gestured that I should sit. Finally, we were together and alone. Max raised his glass of wine. "To us," he said and we began a dinner that would consist of three courses: a soup from Portugal called Caldo Verde, followed by a salad of mussels and the principle dish with its origins in Argentina that Max called Carbonada a la Criolla. Each of these dishes came with wonderfully detailed narratives of their preparation that were revealed throughout our dinner conversation so I asked Max for the recipies. Because he had prepared for this special night in advance, Max had instructions, step by step, including the

complete recipes, in two pages of handwritten notes. Max gave me these notes as a memento of my dinner with him. These notes follow in their entirety:

My Dinner with Armando

21 of December, 1991

Friday

(Remember to buy flowers, candles and Port).

Sabado

(Clean the house!)

FIRST COURSE: Caldo Verde (The most common soup in Portugal)

litres of water

potatoes, (medium size)

Salt (to taste)

1 whole cabbage (finely chopped)

30 mil. Olive oil

Black Pepper (to season, freshly ground)

Bring the water to a boil in a large pot. Add the potatoes and the salt to taste. Cover the pot, reduce the heat and cook the potatoes until they are tender. Take the cooked potatoes and purée them before returning to the water. Add the chopped cabbage, olive oil and pepper to taste. Bring the mixture to a boil then cook without a lid for five minutes. Adjust the condiments and serve. This make

four portions.

SECOND COURSE: Ensalada Mar y Selva (Sea and Jungle Salad)

1 doz. Fresh mussels en their shells and cleaned

1 doz. Fresh shrimp without heads and tails, deveined

1 Mango, cut in bite size pieces

6-8 chive flowers

2-4 banana leaves

With a food processor, mix the following:

green chilies, cut in pieces

1 mid-size onion, cut in pieces

1 garlic clove, cut in pieces

1 pinch of salt

125 mil. Lime juice

Take equal portions of the chili lime paste and place en the center of each banana leaf forming a small mountain. Arrange the mussels and shrimp around the chili lime paste mountains and add the chunks of mango. Loosely enclose the mixture with the banana leaf securing the contents so they do not leak out of the package. Next sew ends of the leaf together with the stem of the chive flowers. This will take some practice and having a large needle to make the holes in advance will help. Place the banana leaf packettes upon an elevated bamboo perch inside a large pot with

cold water in the bottom. Place a lid on the pot and steam for 15 to 20 minutes after the water reaches a boil. This should be enough time to allow the mussel shells to open inside the banana leaf package. Serve packettes unopened on a large salad plate.

MAIN COURSE: Carbonado a la Criolla (Stew with Peaches and Pears)

NOTE: This is one of the most characteristic dishes of an Argentinian kitchen, a recipe I learned while an apprentice for the Buenas Airies Department of Roads and Highways.

60 mil. Olive oil

1 onion, regular size, cut into fine pieces

1 kilo of beef, cubed and fat removed. (Lamb may be substituted).

3 tomatoes, blanched, peeled, seeded and chopped

1 bay leaf

½ teaspoon dried oregano (pinch)

1 tablespoon tomato paste

½ teaspoon sugar (pinch)

1 litre of beef stock

¾ kilo sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed

¾ kilo potatoes, peeled and cubed

½ kilo pumpkin or Hubbard squash, peeled and cubed

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

3 small peaches, peeled, pitted and halved

3 small pears, peeled, cored and halved

3 ears of corn, shucked and cut into 1 inch slices

1 medium to large size pumpkin (a zapallo pumpkin from the Antilles works best) with an opening cut around the stem large enough to insert your hand to make hollow in order to hold all the contents of the stew.

Heat the olive oil in a heavy casserole pot. Add the onion and fry until it is lightly browned. Push the onion to one side of the pan and add the meat to lightly brown on all sides. Add the tomatoes, bay leaf, oregano, tomato paste, sugar and the beef stock and stir to mix. Cover and simmer for 1 hour.

30 minutes before serving, place the pumpkin in the oven and cook at a temperature of 180°C. Cook the pumpkin top next to the pumpkin to allow the interior of the pumpkin to cook. Check frequently to make sure sides of pumpkin do not crack.

In the casserole pot, add the sweet potatoes, potatoes and pieces of pumpkin. Add salt and pepper to taste, cover and cook for 15 minutes. Next, add the peaches and pears, cover and cook another 10 minutes. Add the corn and cook for 5 minutes longer. Transfer the contents of the casserole pot into the hollow of the baked pumpkin and cook 10-20 minutes more with the cover on top of the pumpkin to trap the flavors. The contents will remain warm in the pumpkin for 20-30 minutes after serving.

(At this point in his notes, Max included the recipe for Rice and Lemon

Caramel Custard, but he and I omitted dessert in favor of carnal sweets).

Sex with Max was a disaster of proportions truly comical. We certainly weren't alone and the Port Wine takes the blame for this. In the beginning of our dance, all was well but soon enough the face and the body of Max transformed, first to take on the image of Father Federico and after, perhaps most upsetting, the image of El Único. Next, Max had the head of El Único and the body of Father Federico. Minutes later, I was inside the ass of Max but in my mind, it wasn't the ass of Max but of Father Federico and he was wearing the vestments and crucifix of a Father, though he'd pulled them up to his collar bones. I could not divert my eyeballs from the brilliant reflection off the crucifix that might well dissolve them. I suddenly shouted the words "SAVE ME" as I realized I was thrusting deep inside the ass of the Holy Church. I couldn't close my eyes because that made it worse. A moment later, I was making love to El Único who had the penis of Max and the hairless chest of Father Federico. What a Frankenstein!

When I left Max's house, I was perplexed and not altogether certain with whom I had been. I did remember at some point somebody, and I'll assume it was Max, asked if we could meet together again at the Basilica Santiago Apóstol for the Christmas Eve Mass in two days time. So two days later, I dressed almost completely in black: pants, shoes, underwear, socks, tie, belt and blazer, except for a pressed white shirt buttoned to the top, because I could not think of

anything more appropriate for the twenty-first anniversary of the original Christmas Eve Mass, —The Leaping Mass, or rather, la Misa Saltando.

I arrived at the Basilica early and remained outside the front doors for the arrival of Max. I was very uneasy, anxious and in spite of using a ton of anti-perspirant, I was sweating inside my black shell. The Basilica was full to the brim and I didn't see any sign of Max. The large vibrating notes of the pipe organ traveled across the cobbled stones of the Basilica floor to crack my soul and activate my Catholic guilt complex. It had been twenty-one years since I had been in the Basilica or any church. Still I believed in God. In Venezuela, you didn't have another option. The priests and the archbishop formed a procession next to where I was standing, waiting for Max. The high processional was about to begin when the archbishop suddenly turned to me and said "God Bless you, Armando."

"How do you know me?" I asked the archbishop.

"The Lord knows everyone." He smiled with a papal-like nod.

The music changed and in an instant I recognized the original arrangement of the Ave María by Father Federico. I pushed my way inside the Basilica past the processional already in motion. In the interior, the air was clogged with the smell of paraffin and movement was like pushing through honey. In the interior of this choked and holy place, everything was moving at a ridiculously reduced velocity and then I saw the boys of the chorus already outlining the octagonal floor under the basilica dome and just as incredibly, the

haunted aria began. From where I stood, I saw the image of Max disappear through the narrow entrance to the stairs leading to the balcony high in the dome. I struggled to move through the multitude of the faithful to reach the stairs. I broke the choreography of the moment by striding straight across the open octagon where I ran into a boy from the chorus who had eyes so blue, he could have been Max as a child. The boy smiled and then murmured, "Look, Armando!" pointing with his hand up to the balcony. But I couldn't look.

"Who are you," I asked the strange boy with surprise. The boy who knew my name, didn't respond. The voice of the soloist began to fill the dome of the basilica. The boy with the blue eyes began singing with the chorus, his eyes transfixed upon the balcony. I buried my head in my hands wishing I could shout an end to this re-creation of the worst night of my life, but the music continued precisely as it had been written. When it came time for the soloist to hit the highest note in the aria, the boy with the blue eyes began laughing like a demon. In this moment, I noticed blood on my white shirt that formed a letter "F" and I could no longer resist the temptation to look upward. There, upon the railing of the balcony, with arms extended wide, balanced a man in the vestments of a priest. At the exact moment, when the boy soloist reached for the High G Major from the balcony above, bleeding inexplicably on the octagonal floor of the Basilica, I screamed the words:

`iMax, NO!

Chapter Twelve

I had been waiting in an uncomfortable metal chair at the central downtown police station for close to an hour. The blood on my white shirt, having taken on the characteristic of starch, scratched and tugged at my skin with every inhalation. The paramedics attending to me in the first minutes following my disruptive fit inside the Basilica had given me something to calm me down so the Christmas Eve Mass could continue but confounded, they had determined neither the source of my bleeding nor any medical rationale for my heretical outburst.

The smoke tinged walls graying beneath the requisite fluorescence of the military-inspired institution irritated me so that I knew the relaxant I'd been given, was wearing. I had not been spoken too since being delivered to this room and I had not spoken, even to myself. My mouth and throat were so dry I

could not garner a respectable spit in disdain of the authorities that apparently detained me. I looked at my brown hands, at my fingernails and the dried blood under the whites I'd normally kept meticulously groomed. It looked as though I'd been rooting through a carcass. I fidgeted nervously to affect a rudimentary manicure as I waited and waited. Any minute I expected someone would enter the room to confirm the identity of Max and question if I knew any reason he'd take his own life. Any minute and still another thirty of them passed. I stood and turned the handle on the door of the small room. Finding it unlocked, I slipped into the hallway and then kept walking. Unchallenged, I closed my black suit jacket to conceal the blood on my shirt and passed under one salida sign after another until I reached the double front doors of the station and emerged into the Caracas night. In the silver canyons of the tall buildings I searched for architectural landmarks and once I recognized where I was, I headed in the direction of my car some twelve blocks away, still parked where I'd left it near the Basilica. It was almost one o'clock in the morning when I reached my parents house where I slipped into the house like Santa Claus himself while all were up to their brows in dancing sugarplums. I stuffed the bloody shirt in a plastic bag, confirming once again for myself, that there was no broken skin on my torso, before lying naked on my bed where I drifted back and forth from sleep to guilt-driven restlessness. Was this my fault—again?

When I emerged from the shower some hours later, the impatient screams of heralding angels that could only be my nephews and nieces had filled

the house with the spirit of Christmas morning. My brother and sisters would be downstairs with my parents waiting for Tio Armando to join them so the children could open the presents that Santa had brought them. I wasn't in the mood for anything but sulking. Still, I put on a brave and cheery face that separated me from everything that had anything to do with the latest episode from the reoccurring La Misa Saltando and joined my family downstairs.

I could expect the holiday would hold few answers for me as El Nacional had not run a news edition on Christmas but I invented an excuse to tell my family that I needed to finish up some paperwork at the theatre before starting my thirty days of annual vacation. I apologized for cutting the afternoon dinner short and got into my car to see what I could piece together in a Soup Bowl full of clues.

I drove past the Basilica on three sides but disappointedly saw no sign of a police investigation. I parked the car adjacent to the octagonal dome and walked around to the giant front doors at the top of a wide flight of stone steps. A smaller door, inset in the carpentry, was slightly open and I walked through it into the vestibule of the church. Candles flickered in the distance beyond my uncorrected focus and I moved toward them into the heart of the Basilica. The hunched figures of half a dozen of the city's most devout or perhaps just tormented Catholics, were scattered about the nave in prayer. Annoyingly, the taped recording of organ-rendered Christmas hymns, warbled at a speed slightly under tempo from speakers positioned in some cases discreetly about the

cathedral and in some cases, such as the tall narrow speakers that flanked the white alabaster robes of the four foot tall Madonna, depicted in front of me, not so discreetly.

I walked to a position inside the poinsettia-lined octagon where I thought I might have been standing last night when Max—. My legs suddenly went weak and I had to concentrate in that instant to keep standing. I looked across to the narrow door that I knew concealed the staircase that lead to the walkway that ringed the dome above. I struggled to raise my head to look up into the dome but it felt as though all the angels were pressing down on my head and neck to prevent me from seeing it play out again. I closed my eyes and counted to three or four. I tried raising my head again but I could not overcome the forces that kept it bowed. It was then, looking down, that I noticed I was standing on an amoeba shaped stain of what looked like dried blood on the cobbled stone floor and when I stepped out of it, the outline of my precise shoe size, a right and a left, looked as though it had been etched by acid in the stone.

“You won’t find answers here, Armando.” The voice of a young priest I’d never met or seen before had placed his hand on my shoulder and tried to turn me toward the exit. I planted my feet and refused to go further.

“How do you know my name?” I demanded to know turning to face the priest eye to eye. He lifted his head without answering my question and his eyelids rose slowly to reveal heavy lashed eyes, blue like Max had. —Had. Past tense. I asked again. We haven’t met and yet you know my name. How?”

The priest, no older than Father Frederico when he— Jesus! I felt as though I might be going crazy, or maybe that was Past Tense, too! “I was here last night and I was here 21 years ago last night. The answers I seek are here.” The priest had an enlightened look sweep over his nearly hairless face.

“The answers are within you, Armando. Nothing happened here last night. I’ll walk you out,” he insisted.

“Stop using my name until you tell me how you know it and don’t presume what may or not be within me,” I scolded in frustration.

The priest turned me with his two hands and raised my chin so that we were face to face. “I know you, Armando, because Father Frederico has told me about you. I know you are troubled because it shows in your face. And I know that only bad things happen inside your brain when you come back to the Basilica.”

I shifted my weight and tried to ignore how attractive I was suddenly finding this priest and the closeness we had achieved during this brief exchange was making me flush. As he spoke, I tried to stop glancing down at his full lips that provided bumpers for two perfect rows of white teeth but he was watching my lips too and in any other setting, this would have been the moment when we kissed. I closed my eyes to block it out and realized that this might have been Father Frederico up to his old antics again. When I opened my eyes, the priest was smiling.

“Are you alright then?”

“I am.”

“Would you like to get a coffee and talk, maybe?” I nodded and this time allowed him to lead me out the front doors. “There’s a place just around the corner that should be open today,” he said extracting sunglasses from inside his vestment. There was something about a priest in sunglasses...well, there was something about a priest—period, where my hormones were concerned. In a certain mood, I’d probably find the Pope jumpable so hopeless was my redemption.

The coffee shop was open on Christmas Day and catering mostly to those I would have considered homeless. At the counter, the priest self served two cups full of coffee. “How do you like it?” he asked innocently. I had a thousand answers for him in that instant but said nothing. We sat down.

“You haven’t told me your name and I will level with you that Father Frederico has told me nothing about you.” This time I smiled.

“I am Father Mateo,” he offered with an extended hand just as soon as he’s set his coffee cup on a Formica topped table for two. As I shook it, I noted that his arms and hand were hairless, just like Father Frederico, which prompted me to wonder if they had both originated in some Franciscan Boys from Brazil Order where all the priests were genetically engineered to have blue eyes, perfectly kissable lips and no body hair. They were certainly sure to wreak havoc on young gay Catholics who had more than enough on their plates to Hail Mary over to begin with, never mind this whole new embodiment of temptation.

"Mucho gusto," I told him but I didn't tell him why. "You said Father Frederico speaks to you. I'd like to hear more about that."

"Well, there's not a lot more to say. Shortly after I arrived from seminary, I heard about a priest who wrote the definitive arrangement of the Ave Maria and when his work was done, he offered himself to Heaven."

I wanted to suggest that heaven was the only thing left after Father Frederico had apparently offered himself to everyone else, but I was quiet. Father Mateo continued.

"Having my own interest in music, I wanted to learn more about him. One of the older priests directed me to musical notebooks Father Frederico had kept in somewhat of a diary format. I have spent years reading through his diaries to better understand this disciplined musician among men. Indeed he speaks to me through these notebooks and your name surely appeared on more than one or two margins in the year leading up to the public debut of his Ave. According to these notes, you possessed one of the finest voices the church had ever heard and Father Frederico didn't mince words when he admitted that he wrote his Ave for your voice. In twenty-one years there has not been a child's voice to equal yours which is why Christmas Eve after Christmas Eve, we have used the original recording of your aria and the choir accompanies the tape. Oh, most of the congregation doesn't know the difference. Each year we select a new child ingénue to lip sync with the tape but every year for the last twenty, it has been your voice filling the dome of the Basilica. As you may have noticed,

we also toss the vestment of a priest into the air from the balcony to celebrate The Leaping Mass. I must admit to any outsider, it must seem a very macabre ritual, but we are Catholic, aren't we, and so quick to claim we've witnessed a miracle. I've long known about you and admired your voice so it is a pleasure to meet you in the flesh. Do you still sing?"

"Since the death of Father Frederico, I scarcely smile." I over-dramatized my situation. My brain had leapt back into the night just past. The vestments of a priest? If it had been my own voice I was hearing from the floor of the dome, it was possible that my mind had only imagined Father Frederico's suicide all over again and this time substituted Max in his place. And the blue-eyed choirboy who knew my name, could have been my own manifestation of the child Max as he had told me he had watched the whole thing from the Basilica floor twenty some years earlier. But what about the blood and my footprints on the stone floor and did all this mean Max was still alive? "Please excuse me, Father Mateo." I reached in my pocket and placed 500 Bs on the table next to my cup. "I suddenly have to be somewhere else."

"Armando—" he yelled after me.

Thirty minutes later, after getting my directions turned around, I pulled into the gated driveway in front of Max's parent's house and rolled down my window to announce myself. I cleared my throat and looked around. I wasn't being acknowledged. I thought to toot the horn of my green Chevy Nova but

reconsidered should the family be inside mourning the loss of their beloved Max. I turned off the engine and sat another moment before opening my door to see if the gate was unlocked. Just as I reached for the gate a woman's voice squawked through the speaker mounted on the post behind me.

"¿En qué puedo servirle?" How can I help you, the woman asked.

"I am here to see Max. Is he home?" I answered and asked the speaker voice.

"Max no está aquí, señor." The voice paused a moment and when I thought the voice would tell me Max was dead, it continued. "Max vive en Portugal."

"¿Cómo?" How, I asked out loud, could that be possible? The woman's voice didn't just say he was in Portugal, but that he lived there."

"El vive allá por siete, —no, ocho años. ¿Quién habla?"

I cleared my throat and bent down to speak directly into the speaker. "Me llamo Armando Amatista." Max y yo..." I suddenly didn't know what to say... "Max y yo cantamos juntos en el coro de muchachos en la Basílica hace muchos años." I told her Max and I had sang together in the boys choir.

That's nice, she told me in Spanish. But he's in Lisbon now and hasn't been home in five or six years.

"Really?" I asked the woman.

"Sí."

"Bueno. Muchas Gracias señora. Si Ud. habla con Max...ah, no importa.

Gracias señora.” I straightened my back and prepared to get back into my car. I waved toward the house in a friendly way.

“Adios, Armando.”

“¡Espera! ¿Señora, es posible que Ud. tiene una foto reciente de Max?”

“Claro que sí.” Venga,” she invited me in with the activation of the gate. I jumped in my car and pulled into the driveway but the gate did not close behind me but rather stayed open. Evidently the woman did not anticipate that I would be staying long. I parked the car in front of one of three garage doors and walked to the front door where she joined me in the sun on the front steps. “Hola,” she greeted me again. “Soy la madre de Max.”

“Mucho gusto.” I tipped my head graciously. She held a framed photograph, image to her chest. She explained that it had been waiting for them in the mail when they returned home from Argentina two days ago. She said that she had pleaded with Max for him to join them in Buenos Aires before the holidays but that he was much too busy with work. “What does Max do, I queried further mostly to see how much of a liar Max truly was.”

“Max es el administrador de un hotel que se llama...que se llama...no lo recordar” was her response.

“Really, a hotel manager? Well good for Max.” I forced a smile to conceal that I had been double-crossed. “And Max hasn’t been back to Caracas for many years?” I asked again.

“Es correcto. Su hotel es nuevo y le toma toda su tiempo. ¿Cómo se

llama ese hotel?" It was obviously bothering her that she couldn't remember the name of the hotel her son managed. As she still hadn't surrendered or revealed the image in the frame, I decided I likely was not going to recognize her son in the photo anyway as the Max I had known in this house had obviously been masquerading as the son of this very pleasant woman. "¡Lo recuerdo! El Hotel Dom Pedro Lisboa. She exclaimed. Again I smiled. "El Hotel Dom Pedro Lisboa," she repeated as if to commit it to memory, either mine or hers. "¿Todavía asistes la Basilica regular, Armando? She asked if I still attended the Basilica.

"No," I answered a bit automatically. She wasn't phased by my backsliding.

"El Arzobispo Vincente Zamora no sera feliz que mi marido y yo no asistieron la Misa Saltando la noche pasada. Hayamos asistido cada nochebuena desde entonces Max cantó con el coro de los muchachos."

"You actually call it The Leaping Mass?" I had to ask her. "I was there that night, singing from the balcony when Father Federico..."

"Of course you were," she said in Spanish. "We've attended every year since that night. Archbishop Zamora has been very good to this family. If my husband weren't suffering from a nasty run of dysentery he acquired in Argentina, we would have been there last night. As a matter of fact, the Archbishop is likely to phone today just to make sure we are well as I'm certain he noticed our absence."

Now she was name-dropping or trying to assert her affluence and I couldn't tell if she had altogether forgotten who I was or why I was there. She still clutched the photo to her breast surely suffocating the image imprisoned first in glass and now in motherhood. "I should be going then. I'm sorry to have bothered you on Christmas Day. If Max should call you today..."

"He phoned earlier this morning," she explained in Spanish, "what with the time change between Europe and Caracas," she added.

"Oh well. May I see his photo," I finally asked out right. She extended the frame with a mother's pride.

"Maximo mío," she offered, blushing.

I gasped. "He's just as I remember him." I spoke the truth seeing those blue eyes staring back at me. "And he phoned you this morning?" She nodded her fair-haired head. Then he wasn't dead. "Gracias, Señora. Muchas gracias y Feliz Navidad a la familia tuya."

In a year that saw South African's Nelson Mandela released from prison after 27 years and Venezuela's own Ninebeth Jiminez crowned Miss World, finding myself in Lisbon five days later, on New Year's Eve, searching for any trace I could find of a lover I'd known for less than a week, didn't seem all that extraordinary. I'd never been to Portugal and it turned out to be easy enough to convert my airline ticket intended for Denver, so I hopped on an American Airlines flight that connected through San Juan, Puerto Rico to an Air Portugal

flight direct to Lisboa. I can't remember the precise intersection when it occurred to me to chase Max all the way to Portugal, but before I reached downtown Caracas from his parent's house in the foothills of the Avila, I'd made up my mind. It then became a matter of waiting for the travel agency to open after the weekend that followed the holiday. I was off work for a month with a hole in my planner as big as the hole left in my heart by the revocation of El Único's invitation to join him in Colorado. I couldn't reconcile being dumped again, this time by Max, so I went to Lisbon mostly to understand why the people in my life were trying to get out of my life.

The most preliminary of research told me I couldn't afford to stay in the hotel that Max was supposed to manage, at least according to his mother, so I had the travel agent reserve my room at the As Janelas Verdes Inn. As the taxi turned onto the cobbled Rue das Janelas Verdes in the early hours of New Year's Eve Day, all the buildings revealed the source of the name. On both sides of the narrow street, every building had green window trim including the hotel that had been reserved for me. I remember thinking how quaint this was, momentarily reveling in the most trivial of details as though I were a tourist on holiday and not a mercenary on a mission. Once inside my hotel room, I was all business, laying out the outfit that I would confront Max wearing, which of course had been pre-selected and pre-ironed to give him cause to question how he could have lied and why he would have chosen to run. After the seventeen hour trans-Atlantic flight, my killer outfit required touching up and so an iron was requested.

At least I think my Portuguese, which I hadn't studied since secondary school, would produce an iron at my door at any moment. "Necessidade passar a ferro mi roupa." I said the phrase to myself out loud over and over again to reinforce that I was indeed in a foreign land undertaking a dangerous if not altogether risky proposition. If Max turned out to be as established here as his mother believed him to be, it wasn't like I was about to convince him to come back to the Soup Bowl no matter what I was or wasn't wearing. The iron arrived and I took an hour and forty minutes to press out enough courage to put the outfit on and leave my hotel for his, located several blocks away according to the directions drawn by the staff at the front desk on a map that had conveniently been printed to show all the locations where McDonald's could be found in Lisboa.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning when I walked through the main entrance to the very new looking Dom Pedro Lisboa Hotel feeling like a million dollars or I guess that would be something like 228,100,000,000 Portuguese Escudos. I did not feel out of place among the stylish European patrons of this swank five or six star major hotel. I sauntered through the lobby to the viewing decks on the far side as though I were traversing a catwalk in Milan or Paris. A perfect breeze ruffled my royal blue silk shirt as I took note of at least six of the seven hills of Lisbon that lined up to nearly contain the Tagus River or Rio Tejo, as it is known locally, that still managed to flow into then through the remarkably symmetrical medieval city. I was standing in a hotel situated on the summit of

one of the Seven Hills of Lisbon, in the realm of Max in a spot he had probably stood a hundred times in his role of hotel director and my heart raced with the uncertain anticipation of surprising him in a confrontation that needed more to communicate my desire for him than my desire for revenge. It was a fine line I was walking on the other side of the world from the Soup Bowl I called home. Already, the extravagance of this exercise had begun to nag at my practical conscience, which of course could be a shadow of the depression to come should I be dumped again, but I had something to prove; if not to myself, then to Max and if not to Max, then perhaps to El Único who had led me on more than anyone. I had to know there was more to life than lamenting my loneliness.

I turned away from the rolling view to look back inside the lobby to formulate what would be my announced entrance and I spotted a suited Max speaking to what might have been one of his employees or perhaps a guest. I waited with my heart behind my larynx. It was actually Max! I had traveled I didn't even know how many thousands of kilometers on a hunch and a rumor that Max had a life here, and there he stood, the proof of my pain, the grail of my quest. And in my paralysis, he spotted me too. At first I didn't because I couldn't move. When he found he couldn't look away and when I saw the shock register on his face, I very slowly removed my sunglasses and dropped my arm to my side. I wanted to smile but knew it would be a minute premature so I held my emotionless gaze another 60 seconds while Max dismissed the young lady he was speaking with and began to walk toward where I was standing on

the balcony. Until the very last possible moment when he broke the threshold of the open French doors less than a metre away he could have been approaching to push me off the balcony but at last he smiled.

“Armando, I have been expecting you,” he said to my surprise and we embraced heartily. “Have you had lunch?”

“Not for eight days,” I answered him honestly. “I thought you had died. I was in mourning.”

“That is sweet. Come. Let’s have lunch together.” I walked with Max through the lobby to a grand staircase and together, we disappeared through the ceiling and into a highly ornamental dining room of cut glass, ironed cream linens, yellow sheers and green leafy plants. We were seated at a table for two next to giant windows that revealed the seventh hill of Lisboa, my collection complete.

“You must tell me how you knew to expect me; I mean, here in Lisbon.”

Max let loose a burst of laughter. “You kidding? The way I disappeared after standing you up? No self-respecting man I know would have let that go unanswered. You have come for answers, just as I had expected you would, but first I owe you an apology. I probably owe you more than one,” he grinned, “but I’ll start with my apology for lying to you.” He raised his water glass toward me. “You look wonderful, Armando. I don’t deserve this pursuit.”

I thought about how I should interpret that comment and raised my

water glass to his. He tapped it. "Let's replace this with a bottle of wine, shall we? I have a feeling this might be a long lunch. Where are my manners? Welcome to Il Gattopando and the Hotel Dom Pedro."

I didn't know if he was talking from nervousness or ease and I didn't know which reflex would upset me more. He still really hadn't revealed why he had expected me and until I knew, this left me feeling hopelessly desperate and foolish. For the moment, I knew to avoid looking into those blue eyes and so pretended to have an interest in something as unnecessary as nourishment. I wasn't nervous and I wasn't at ease. I was still mad or maybe it was just hurt. When I added this to the now-obvious realization that Max in fact did have a life in Lisbon and all my globe trotting dramatics wasn't going to bring him back to Caracas, I was at more of a loss than before. "You haven't said why you expected me," I prompted him a second time. "Surely you must be surprised."

Max smiled in a way that communicated that he knew I would accept nothing but honesty and now that he knew I could tell the difference between truth and lies, he must have known he would either need to be more careful or more crafty. I had never been more on guard.

"Okay." He leaned closer to me. "First, my mother told me there had been a male caller at the house and that had she told this caller that I lived in Portugal and managed the Dom Pedro. Second, I then phoned your house to give you a long overdue apology and your mother told me you had gone to Puerto Rico on holidays. I've traveled between Caracas and Lisboa enough to

know you can't do it without switching planes in San Juan. Third, I received an interesting phone call from a friend of mine, Mateo—who told me he had met you."

"Mateo?" I queried. "Father Mateo from the Basilica?" I became despondent and covered my mouth with my hand.

"He told me you were under the delusion that I had committed suicide from the balcony of the Basilica the night of The Leaping Mass and that you ended coffee with him very abruptly once he explained that it was ritual for the priests to reenact Father Federico's suicide in honor of the Ave he had received divinely from Heaven."

"Divinely?" I questioned. Max nodded with a smirk.

"When God doesn't make his presence obvious, there are those determined to illuminate the subtleties, if you know what I mean."

I was trying to process the pieces of the story I was hearing with what I had been lead to believe by others and suddenly remembered Max's mother saying he hadn't been home in years. "Your mother does not know you were in Caracas."

"Good and thank you. It would only upset her to know."

"But why would you come home if not to see your family?"

Max started to speak then paused. "I deliberately came home while I knew my parents would be in Argentina, to retrieve some money that belonged to me that I had hidden in the wall of my bedroom. I didn't want them asking

me about it and I wasn't able to stay long enough for a proper visit."

"Go on." I wanted him to get to the part about deceiving me.

"Here in Lisboa, I have a partner—a spouse, I mean. It was my first time away from him in four or five years and I suppose I was anxious to be away from the relationship to explore some freedoms I had given up a long time ago. That's why I went to the clubs the night you and I met. Once I realized who you were and that we had been through the choir together, I wanted an opportunity to see you again before I had to return home. I didn't mean to lead you on and I certainly didn't think I had affected you enough to provoke your 'round the world investigation. I don't know, Armando. I sense that you and I have been through similar experiences and I have never been able to talk with anyone about my childhood, about what happened with the priests."

The wine that Max had ordered arrived along with a tray of breads and fava beans. "What happened with the priests, Max?"

"Well, you know, Armando. Father Federico was so in love with you."

"But you said priests; as in more than one."

"Sure, well...there was Father Federico and Father Vincente. Father Federico only really had an interest in me when you weren't around. If you were anywhere in the church compound, nobody else existed for Father Federico. Father Vincente was different. He was rough and crude and demanded things from me every time he saw me."

"Things like what, Max?"

“He would wave his dick near my face and tell me to lick it like a stick candy. He loved to suck me, too. That was okay, I guess. I didn’t like it much when he stuck his fingers up my ass or when he had me fuck one of the other boys while he and sometimes Father Federico watched but the money kept us quiet. It keeps me quiet still.”

“You mean to tell me the Church has been paying you to keep quiet?”

“That’s the money I went to Caracas to collect. My partner and I are buying a house in the hills about 30 minutes from here. We needed the extra cash to convince the bank we were serious about our offer. I have been stashing my church payments in the wall for twenty years.”

“I don’t understand it. Father Federico is dead. What is there to keep quiet about?”

“Father Vincente is still alive and so he has an obvious interest in keeping matters tidy. You know, Armando, I don’t ask questions which is why the arrangement has worked all these years. For the past ten years, I’ve always met Mateo discreetly in a club or once in a while he’d come to my home when I was living in Caracas, and give me the cash, always cash, in an envelope. Before I left the city Mateo told me the Caracas Diocese had made application to the Vatican for the beatification of a Venezuelan woman. If accepted, she would be the first Venezuelan saint. The diocese cannot afford any scandal while this is before the Pope for consideration. I think that’s why my payments suddenly doubled.”

"You don't refer to Mateo as Father Mateo but isn't he a priest?"

"He wasn't when I was fooling around with him. At least I don't think he was. Jesus!" Max's blue eyes grew large and an astonished smile overtook his lips.

"He was definitely a priest when I was in the Basilica four or five days ago; collar, robes the whole drag, if you know what I mean."

"Well isn't that interesting?" Max toyed with a fava bean before popping it into his mouth. The waiter approached to announce a phone call for the hotel's director. Max excused himself with a wink and a smile.

Sun had begun to stream through the large picture window next to our table as it cleared the roof of the Hotel Dom Pedro marking the half-day of the last day of 1991. In its warmth, I wanted to surrender to my sentimental side and I wanted to be comfortable in my chair across from the blue-eyed Max having worked so hard to find him but I already knew in this venture I had recovered nothing. My dignity remained scattered about my feet in a thousand pieces and I would enter the New Year and soon after begin my 35th year on this planet without a lover. What in the hell was I doing in Portugal on New Year's Eve, alone? Max returned.

"¿Dónde estamos?" He asked where we'd left off the conversation before offering an explanation of the telephone call he'd received from the banquet manager about the New Year's Eve party scheduled for later in the evening in the main ballroom of the Hotel Dom Pedro. I suddenly longed for fresh air and a

good-bye that would end what had become the most pathetic exercise in my adult life. Max seemed to be taking pity on me, which is the last thing I wanted. "Are you at least staying in the hotel?" he asked as though it might be consolation for my misery to wallow an evening in five star comfort.

"No." I answered. "Your hotel was already full when I phoned for a reservation. I'm staying not far from here in a smaller hotel on Avenue Janelas Verdes."

"Oh, I know that Inn and on such a charming street. If I didn't have to be here, I might suggest that we get together for a drink later this evening before the New Year."

"What about your boyfriend?" I asked not caring about the answer.

"He'll probably stop by here before midnight. He has his own friends and since I have to work anyway..."

"I see," I told him. I didn't. Max hadn't explained why he had lured me into believing he liked me and that we might begin dating but that was okay. I lured myself into believing it. I knew whom to blame. "I should go," I finally said awkwardly. "You need to get back to your work and on such a busy day. I shouldn't have come, Max. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"I'm glad you came. I'm sorry it must have cost you so much money and I'm really sorry that my hasty departure left you no other rational option. Happy New Year, Armando. I really mean that."

"Thanks, Max. To you too." I stood up, placing my napkin on the table.

I was dizzy and emotionally suffocating and wanted to run through the lemon coloured restaurant to leap off the open balcony on the other side but Max neutralized my hysteria by blocking my plight with a hug and in the middle of his restaurant in plain sight of each of his employees, we embraced each other. I made a point of letting go first. It was time for me to let go, after all.

I wandered the avenues and side streets of downtown Lisbon for several hours growing increasingly entranced by the black and white mosaic designs on the sidewalks that moved my feet like a conveyor past monuments and fountains through cobblestoned praças named after heros and kings. I took an historic elevator from near Praça Rossio to the Chiado where boutique after boutique was closing down for siesta and not expected to open until after New Year's Day. There had been no point going to the airport early as my flight didn't leave until just after ten the following morning and there was only one flight a day to Caracas anyway. Just as soon as I was hopelessly lost somewhere in the Barrio Alto, I signaled a taxi to take me back to Av. Janelas Verdes.

Upon entering my hotel room, a spray of flowers caught my eye on the antique table in front of the tall and narrow double windows that were framed, at least on the outside, by a broad trim of green. Only two people in the world knew I was there, the hotel desk clerk that checked me in and Max. The clerk had been handsome enough but the registration unremarkable so the flowers must have come from Max. I ignored the card attached to them and collapsed on the bed from exhaustion. There was no sense in protracting my misery and it

seemed a personal siesta was what I required. I kicked off my dress shoes and pulled half of the deeply brocaded bedspread over my body.

When I awoke it was to the sound of drums and horns that seemed to be filing past just outside my green trimmed window. I rose from bed and went to the window, was reminded again of the arranged flowers on the table, and peered outside. It was a parade of sorts, no doubt heralding the end of the year, and to my surprise, the day had turned night. A glance at my wristwatch told me it was nearly 8 o'clock. I only had 14 hours remaining in my Lisbon overnigher and it was New Year's Eve. I had absolutely no strings and no plans and this excited me. I changed into a set of clothes I had already ironed and selected just in case Max had wanted me on his arm to impress his friends at some exclusive New Year's Eve Ball. God, where was my head? I brushed my teeth and splashed water on my face and through my black hair. It was time to join the Lisbonetas.

Outside the hotel I was swept into the melee by strangers, already drinking, that put their arms around my shoulders and rushed me down the narrow street of green windows. A flask was offered which I automatically accepted and a warm ooze of almost thickened port, glided down my throat. Like brooks and streams, the side streets emptied one into the other until the river of people was five, maybe ten cars wide and spilling—no, cascading, into the Praça Dom Pedro IV. Some girl speaking Spanish to me taught me the Portuguese name for the celebration, Noite Magica just before she lay down on a

park bench to pass out. People were dancing to music exploding out of speaker stacks a building tall. A man standing on top of a large garbage can yelled at me to give him my hand. I reached up and he grabbed it to pull me up there with him. I thanked him with a confident "obrigado" and marveled at the much-improved vantage I held over a sea of bopping heads. He jabbed his flask into my side and I took it from him appreciatively. His hair was died platinum blonde to match a lazily trimmed moustache and goatee and his eyes had been ringed with black paint. A silver ring pierced his lip, another through his tongue and his earlobes were lined with diamonds, birthstones and studs. For a second, his appearance made me question the legitimacy of the contents of his flask but then he smiled to reveal dentist-perfect teeth and dimpled cheeks that rather betrayed his tough and punk exterior. I took one swig and then another. He was staring at the port on my lips while his tongue played with the ring in his lip. With a jerk, his hand cupped the back of my head and pulled me into an animal kiss that ignited pyrotechnics in my chest. I tasted the metal of his lip ring and of the stud through his tongue and thought I might be conducting electricity. I plunged my tongue deep into his mouth as his eyes narrowed in a smile before growing big again. He pulled away.

"Happy New Year," he said in perfect English without an accent before hopping off the garbage can we shared and disappearing into the camouflage of a thousand, maybe ten thousand platinum blonde look-alikes. He'd left me his flask and a hard on, neither of which I knew what to do with, especially standing

most conspicuously on top of the garbage can, so I hopped down into the crowd. It had become nearly impossible to move and I knew my tolerance for these types of conditions was usually measured in milliseconds so I made my way toward the closest street leading out of the plaza. It was 10 o'clock. Only two hours remained in the year 1991. I tried to think where I should be at midnight so that I could devote the next two hours to arriving there physically, mentally, spiritually, whatever. I thought about crashing the New Year's Eve festivities at the Hotel Dom Pedro but decided that would be going backward, irrevocably backward. The kiss with the platinum stranger had activated juices that now boiled inside me. It had been –what? Three weeks since my last tramp night and that expedition had netted Max so I felt I was ready for another encounter of the full flesh kind. This was Lisbon! Who knew where the next trick would lead me?

I rearranged myself inside my underwear and scanned the crowd for a sympathetic stranger, one who would safely volunteer directions to the nearest gay club. It wasn't a long search and I was given not only directions but a several block escort culminating in a proposition which I declined, not having selected my candidate for his looks as much for his swish.

I arrived at Memorial fifteen minutes before 11 o'clock and the Europop had already hit full gyration and tilt for a club that had only opened 15 minutes earlier. It was packed almost as tightly as Praça Dom Pedro IV. I received two beer tickets with my cover charge stamp and made my way to the bar, even

though my flask was still more than half full. It seemed completely impossible to meet somebody on a night as crowded as this but it occurred to me that Memorial was more along the lines of a collective disco-grope anyway and chances were, I could get the friction I was looking for in any of the bathrooms, the dance floor or the backroom.

While facing the bar about three patrons back and waiting my turn, I was subtly rear-ended by somebody my height. I knew he was my height because I felt his package dent my butt cheeks. He muttered an apology and claimed to have been pushed from behind himself. I said it wasn't a problem and smiled.

"Well, then, in that case..." he smiled back and pushed his crotch into my ass again, this time holding himself there with his hands on my waist. "It's a nice fit," he breathed his Portuguese come-on into my ear.

"Tranquillo, hombre." I told him to settle down as I moved one patron closer to the bar.

"Fala Portuguese?" he asked me.

"Español y Inglés" I told him.

"¿de España?"

"No. Soy Latinoamericano." I told him and the conversation continued in Spanish.

"Are you here with anyone," he asked. I shook my head. "I'm Sebastianne."

I turned around to meet him face to face. "I'm Max," I lied for no real

explainable reason.

“Max? That’s interesting,” he said. Max is also my boyfriend’s name. It’s nice to meet you. How about if I buy your drink and you can meet my friends.”

I hope I at least smiled through the shock and paralysis of my own entrapment. In a city of nearly 1 million, what could the chances possibly be that I was meeting the boyfriend of the one night stand whose trail I’d tracked around the world? I quickly went through my list of acquaintances to see if even I knew another Max. I didn’t. “Where’s your boyfriend tonight, Sebastianne, and more importantly, why are you pressing your business into the culos of strangers?” Sebastianne grinned.

“He’s working,” he offered lamely. “I guess I’m working too,” he said, adjusting himself in his Levi’s. “Besides, we’re not strangers, Max.” He reached up to touch my cheek. “Come on. You’ll like my friends. No point being alone on New Year’s Eve.”

We collected the drinks the two of us had ordered from the bartender and I followed Sebastianne through the club. Half way to the station where he’d left his friends, Madonna’sVogue began playing through the speakers and the balance of the club’s patrons rushed us on their way to the dance floor. It was what it must be like at a futbol game when your soccer team wins the game and half the stadium feels like it is going to collapse.

When we finally reached his friends and the introductions were made, I’d relaxed into the rhythm of my charade which had evolved to include among

other things the details that I was visiting from Buenos Aires and that I was a civil engineer by trade. Sebastianne, who apparently had the same taste in men as his boyfriend, asked me to dance and it was sweating on the dance floor thirty minutes later that we brought in the New Year with a kiss that spanned a good four minutes either side of two years. He led me out of the club and into the street where we could see the sky perforate with fireworks above the river below. We kissed again and I wondered how many minutes into my new year's resolution to return to celibacy I could get away with before the resolution was ipso facto void. Sebastianne had worked his hand through the zipper of my pants and body language being what it was, I wasn't exactly communicating that he stop. Still, I wasn't one for public exhibition and forcefully suggested we go someplace. I hadn't completely forgotten that he was the boyfriend of Max nor that I had been his boyfriend's Venezuelan lover but at some point, it had nothing to do with what I could remember or atone for and everything to do with nerve endings, feeder veins and capillaries. Without asking, I already knew we couldn't go to Sebastianne's place so I volunteered my suite at the As Janelas Verdes Hotel. I'm not sure how we managed to navigate the alleys and walkways from the Barrio Alto through the Baixa but it seemed that in no time at all, we were staggering through a valley of green trimmed windows. Sebastianne was more drunk than I, though I could confess to a degree of numbness of my own making, thanks in large part, I had a feeling, to the fortified contents of my party flask. I couldn't help but fantasize bringing the

pierced and platinum wonder to my hotel room instead of Sebastianne, but at One in the morning, beggars, well—Beggars awake, beggars begotten. If it weren't for my cock, the night would be rotten. I don't remember where I picked up that lament and I don't know why I remembered it at that moment, but it was one of those English phrases that had gotten stuck in my muck of my mind. Wait, I do remember where I picked it up after all! It was written on the wall of a prison cell in Canyon City, Colorado that we had visited when I was in The Circus.

Sebastianne was leaning the bulk of his body weight against me as I turned the key in my hotel room. I wasn't sure he was going to last to the qualifying heat so once inside, I eliminated any need for foreplay and began taking off both of our clothes. Sebastianne had an athlete's body that he obviously maintained regularly. I remembered that about Max, too. Now, I could just see the two of them going to the gym together, neither one a poster of fidelity, but mutually adoring all the same.

The brown haired stud was too wasted for his curved and dangling dick to get very hard but he knew what to do with my erection, that is, until the moment just minutes after he'd started, when he passed out and passed out cold. I was liberating the bedding from underneath him to cover him over when there was a knock on my hotel room door. Perhaps we were being too loud, though I couldn't recall. I had the forethought to toss the covers over Sebastianne's deeply snoring head before I opened the door just a crack.

“Armando! It’s me, Max. Let me in!”

“I can’t,” I stammered. “I’m uh, naked plus I’ve got somebody in here with me.”

“Diablo! I need to speak to you. Come out here then.”

“Just a second,” I said, closing the door between us. Fuck! Fuck! I mouthed the words without making any sound. I grabbed a fresh T-shirt from my open suitcase and a pair of running shorts I’d hardly ever worn and certainly never used, at least for what they were intended. I snatched my hotel key from the lamp table and joined Max in the hallway.

“Once again, Happy New Year, Armando.” Max leaned into me for a kiss and a grope. With his hand firmly around my softening erection, he announced “I think you still have the nicest dick I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you,” I answered modestly. “Happy New Year to you too, Max.”

“Listen, I wanted to be the first to tell you that I spoke to my friend, Mateo, in Caracas this afternoon, you know, the one that I told you about.”

“The priest?” I clarified.

“According to you, yeah maybe. Anyway, he has confirmed that you can go on the payment plan as soon as you get back.”

“What payment plan and you can let go of my pene now.” Max smiled, gave one last squeeze and withdrew his hand.

“The money, Armando. The money to keep us quiet about the boy’s choir. He’s spoken to Father Vincente Zamora and everything—”

"Father Vincente Zamora? Your mother used that name when she was speaking with me at the house the other day. Vincente Zamora," I repeated out loud. "¡El arzobispo! ¡Coño Max! The Father Vincente that you said fooled around with you, is now the bloody archbishop? No wonder they want our mouths to stay shut!"

"I didn't know he'd become the archbishop but then I've been away for six years. Anyway, I couldn't wait to tell you that, since I really wanted to make sure that you didn't come all this way for nothing."

"I don't want that money, Max. I was in love with Father Federico and I think it was pretty clear that he was in love with me. I don't blame him or the church. I thank them both, quiet honestly. Those were the only real years of my life."

"Well, say what you want. I don't blame anybody either but the money has sure been nice. I'll warn you that I doubt Mateo will be permitted to take no for an answer."

"I can handle, Mateo," I assured Max. "I should get back inside before my date gives up on me."

"Let's make it a three-way, Armando! I sure wouldn't mind climbing into bed with you again."

"A three-way is out of the question!" I practically exploded for reasons Max could never know. "Go home to your boyfriend, Max." I pushed him away. "Hey, thanks for the flowers by the way."

“Come on, Amando. Don’t make me feel worse than I already feel.” He leaned over to kiss me goodbye and I pulled him into a hug that for me could only begin to tell Max how sorry I was to have come to Lisbon in the first place. Go home to your boyfriend, I thought about what I’d said and worse, about what I’d done. Better yet, why not give your boyfriend a ride home, I could have said.

Max walked away and rounded the corner at the end of the short hallway. I turned the key in the door and was overtaken by the sonic blasts of Sebastianne’s snoring. I needed to get him home to his boyfriend, I thought. I pulled him out of sleep and out of bed and walked him to the shower where he could sober up a few minutes while waiting for a taxi to arrive that would take him home. While the shower ran, and as Sebastianne started to sing what sounded like a folk song from his Basque childhood, I walked to the arranged flowers in the vase at the tall windows and took the little card envelope in my hand and held it toward the sheer filtered street lights.

Happy New Year Armando. I’ll pick you up at the airport. –Mateo.

Chapter Thirteen

My tired and scratchy eyes searched the concourse for a priest. I had braced myself for the past three hours flying over the Caribbean for the briefest

of exchanges between us, if indeed Father Mateo had staked out the airport for my return to The Soup Bowl. I had no interest in Max's extortion scheme and no desire whatsoever to become re-involved with the Church under any, and certainly less than altruistic, circumstances. I meant what I told Max. I loved Father Federico. I love him still. I wouldn't do anything to taint that bond or his memory. The Church's secrets were safe with me because I frankly didn't care about them and that's what I planned to tell Father Mateo when I saw him.

I cleared customs without incident despite the fact I had only been out of the country for 36 hours and had nothing to declare but a broken heart. I suppose by now it was practically etched in my passport with ink probably only detectable under black light. There, in the space just under my name: Armando Amatista, travels solo with a broken heart. I also have one of those honest faces that wouldn't provoke suspicion if I were wired with a jacket of visible grenades. This was usually in my favor but today, in front of Father Mateo, I didn't want to appear vulnerable and conquerable and an edge, even if it had its origins in jetlag, could be useful if deployed convincingly. Except, Father Mateo was nowhere to be seen.

"Armando!"

Make that nowhere to be seen if you were looking for a man in priest's clothing. Standing practically in front of me, Father Mateo was dressed in faded Levi's, which I have to say he wore really well, and a red button down shirt made from corduroy. His hair was cut with a razor clean line on the back of his neck

tracing his hairline to his sideburns. The precision was so mannequin-fine he either came from a military or more likely from a homosexual background. There were those perfect lips again, lips I might have found irresistible had I not invested so much time on the plane countering any tactics the handsome priest might try to use against me. This preparation had included masturbating twice in order to be so un-sexually motivated when we met face to face, pelvis to pelvis if it came to that, that temptation itself would have been rendered a non-issue.

"How 'bout that, your plane was right on time," he told me as he reached to liberate the carry-on bag from my hand.

"Hello Father Mateo." I said dryly even though the perfection of his white teeth and the absolute correct proportion of his eyebrows and eyelashes to his blue eyes was confounding. If he showed me a forked tongue in that moment to reveal the devil he truly was, I would surrender my soul and all things attached and not look back, just to give the customs officials something to talk about at coffee.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" I couldn't lie. It was a pleasure.

"Please, call me Mateo. I'm not really a priest, you know. Well, not yet, anyway."

"Then that's my mistake," I admitted. "I mistook the vestments you were wearing in the Basilica on Christmas Day for authentic drag."

"Well I can explain that," he started but was stopped by a child who

darted in front of him and tripped as we walked. He chuckled good- heartedly and helped the child back onto his short legs before continuing. "I am in my final semester at seminary and with the holidays approaching, I volunteered to priest-sit the Basilica for a few shifts, to give the regular priests the day off, especially after La Misa..." Again, he stopped himself short. "The Christmas Eve Mass," he continued more cautiously.

"What seminary are you attending?" I asked him, suddenly questioning everything about his masquerade and remembering Max's admission that he and Mateo had fooled around on occasion.

"La Universidad Interdiocesano Santa Rosa de Lima."

I smiled. I didn't suppose he could have made that name up on the spot. "And you are in your final semester?" I was following his lead as we turned toward the exit signs labeled "parking" in Spanish.

"That's right. I received my undergraduate degree from La Universidad Andrés Bello in Ecclesiastical Sciences with a minor in Latin before entering the seminary three and half years ago."

"That is a lot of schooling for somebody your age to have achieved." It wasn't flattery as much as it was a clean assessment. As a matter of observation, Father Mateo, —Mateo looked much younger than I. I wasn't accustomed to priests being younger than I was so it seemed odd to suddenly have aged beyond those I had normally revered and lusted and looked up to all my life.

"You and I are the same age, Armando," he dropped the bomb.

"How do you know that?" I asked having been taken off my guard.

The blonde priest-to-be paused to open the door ahead of me and I passed through catching a whiff of his cologne, Eternity by Calvin Klein, I think it was.

"Father Federico's diaries, that's how. His diary chronicled your age and the development of your voice. I remembered reading a passage and thinking that you and I were the same age, that's all. You were born in February if I remember right and I wasn't born until September of that year, but we're the same age."

"You will have to show me these diaries sometime," I asked and demanded in the same sentence.

"I would be happy to," Mateo answered, placing his free hand, that wasn't carrying my suitcase or opening doors for me, on my shoulder. We walked into the parking area and he suddenly stopped me. "I hope you didn't leave a car at the airport, otherwise, it may have been redundant for me to meet your flight."

"No," I rushed an answer out of my mouth. "I took a taxi to get here." Mateo only smiled. He was flirting with me and the Universe at the same time. I allowed it. Jet lag.

A few rows of cars later and Mateo was unlocking the trunk to a silver Mercedes sedan. With my suitcase stowed, he unlocked the passenger door and held it open for me. It wasn't exactly the symbol of sacrifice and pauper-hood

I'd believed all priest candidates underwent on the route to salvation and perpetual service to God and others, but I didn't say anything. Chances were he was borrowing the car from his parents anyway. I decided not to embarrass him by inquiring. He got in and we drove out of the airport compound into the streets of the seaside town of La Guaira.

"Since we're here, we could take a walk on the beach," Mateo suggested. "There must be a dozen times a week I wish I could break free from the city to get to the beach, but I never do," he lamented.

"Sure," I agreed, wishing I'd masturbated a third time.

We had driven another thirty minutes before I realized we were in the beachside neighborhood of Julio Benetar's parent's condo that had been the site of my first adult sexual escapade some fourteen or fifteen years earlier. I was so impressed with my memory that I actually said something.

"I had my first adult sexual encounter in one of those condo's." I pointed toward the gated fence. Mateo looked at me with a grin. "I'm just amazed I remember that."

"You're supposed to remember your first adult sexual encounter. What was his name?"

"How do you know it was a him?"

"The diaries, remember?"

I looked puzzled. He continued.

"It's just that all your childhood sexual encounters were with Father

Federico—

“Not all of them,” I interrupted.

“Well, the diary didn’t tell me everything then.”

“It wasn’t my diary.”

“No,” he grinned again, this time showing teeth. “I suppose it wasn’t.”

There was a silence of about two minutes and several kilometres between us before I spoke again. “Julio. Julio Benetar.” I said.

“Really?” Mateo asked sounding surprised.

“Really.” I answered.

“I know a Julio Benetar.”

“You mean like I know Julio Benetar,” I queried, given my knowledge of his on and off relations with Max. Mateo just kept smiling which told me I wasn’t Julio’s only conquest. We drove another ten minutes before pulling into a large parking area next to the beach. In the silence that had swallowed about ten kilometres, my brain had stalled on the statistics of our encounter scarcely seven days before in the Basilica. It was pretty remarkable odds that out of 5 million inhabitants in the Soup Bowl, Father Mateo had slept with two of the five Venezuelan men I had slept with. Had he slept with Father Federico too? I had to know.

We got out of the Mercedes and into the sun. I said I needed to get my sunglasses from my bag and he opened the trunk. Next to my small suitcase was a frosted plastic garment bag and through the plastic I could see the suit,

maybe several suits of a priest, with a pink dry cleaning slip stapled to the outside. If Mateo wasn't yet a priest, had he borrowed his Father's Mercedes?

"It belongs to the Basilica." He seemed to be reading my mind, which was an unsettling thought given all I was thinking. "The car, it belongs to the church motor pool." I withdrew my head from the trunk and looked at him inquisitively. "And your sunglasses are on top of your head." He pointed. My hand flew to my head to confirm his sighting. I blushed. At the edge of the pavement, we took off our shoes and socks and carried them as our bare feet sank beneath the warm sand.

"It's really warm compared to Lisboa," I offered.

"How is Max these days?" Mateo asked, reminding me of everything we had in common.

"He seems fine, happy." I didn't know what to say as anything I said had the potential for getting back to Max and I didn't want to hurt him. Wasn't that a funny thing? Max had lied to me, fucked me and left me falling in love with him and still, I didn't want to hurt him. I think his boyfriend's eagerness to cheat on him had convinced me that Max didn't need my retribution as the yang to balance his ying. What goes around had already come back around for Max, even if he didn't know it yet. It made me sad. "You know Max and I were in the San Apóstol Coro de Muchachos together when we were children."

"I know."

"Of course," I remembered. "The diaries." Mateo nodded his head. "You

will show me Father Federico's writing, won't you?"

"I would be happy to," he repeated. "I hope we can make arrangements to meet again and regularly," he added. "I'm certainly prepared to make it worth your while."

"About that," I started to say.

"We don't need to talk about that right now if it makes you uncomfortable."

I looked at him and crinkled my forehead. "I'm not interested in the past and I hold no grudge against Father Federico or the Church. I'm not harmed and I'm not in any way bitter. The money work's for Max, great. What Father Federico and I shared, well, there can't be a monetary comparison, that's all. The money wouldn't bring Father Federico back would it? So I don't see any point."

Mateo thought about this a moment and then raised his sunglasses. "Fine. Let's just enjoy the playa, shall we?" His blue eyes sparkled with the reflection of the Caribbean and had no function beyond seduction. They would win souls for the Church or the Devil, depending for whom Mateo worked. He peeled off his red shirt to reveal the muscles it had contained, even camouflaged. I caught myself staring at his abdominal muscles, not because I didn't see a letter 'F' scar there but because they were so perfectly developed and stacked on top of each other that he had no business wearing clothes, ever. At that moment, Mateo worked for me. We sat then laid on the beach, Mateo

having spread his red shirt out in advance. I had delayed removing my shirt until Mateo was resting but by then, the heat of the day and the heat from the sand were broiling me on two sides. I quietly removed my shirt and balled it behind my head. Mateo didn't seem to notice but that was what was so cunning about Mateo. Not even a minute later, he offered his assessment. "You work out too. We should gym together sometime."

Gym together? I thought to myself. Where could that possibly lead? "Uh, maybe if you stopped working out for a year and gave me a chance to catch up, I'd consider it."

"What are you saying?" Mateo propped himself on one elbow and traced my chest down my stomach with his finger. You look wonderful just the way you are." His finger suddenly diverted to trace the letter 'F' he saw there. "This is interesting."

I hadn't relaxed my sudden tensing from having been touched and this only made the scar grow redder. "Oh that," I tried to pass it off nonchalantly. I believe, and this is my faith, that Father Federico left that scar as the stain and the testament of his semen." I paused a second. "How does that strike you?"

Mateo lifted his finger from my stomach. "It strikes me as," he thought a bit, "maybe the immaculate deception? How did it really happen?"

"For years after Father Federico died, he would visit me in my bedroom, in my bed."

"In your mind, you mean?"

"We continued our affair for a decade after La Misa Saltando and in fact, I remain pretty true to him to this day."

"Pretty true?" Mateo commented with a grin.

I continued. "The first time my masturbation produced an ejaculation, it fell upon my stomach in three lines forming this letter 'F' for Federico. Over the years, the mark has bled, it's blistered, the skin over it has peeled but it has never left my body just as Father Federico has never left my heart or my mind or," I paused, "my body."

"That's a beautiful story. I don't suppose I could get you to recreate that ejaculation right here, right now for me, could I?"

I sat up. "What's in it for me?" I asked.

"Whatever you want," Mateo promised. "Whatever you want."

"Not here," I raised the stakes.

"Where? You name it!" Mateo licked his lips, reaching a finger to mine.

"Okay. In the Basilica dome, shooting over the balcony. It can be our own La Misa Saltando."

I expected him to break character, quote scriptures in admonishment, his façade to crumble. "Let's go," he said.

We went.

I don't know what had gotten into me. I'd spent several frantic minutes in

a cramped airline washroom to purge what I thought I needed to get out of me in order to have a brief, non-sexual, non-economic transaction between Mateo and me. All of a sudden, I felt hornier than I'd felt in half a decade. Following Mateo up the stone staircase inside the Basilica walls that lead to the balcony, I realized exactly what had gotten into me. It was Father Federico. Father Federico wanted very badly to have sex with Mateo. I was possessed! It wasn't my fault and it wasn't my sin. I was just an instrument for Father Federico, -- once again. I surrendered to the assignment.

Mateo had made sure that nobody had seen us duck into the door and he lowered the latch on the other side to prevent anyone without a key from following or surprising us. When we emerged on the balcony, Mateo pressed my body against the dome wall with his muscled mass as his hands found their optimum grip on each of my wrists. I hadn't been in the balcony in over twenty years and not since the night of the Ave Federico. I wasn't the least bit frightened of the height nor what had happened there. It was as if I was completely at ease with having sex in the balcony of the Basilica Santiago Apóstol. It was as if I had always had sex there. It was as if I'd had sex with Mateo before this. Wait!

Mateo was kissing me, his tongue forcing past my teeth. "Wait!" I said again. I pushed Mateo a few inches back until his blue eyes could focus on my brown eyes. "You've had sex here before. You had sex with Father Federico here." They weren't questions. Mateo's eyes looked lazy as they were floating

in hormonal pools that couldn't be drained just because I'd said wait. His eyes could not deny it though his mouth at first tried.

"Yes," he finally admitted. His eyes could not hold my gaze and his pupils sank to watch my lips that he longed to continue kissing.

"You were in the Coro de Muchachos with me. You had child sex with Father Federico, just like me. Just like Max."

"Just like Julio Benetar. Just like a dozen others. That's right."

"Julio?" That was a surprise. "And not just Father Federico, either."

Mateo did not confirm this with his mouth or his eyes but with the suddenly relaxed grip on my wrists.

"With Archbishop Vincente Zamora?"

"Uh," Mateo struggled. "This is kind of killing the moment."

"With Archbishop Zamora?" I persisted.

"He wasn't the archbishop at the time, but yes, with Father Vincente." He moved his head into mine to plant a brief, reconnaissance kiss on my mouth. I pecked back but I wasn't finished.

"Do you have sex with the archbishop still?"

"That's gross, Armando. He's an old man!"

"We were children, Mateo. He was always an old man, they both were."

"No. Father Federico was not old. Father Federico was a god on earth, when you could get his attention and hold it, that is." Mateo released one of my hands and brushed my hair with his fingers. "That is when Armando wasn't

around.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“He loved you. He didn’t love any of us.”

“How do you know that? We were kids?”

“We knew it. We all knew it. That’s why we hated you don’t you know? You had the perfect voice and the perfect priest. It wasn’t fair.” Mateo looked away so I couldn’t see the frontal view of his long-festered bitterness. “That’s why we hated you,” he repeated. “I’m sorry.” He traced my lips with his index finger. “I’ve always known you were special. Father Federico protected you, you know. He always threw one of us into the pathway of Father Vincente as a diversion so Father Vincente never got to you.”

“He didn’t. I mean, I never had any relations with him.”

“And you should thank every one of us for that, too.” Mateo showed a hint of a smile.

I leaned into his handsome face for a kiss, not willing to let his body get away without collecting a souvenir or two. Maybe it was still Father Federico who wasn’t willing to let Mateo get away but I thought I recognized these new urges as my own. In no time, our shirts were off and our torsos, grafting together, found a common center of balance, the stones of the dome cold against my back, and then against Mateo’s as we danced a dizzying sexual waltz around the walkway. When we’d returned to our starting point by the door and next to the rail where I’d last seen Father Federico alive, Mateo unfastened his

Levi's and pushed his underwear down to his knees.

"I need you to fuck me."

"He needs me to fuck you," I corrected him and then obliged them both. When it came time to cum, we both faced the railing, arched our backs and baptized the sacred airspace inside the cathedral as the essence that was Father Federico in both of us, fell from the Basilica dome again.

We prayed.

We dressed and we descended the steps to emerge at the edge of the cobbled octagon. Without speaking, we walked to the center of the floor beneath the dome and knelt next to the bloodstain that for us and those like us would never fade. There, like belt-polished pearls, our fallen seed had struck the bull's eye to re-hydrate the DNA, the bone and the soul of the man that lurked in each of us. Trembling, we made the sign of the cross and backed our way out of the circle.

"Coffee?" Mateo asked on the outside steps of the Basilica.

"Yeah, let's try that again," I answered. We walked to the same coffee shop. "You came back to the church."

"I never left it. Father Vincente has seen to that."

"So, I take it from Max that you administer the trust and ensure that the Coro del Muchachos continues to sing for and not against the Holy Church."

"I handle the payroll, if that's what you mean." Mateo added sugar to his

coffee.

"And get paid handsomely yourself, I imagine."

Mateo smiled. "All my needs are met."

"What does Mateo need?"

"Mateo needs to see you again."

I raised my coffee cup to his in a toast. "You will." I smiled back.

"So you'll go on the payroll then?"

I shifted in my seat. "That's not what I meant. I hope this isn't what this is all about."

"No!" Mateo said abruptly. "I mean, the money's there for that purpose and you should take it but this," he held out his hands toward me palm sides up, "this reunion of ours has been twenty some years in the making. Father Federico wasn't the only one with a crush on you."

"I wish I could remember you," I admitted.

"Maybe if I showed you a picture of us back then, of the whole choir, you'd remember more."

"More than I probably want to remember, I fear. But that would help." I thought about the choir, about the boys. "You, Max, Julio, who else?" I wanted to know.

Mateo withdrew his hands and looked down at his circle of coffee that had to represent the dark side of this transaction. "It's the Church, that's afraid, Armando and specifically the Arzobispo. As long as he lives, the money flows.

When he dies, the money stops." He paused. "For all of us."

"What about the priesthood for you, Mateo? Are you so scarred by the sins of the Father that the tradition of abuse continues? Abuse of trust, abuse of power, abuse of others?"

"I'm not into boys, if that's what you mean. I am into the priesthood. I adore the ceremony and the history and god, the pageantry of it all. The Church is my fetish. It always has been."

"And the sex?"

"The sex? When I have it, it's with men and always, always with the men from the Coro del Muchachos. I wouldn't dream of having sex outside the fold."

"Isn't a bit like prostitution, like paying for sex?"

"I suppose it is."

"Well, let me be the first to offer you redemption. You don't have to pay me and I'll happily have sex with you. It will restore your dignity." I smiled to set him at ease. "In fact, it would be my pleasure."

"And your sacrifice?"

"For the Church? Yes. Gladly." I stretched my leg under the small table to touch his leg. "What I don't understand is why you, or the Church didn't come after me before now? To hear Max talk, he's been on the take for a couple decades now."

"Max had it the worst, there's no doubt. He deserves every Bolivare he's paid if you ask me. Father Vincente was particularly rough on Max. I don't

know why. As for you, well, you always had this higher profile.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, first your parents knew of the circumstances between you and Father Federico. There wasn’t really anybody you could tell that didn’t already know. I think Father Vincente forgot about you and besides, he hadn’t ever abused you. The priest that had, was dead.”

“Father Federico didn’t abuse me, Mateo, if that’s what you think.”

“Don’t worry. That’s not what I think at all. Remember, I knew Father Federico too.” Mateo pressed his leg into mine and then rubbed it there very discreetly. There were others in the coffee shop, the regular down and outs, that knew Mateo for the Church he represented. He had to be careful. “When you surfaced again, you were working for the media and reporting the news for the radio station. The Church wasn’t about to take a chance on making the news by approaching you then and have you freak out all over again.”

“I didn’t freak out in the first place. I don’t really see what the big deal is here? I mean, for Max, for you, if you were really abused, well, that’s different. But I never freaked. Not even when Father Federico died. I guess because he never left me, I never had to process through the loss. After he died, I saw him more than I ever had before and the sex was more than great, it was truly divine. I mean, how else can you explain the scars? It’s practically stigmata!”

“And you say you didn’t freak out? Having sex with ghosts?” Mateo chuckled.

"You laugh. Has he ever visited you?"

"Who? Father Federico? Plenty, but true to his nature, it's never for sex. Mostly for errands."

"I see. So, where do we go from here? You'll obviously have to report back to the Archbishop that I don't want to play. Then what?"

"I won't kid you. He's very nervous about you and especially your connection to the media. He'd sleep a lot better knowing you were tucked safe and quiet inside, say your own, fully financed apartment. It would sure beat living at home."

"Home's not so bad."

"Yeah, but your own apartment? I could visit. I could visit a lot!"

"Are you saying the Archbishop of Caracas is prepared to give me an apartment? This is craziness!"

"I'm sure he'd be more than happy to consider the transaction as royalties past due. Hey, why not collect for your recorded performance of Father Federico's Ave Maria. Lord knows the Church has gotten mileage out of your voice and the thousands of copies of the tapes and records that have been sold. They are still being sold, by the way, and there's talk of making a CD from the original master."

I was grinning. "A recording contract? I've really made the Big Time, haven't I?"

"Just say the word, Armando."

“I still don’t see what’s in this for you, Mateo. Is it the money?”

“I want to be a priest. I want to be a priest more than anything in the world. I’m getting what I want out of this arrangement. So can you.” Mateo had grabbed my hands in that instant and barely had time to squeeze them before his mind’s reflex had drawn them back. “Lo siento,” he apologized.

“I’m not the priest,” I told him. “You don’t have to apologize to me.” I could see he was troubled and I think I understood why. Not only could a loose cannon spoil life for the archbishop, it could also fold up this fantasy arrangement for Mateo and for Max and for the others I had to assume. “Tell you what. You go back to the Archbishop and you tell him that you think I might consider coming around to his camp but—” I set my condition, “you also tell him that in your assessment of the situation, you feel I need to be watched very closely.” Mateo was taking me too seriously so I had to crack a smile. “Then you get to do the watching. I want to be wined and dined, too, maybe a movie once in a while.”

“Oh, I hate my job! When should I watch you next?”

“How about this weekend?” I reached across the table and firmly slapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks for meeting me at the airport.”

“All in a day’s work. I should get you home. ‘Ready?’”

I finished the last of the coffee in my cup and this time, we left the coffee shop together.

My mother was in the living room reading a book when I walked through the door to our home. I automatically crossed the room to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"How was Margarita Island, Niño?"

I was relieved she prompted me as I'd forgotten the excuse I had used before disappearing to Portugal. "Relaxing. Very relaxing."

"That's good." She put the book on her lap. "Your friend from the United States phoned several times. He would like you to phone him as soon as you can."

"My friend from Colorado?"

"I think that's where he said he was living now. He's the same nice man you've known forever. He's always very polite and tries to speak Spanish with me." Mamá looked as though she wanted to keep talking when I couldn't get up the stairs to the phone in my room fast enough. Every second was torture. To make things worse, I hadn't washed after having sex and I was convinced everyone around me could smell it and knew. Mamá was one sheep that fooled easily but Carmen the maid might as well have been the sheep Gestapo and she could usually smell a wolf even before the wolf had started thinking he might pull a fast one. I needed to avoid Carmen.

"I'm going to wash-up," I announced.

"I think Carmen is cleaning the grout in your bathtub." I must have had a panicked look on my face. "Use our bathroom, Niño." I bounded up the stairs

three at a time. "Armando—?" I stopped at the top of the stairs. "Your birthday's on a Sunday this year. I want to have a family dinner. Don't make other plans."

"Yes, Mamá." I turned around and ran full body contact into all four and a half feet of Carmen. I had no choice but to kiss her cheek.

"Buenas tardes, Señor Amatista. Did you come straight from the airport?"

Chapter Fourteen

El Único cries. I can now assume he bleeds, too. I don't know why this came as such a surprise to me, but it did. Not only did it surprise me, but it worked on me. I had indeed forgiven him for canceling my visit before he had even hung up the phone. I think, to be honest, I had already forgiven him before I had finished reading the letter he had couriered to me to cancel my visit but I let him make his long distance case before I absolved him. The plain truth is I was so overjoyed to hear his American voice as it cracked and stumbled, as his nose sniffled and his words ran together in one long phrase without punctuation, that I practically screamed how much I loved him, how I'd always love him and how, no matter what he did or what happened between us, I would always love him. I could play no games with El Único and a grudge, no matter

how flimsy, would have been a game. I was sour to have my trip yanked out from under me, to have my chance to be with El Único again called off at the last moment when it was all I had looked forward to for weeks. But in the end, if it came down to timing and timing for El Único was lousy, I could wait. Hell! It's what I'd been doing for twelve years so far, and I'd gotten pretty good at it.

To hear El Único explain it, his yearlong relationship with a man named Vince, had failed about the time Miguel had died. El Único was single again (and my experience with this rarity was that it lasted about as long as it took a comet to travel from horizon to horizon) plus he'd just learned that his first-ever boyfriend, that being Miguel, had died from la sida. Suddenly, he turns melancholy amid a paralysis of memories with Miguel, maybe some of Vince too, and lo and behold, he has this Venezuelan vacancy that in his subconscious mind, I was perfectly qualified to fill; hence the invitation. The problem with timing was that I couldn't get there before that comet I had mentioned, had burned out during re-entry. This Vince had returned to El Único a transformed man, unable to face the holidays alone and willing to abide by any condition El Único imposed. El Único shouldn't have taken him back, but he did, and barely 30 days later, he left Vince a second time and this time for good. In spite of El Único's second invitation to visit him in Denver, I had already returned from holidays to my job at the theatre. I wouldn't have holidays again until the following Christmas. Surely by then, El Único would have been in and out and back in love again a dozen times. I didn't get my hopes up and I surely didn't

rush out and buy my plane ticket. We agreed to stay in close contact and every month or so, one of us called the other, just to “check-in” and to exchange the requisite ‘I miss you’s’ and ‘I love you’s, which had become the hollow mainstay of our word-conservative conversations. Whether either of us meant it or not, I could not say, not even for myself. How do you really know if you love someone or if you even miss them when you’ve only spent a handful of hours with them in your whole life, in the first place? I didn’t know what love was aside from the feelings I had once had for Father Federico. Max? I have to laugh. Max was a project. Max wasn’t love. I continued to see a lot of Father-to-be Mateo but I couldn’t stretch what I felt for him to conform to any definition I’d read or witnessed of love. I supposed the strongest, most enduring emotion I had for somebody still alive, I had for El Único. I saw no harm in telling him that I loved him. It never seemed to stop him from falling in love or starting a relationship with somebody else anyway. So I told him. I told him often as a matter of fact and I told myself that I loved El Único too. Perhaps that was where all harm lie like a viper full of un-inoculate-able venom. The poison was in the vein and the interpretation of my own words and it would prove fatal if it ever reached my heart.

I had chosen a pew, four rows from the altar and I sat, not on the aisle like a gargoyle lover on the ledge of obviousness, but tucked away five or six

people deep so as not to raise eyebrows, suspicions or the devil in anyone. I had told Father Mateo that I would not be attending his ordination though he had sent an embossed invitation and photo to my parent's house. He'd spent a great deal of time at that address in the past eight months, usually screwing around with me every chance we thought we were getting away with it but he'd also managed to charm my mother out of two or three dinner invitations a month, only to later prove himself the darling jewel of any gathering and me the bastard waste of a son who was so hopeless, he couldn't even become a priest, which had no qualifications or prerequisites. Actually, that's not how I felt, nor how I was made to feel; not by my family and not by Father Mateo. It's just that my career at the theatre didn't have a working class translation that provoked others to marvel at my devotion, trade or skill. I don't think anyone in my family really knows what I do there, to this day but they were all over Father Mateo, -- not like I was all over him, mind you, but they couldn't get enough. Oddly, neither could I, and the closer it came to his ordination the hornier he made me. It was of no mystery that my interest and attention should pique once he began wearing the suits and the robes full time. It was dangerous for him and careless of me if I truly cared for him but not only did we have sex in every room of my house and in every dank and moldy corner of the Basilica but we christened, with our seed, the dining table at the seminary next door, the dressing table of the sacristy, the centuries-old copper bells of the bell tower, the crypts below the cobbled Basilica floor, the faithful not to mention clueless who happened to be

stationed or passing below the balcony of the Basilica's climactic dome and without a doubt in my mind, every last Mercedes in the archbishop's fleet (which had at least doubled in optimistic anticipation of a visit from the Holy Sea as a result of the long-petitioned beatification of Laura Alvarado Cardozo otherwise known as la Madre Maria de San José). I would not, in fact I had point-blank refused, to screw him on the high altar, though staring at the girth of it during his ordination ceremony I realized it would have added another dimension, and a solid one at that, to the rather long and pompously dragged out proceedings.

That was a few weeks ago at the end of November in a year I had began in Lisboa, Portugal, a year that saw me turn thirty-five years old; Arlindo Gouveia win a gold medal at the Summer Olympics in Barcelona--in of all sports Venezuelan, -Tae-kwon-do; not one but two military attempts to overthrow Presidente Carlos Andres Perez, the second resulting in what became known as the Venezuelan Crisis after the presidential palace was bombed along with targets in other zones around The Soup Bowl and lastly, the Archbishop's ordination of a cock-loving priest named Father Alfonse Mateo Sargento Lobo. For me the real Venezuelan Crisis, and I must digress, was that neither Venezuelan entrant in the Miss Universe or Miss World Pageants this year had even cracked the top five finalist lists. It was truly a national disgrace that would surely require a swift retooling of our pageant system, never mind the presidency.

All in all, it seemed a good time for me to leave the country. How

fortuitous then, to receive a second invitation from El Único, imploring me to make the trip he hadn't allowed me to make the year before. I have to say, he sounded more mature and principled in the letters and conversations leading up to my decision to undertake a second attempt. He was clear, at least in his mind, that this time he wanted us to finally investigate if there were any chance for the two of us to be together and if there were any reasons we shouldn't be. He had assured me that he had already erased his slate of commitments and he had postponed his paramours-inevitably-in-waiting and that he would remain single long enough for us to have this time together, to have this discussion and to accept whatever outcomes might be revealed. It sounded good but I couldn't help but have my suspicions so this time I booked an airline ticket I could get refunded in the event of cancellation.

Heading into this, I knew two things to be true: El Único didn't stand still and El Único didn't stay single, for long. It's like men were sucked into El Único's orbit, his gravitational pull, his—and I don't mean this anatomically, black hole. Allow me to illustrate.

In the year that was El Único's 1992, he had moved to a new apartment in downtown Denver that he had intended to occupy alone, though he first tried and failed to share the space with "Vince" before their eventual crash. He next started dating and almost moved in with a corporate travel agent named "Brent" that he'd met through work. He'd even flown him home to meet his family before Brent experienced, what El Único had termed, a "medical freak-out" and

moved back home to be with his mother in Missouri. El Único next landed roles as a tenor in the Opera Colorado chorus of La Boheme and Der Meistersinger. With the beginning of summer, El Único learned that another ex-boyfriend, "Byron," was dying from AIDS in San Antonio. Perhaps out of guilt for not having been there for Miguel, El Único flew to Texas to be by his former lover's side. When the end didn't come quickly for his friend, El Único had to return to Colorado, only to be called two weeks later with the news his friend had died. In the absence of family or friends, El Único flew back to San Antonio to cremate his friend's body, spread his ashes in the Gulf of Mexico and tend to his affairs. While there, El Único met and admittedly fell for "Scott" who worked at the agency that had provided social assistance to his dying friend. Scott later flew to Denver on a weekend date to tell El Único that he too had AIDS but El Único, forever putting a brave face on the grimmest of situations, told Scott that it didn't matter. They stopped communicating a few weeks later. El Único received a promotion and a transfer to become the general manager of the airport Holiday Inn. The very night he'd gone out with some former co-workers to celebrate his promotion, he met and then for the next three months seriously dated a performer named "Greg" who was in Denver on an extended engagement of the off-Broadway musical hit "Forever Plaid." In the middle of his new job and his hectic dating schedule, El Único single-handedly organized an election night protest march on the state capital building after Colorado voters defeated Amendment #2 that had promised equal rights for homosexuals.

Coincidentally, this night, it was not Greg but his singing cast mate "Drew," who was at El Único's side and even though everyone in the cast had said Drew was straight, Drew supported El Único and apparently the Gay Cause and marched through the streets of Denver holding El Único's hand and even planted a sudden kiss on El Único's mouth in front of the television cameras. El Único doesn't come right out and say it, but I believe he fell in love with "Drew" that night, though it seems Drew went right back to being straight again the next day. Believing that Greg and Drew's show would be cancelled at any moment and that Greg would move onto the next stop and boyfriend on his cross-country tour, El Único broke it off with him and began dating, for all the wrong reasons to hear him tell it, a much older and wealthy theatre promoter named "Randy" whom he'd met through Greg. This arrangement dragged on for three weeks and one night until finally, in bed for the first time, El Único learned that the reason they hadn't yet slept together was that Randy couldn't achieve an erection. Randy didn't give El Único the time it took to say "it didn't matter" which of course he was prepared to say, and they resumed separate lives at once. And, finally when El Único learned that The Circus we'd both traveled and performed in over a decade earlier was moving its world headquarters to Denver, he auditioned for a singing role in their convention-based performance cast. To improve his chance at being cast in this youth-obsessed and oriented company, El Único mounted a complete body transformation to out-shadow the fact he was now thirty years old and no longer twenty.

It just so happened, and it seemed to me more a stroke of timing than preparation, that El Único, stuck on a mission, on a diet and on an insane workout routine, had three weeks free to squeeze me into his schedule of causes, goals and men (not necessarily in that order and quite possibly all three one goal in the same). I could spare El Único three weeks. I'd already given him thirteen years.

Beneath my window seat, in the cargo hold of the 747 nonstop from Miami to Denver, laid my suitcase containing six pre-ironed, pre-selected outfits and two pairs of shoes. The captain had just announced we were starting our descent into Denver and I suddenly panicked that I'd forgotten to pack my winter coat. In Venezuela, we don't really have winter and the coat I'd meant to bring belonged to my friend, Gustavo. As I fastened my seatbelt for landing, I remembered Gustavo's coat on the back of my chair in front of the desk in my bedroom. I was going to freeze to death in Colorado. That was my prediction. I had no idea it would become my prophecy.

I hadn't seen El Único in three years and while longer periods of time had passed without seeing him, I knew he would not have changed. His annual photo Christmas cards had kept his image fresh in my mind just in case the memory in my mind had diminished, which it hadn't and never would. I had already cleared customs in Miami so all I had to do was walk off the plane, down the gangway and into the terminal but the door had jammed and they couldn't

open the plane. We waited and waited. The gum I had began chewing when I thought my encounter with El Único was merely minutes and metres away, had already started to lose its flavor. I put another stick in my mouth and chewed nervously. Tranquillo...tranquillo I coached myself to relax. Finally, the flight attendants opened the opposite door and a set of stairs was wheeled into place. The passengers began leaving the plane and I could feel a rush of arctic air moving down the inside of the tube that was the plane. I was going to freeze to death, I was now certain. Outside, my hands stuck to the railing of the stairway and my nostrils froze together when I breathed in through my nose. It had already started, --the freezing to death, that is. We were escorted through the basement beneath the terminal to a set of stairs that emerged on the other side of our intended gate where Denverites were still waiting for their passengers, all facing the empty gangway door with wearing anticipation. I had to pick out El Único from the backside, which was something my memory hadn't counted on and really wasn't equipped for so I just stood there, in the open. Then I saw him in profile and smiled as I had indeed been watching the right ass. I walked up behind him and said, "is there somebody else you are waiting for?"

El Único spun around in complete surprise and unable to speak, he threw his arms around my neck and just squeezed. I could feel him quaking in laughter as he sputtered, "what...where...how?" without ever finishing his sentence.

"They couldn't get the plane door open. They brought us up a different

entrance.” I explained to him through a very big smile as my eyes scanned his handsome face. He hadn’t changed but El Único was getting older. I had waited a long time for him to get older. It was my only hope that as he aged and became wiser he might one day understand how much I cared for him. Minutes later, we retrieved my bag from a conveyor belt and made our way outside toward the parking garage.

“You’ll freeze out there.”

“I know,” I told him. I had already accepted that.

El Único removed his coat and forced it onto me. “My skin’s more use to this than yours is and it’s not like I have a tan to lose. Wear it! I have more coats at home. “Ya hungry?”

“Okay.” I wasn’t the least bit hungry having been overfed on the plane like a baby cow trapped in a cage but El Único seemed to have a plan. I think he wanted to ease into this visit, maybe set an agenda and a tone for the next three weeks. I was just happy to be along for the ride in his black, 1991 Honda Accord as it flew down the freeway toward downtown Denver. I was with El Único! Do you think it mattered where we were going? “Take me to the jungle,” I blurted out in my excitement to see if he remembered telling me the same thing when he was last in The Soup Bowl.

“It gets warmer. Don’t worry!” I’m not sure if he made the connection. He seemed a little nervous to be with me. I was nervous too. It had been a long time for us to be apart to suddenly pick up the pieces to see if they were

still recognizable as belonging to the same puzzle we'd spent half our lives working to solve. It wasn't like we were going to know right away and I think I knew better how to be patient. I was older. Things already moved slower for me. I pressed my back deep into the passenger seat and for a minute or two actually tried to remove the smile from my face. It was impossible. Could it have already frozen there? My teeth chattered together until the cold air rushing from the vents in El Único's dashboard warmed to hot air.

The roads were covered with snow but El Único drove them like a Colorado native, though he wasn't. He was confident and comfortable behind the wheel. He knew his car. I was beginning to relax but now it had become too hot in the car and this only made me sleepy. I had tried to nap on the plane but my adrenaline would not allow it. Now I just wanted to curl up in El Único's arms and sleep for days, maybe a week. The skyscrapers of the Mile Hi City grew closer and closer. We left the freeway and traveled for some time along the boundary of a long, city park. El Único wasn't saying much. I began to worry all over again.

"You never change," I told him. "You look exactly the way you looked when I met you the first time."

"Me? You're the one who never changes, never gets older, never stops looking sexy and healthy and alive." El Único was smiling as he spoke and watching me more than he was watching the icy roads.

"Aye! The light's changing," I winced, pointing to the traffic light. El

Único abruptly reduced his speed and slipped a few yards into the snow filled intersection. There was very little traffic. We weren't in danger. In the next block, we parked in front of a sidewalk bistro that was mostly windows.

"We're here," El Único announced. I smiled. That's all I could do anyway, well, that and brace myself for a venture back outside into the arctic realm. I got out of the car and walked a few steps before slipping on the ice. My arm hooked a parking meter or I would have fallen on my ass. El Único laughed. "You're like Bambi on a frozen pond. You know Bambi?"

"Oh yes," I thought. "I know Bambi."

"Here." El Único offered his arm. I let go of the parking meter and reached for him. "There," he patted my hand. "And we need to get you a pair of gloves too!"

Inside, we were seated at the best table in a glass alcove that jutted onto the sidewalk so that we were surrounded by winter but tucked inside a heated envelope of glass. It had started snowing again, great big flakes of snow revealed by a nearby streetlight wrapped with multicolored Christmas lights. I was definitely in Colorado in December. It had taken me over a year to get there, but there I was. And there was El Único sitting across from me, smiling back. It seemed inconceivable after the year I'd had.

A bottle of red wine arrived that I hadn't heard El Único order. Two glasses were poured and this was followed by a dish of olives and some type of pickled broad bean with tiny peppers the color of my car back home. El Único

raised his wine glass ceremoniously. "Here's to us!"

I raised my glass and made it touch his. "A nosotros," I agreed in translation.

El Único got right down to business. "Please, look at the menu. Absolutely everything is out of this world good."

"What are you having?" I asked.

"Butterflies," El Único said.

"Mariposas? Para cenar?" I smiled.

"No, I'm kidding. I always have the same thing every time I come here to Three Sons. They have probably started preparing it in the kitchen already."

"Well, that's what I'm having then, too. I want to know what you always eat."

The waiter returned. "We'll both have the Capellini Madonna."

"Tony wishes to know if you approve of the Christmas decorations."

El Único gave a big smile, looking around the completely overdone restaurant. "Tell Tony that I think he held back this year. Oh, and please tell our host that I expect him to make an appearance at our table so he can meet Armando."

"Very well." The waiter turned and walked away.

"Who is Tony?"

"Tony's one of the Three Sons." El Único paused. "He's the Gay one, in case anyone should ask, not that these flashy Christmas decorations would

betray his orientation. Tony is pouting tonight because he knows that I have feelings for you. It makes him jealous.”

“You have feelings for me?” I asked mostly to hear him say it again.

“Of course I do! Say, do you want your Christmas present now or later?”

“Well, what I asked St. Nicolas for wouldn’t be appropriate to give me in a public restaurant, so you better save it for later.”

“I see. St. Nicolas didn’t mention anything to me about this. Are you sure you’ve been a good boy and that you are deserving of a present in the first place?”

“Um, I’ve been as good as a priest.” (That wasn’t lying when you considered the priests with whom I kept company).

El Único rubbed his chin, deep in thought. “Well, I will tell you that it won’t be necessary to unpack your bag tonight since you’ll be needing it again tomorrow.”

“You’re sending me back to Caracas already?”

“Not exactly. I’m taking you home to Idaho to meet my family.” El Único extracted two plane tickets from his coat pocket and laid them on the table.

“Your family?”

“That’s right. These three weeks will be the longest time we’ve ever spent together. I want more than anything to see once and for all if there is something between us that we should be paying more attention to, you know?”

Could this be true I wondered? I didn’t speak.

"Maybe you and I are supposed to be together. We should find that out during the next weeks, don't you think? And if we are meant to be together, it's important to me that you meet my family."

"I've met your father, remember?"

"How could I forget? Seeing you now makes me think that was only yesterday. How could so many years have disappeared between us? How come we haven't listened to our hearts?"

"What does your heart say to you?" Now this I wanted to know.

"Escuchame...escuchame." He whispered the words so softly they sounded like they were coming from inside his shirt, from his heart.

"Bueno" I told him. We will listen.

Dinner would have been a blur had the dish El Único ordered us not been so singularly remarkable. It was a giant bowl of angel hair pasta swimming in the richest chicken and herb broth I'd ever tasted, loaded with tender pieces of stewed chicken. It made me almost wish I had a terrible chest and head cold to cure, as this was certainly the concoction to do it. After a few fork and spoonfuls, I didn't see how I would be freezing to death with this new medicinal fire in my belly. I felt as though I could run naked through the snow just as if I were running along a Caribbean beach. I felt altogether transformed until I felt all of a sudden-must-surrender sleepy. It was two o'clock in the morning in the Soup Bowl where I had begun my day. My eyelids turned to lead and my lungs

dispatched yawn after yawn to my mouth.

"You're tired. Of course! Let's get you home and into bed."

"Finally, Santa Claus delivers!" I announced valiantly given the last gasp of energy it took from my reserves.

I don't remember the drive from the restaurant to El Único's apartment. I may have fallen asleep, transfixed by the chicken broth and red wine potion that had turned off every cerebral light from my attic to my cellar. He unlocked the door to his apartment and we stood inside the vestibule. He turned into me for a kiss. My lips awoke. Connected by mouth, El Único began walking up the staircase backward. My eyes awoke. With my drugged frame I pinned him against the brick wall. My arms jolted to life. El Único grinned as we kissed, his eyes sparkling with snowflakes of their own. He spun out of my hold and scrambled up the stairs but I tackled him with my arms around his legs. My penis awoke. He was laughing as I used his body to hoist my own mass up the stairs. My hands awoke. My fingers were undoing the buttons on El Único's jeans as he struggled to play escape. He gained two stairs in elevation but at the cost of losing his pants and underwear to just below the cheeks of his perfectly proportioned ass with a birthmark patch just above the crack. I'd never seen that before. I strained my neck to kiss it. He giggled and gained three more stairs in my disorientation. My legs awoke. With a thrust I pinned him against the stairs with my full body. My face was kissing his neck while my

pelvis found cushion in his buttocks. My voice awoke. I groaned and growled in his ear. This was Christmas and New Year's Eve and birthday and All Saints Day rolled into one explosive celebration of my desire for this man, the only one; El Único!

After making love in two sessions and dozing off for forty minutes or more, I got up from bed to find the washroom. The little lights and mood of El Único's apartment were illuminated just as he had pre-set them before going to the airport to retrieve me. So blinded and drugged was I when we arrived from the restaurant that I hadn't taken so much as a moment to notice how nice and neat the place looked. One exposed brick wall ran the entire length of the four or five room apartment and the rest of the walls were white with framed prints mostly of an American Southwest theme. A string of electric luminarias on the floor dotted the long hallway that connected the living room to the bedroom, bathroom and kitchen beyond. A second bedroom was tucked in a room off the living room where there was a desk in front of a window facing the snowy street below. I felt as though I were spying, as these were things I'm certain El Único intended to show me had he not passed out from exhaustion first. His flat was immaculately clean but shockingly generic except for the framed photographs of the people in his life that sat in the upright hutch that also contained the television. Only they revealed anything personal about the occupant. There were no newspapers or magazines about that might indicate what the occupant

liked to read. There was nothing to indicate what the occupant did for a career. His car had been the same way. There was nothing of his personality revealed in the two places where I had to think he spent most of his time. How could somebody as deified as El Único had become in my mind, not leave a trace of his existence where he walked, where he lived? Maybe this was a tactic he used to become whatever somebody required him to be. Maybe El Único was nobody until someone gave him a role to play, a character to portray, a purpose and an identity. Maybe this was why El Único relationships always ended so definitively like it was the close of a Third Act and it was time for the audience and players to go home. But go home to what if nothing of who you are can be found in the place where you live? This bothered me. At two o'clock in the morning, three thousand miles from the Soup Bowl and surely only hours away from death by freezing, this is what occupied my mind. I went to the generic bathroom past the generic towel racks and the generic bottles of shampoo and bar soap to pee in the generic toilet that might as well have been the trophy for all things generic and non-descript in this strange, plain world with no identity. As I peed, I glanced out the shoulder level window next to the toilet and stared onto the strangely blanketed city of whiteness and realized, how snow obliterated everything on both sides of the glass. It was easy to blame winter so I could return to sleep, nuzzling the neck and shoulders of a man I knew would materialize into something more than spectacular come morning or if it were necessary to wait for the thaw of the generic glacier, come spring. What would

the retreating ice reveal? His love perhaps. Yes. His love.

El Único was all business when he awoke as he hurriedly pried himself out of my arms and legs. "Our flight's at nine-forty-five. We have to hurry," he spouted almost drone-like. Barely minutes later, without coffee, without breakfast, without a thank you or acknowledgement for last night, we were back inside his car-with-no-personality heading back to the airport along the same roads and freeway made only more generic and lifeless by the white light of day and the driver's more than obvious silence. Had I not lived up to his memory of me? Had my body aged beyond El Único's younger tastes? Was he still holding onto his last relationship or was he anxious to move onto the next one after my visit had concluded? I had a dozen questions that would have broken the silence between us if I had only been brave enough to ask and not afraid of the answers he might give. I was freezing to death all over again.

Instead of driving to the airport, El Único drove past the airport and under the runway overpass to the hotel he managed nearby. There, he parked the car and we moved our bags and bodies to the Holiday Inn van waiting there for us. The driver whisked us back to the airport and dropped us off on the departure curb. The moment El Único's feet were inside the airport he was suddenly emotionally human again.

"Are you ready for an adventure, then?" He had stopped walking to face me and his green eyes made sure to connect with mine.

“Yes, I guess I am.” I smiled an uneasy smile. “I haven’t been to Idaho in a very long time.”

El Único set his bag on the floor and bent over to unzip the side pouch. He extracted a new Levi Denim Jacket lined with the fake sheep fur inside. “You’ll need this for your Western Winter. It will keep you from freezing to death.”

“Do you promise?” I scrunched up my forehead into a question.

El Único stared into my eyes and after a few seconds a smile broke across his face. “I promise,” he said. He threw an arm over my shoulders. “Come on!”

I held the dark blue denim to my nose and inhaled the strange smell of new jeans that always reminded me of spoiled milk. I turned the fake sheep fur to my cheek as we walked through the busy, pre-holiday terminal. Excitement rose from my toes to tingle around my heart as we presented our tickets at the counter. I loved to fly and I had never flown with someone I loved. This was going to be an adventure all right. I was receiving regular smiles from El Único again. I decided he hadn’t been able to relax and accept he was on vacation until he entered the airport. We were going to his family home for Christmas. This warmed his morning mood and since I was standing nearby, it thawed my extremities and bought me several more hours of exposure, I figured. Behind my denim and fake sheep jacket, I was one dark, grinning Indian who was about to get a Christmas Holiday he was never going to forget. I let out the air in my lungs and allowed my old friend, the kink in my shoulders, to settle back into the

muscles where it would lurk unnoticed until the next time my life grew unexpectedly tense.

Two hours later we were in another airport surrounded by deeper snow and even whiter people. El Único had spent a clear hour trying to talk me into preparedness for the family I was about to meet. His parents were in their young fifties and had come to terms, more or less, with the knowledge that each of their children had pronounced and accepted their homosexuality. I can't imagine such a scenario anywhere in my country, which made El Único's family automatically extraordinary and remarkable. Only his parents had made the four-hour trip by car to the nearest airport to retrieve us. El Único hugged his mother first and to my surprise, his father, recognizing me from The Circus, opened his arms and drew me into a hug that ended abruptly with a few pats on the shoulder. I was honored and humbled. El Único's mother released her son, having already made eye contact with me, her next target. She took a few steps to receive me. She hugged me longer.

"Finally, it's my turn to meet you, Armando." She pronounced my name carefully. She had probably practiced saying it in the car on her way to the airport. I appreciated the effort. She was a lovely lady with the exact same green eyes as El Único. I hadn't remembered that his father looked surprisingly like Pope John Paul II but in a plaid button down shirt with dark colored pants. El Único had warned me about the resemblance but it hadn't prepared me for the shock. In Catholic South America, the Pope's picture is everywhere. I would

now forever see El Único's father under the miter and robes. He could get work as a Pope stand-in if that ever interested him. I could cause quite a stir at the Basilica back home if I dressed up El Único's father and brought him by the rectory for a chat with the Monsignor Arzobispo. Of course, I could cause quite a stir at the Basilica just by telling what I knew of the rank and file. I didn't need props, celebrity-look-alikes or extras to cause a scene. I wondered if I would have a chance to tell El Único about this secret history of mine and of the Church. It made for a good story if I ever decided to tell it.

We made our way through the airport and into the covered parking garage. I frantically buttoned my Levi jacket from the bottom to the top button. With his parents doting on him after a long spell away from home, El Único didn't think to think about me. It was so cold with the wind blowing snow inside the parking structure I thought that this might be the moment my heart would seize when a chunk of blood ice clogged an artery or my nostrils and mouth would freeze shut with suffocation sure to closely follow. To send out a sign of my distress, I intentionally stepped on the back of El Único's shoe.

"I'm sorry," I squeezed into the conversation he was having with his parents.

"Armando, your lips are blue!" El Único nearly squealed.

Thank-you for noticing, I wanted to say. "It's not the Caribbean," I managed to substitute before my chattering teeth cancelled my ability for speech. Coming to my aid, El Único did sit closer to me than he probably

needed or wanted to in the backseat of his parent's sedan until the air blasting from the dashboard began to find its way to my ice-cracked lips. "I'm okay," I offered with a small shove by way of a release if he wanted to find his own space in the backseat.

He nudged back. "I'm okay too," he said with a smile, before tickling me in my ribs with his right hand concealed under his left arm. I didn't feel comfortable being this obvious in front of his parents, even if they had adjusted to their children's sexual preferences. It just seemed blatant and disrespectful. Of course, it wasn't I realize now. His behavior was just as natural in their family setting as if he had brought home a girl to meet the parents. I tried to adjust to this new paradigm and keep from freezing to death at the same time. I had a lot going on at once plus I was in my fourth time zone in twenty-four hours and beginning to feel the drag of jet engines and insecurities. "If you're sleepy," El Único offered, "it's a long drive. You could try to nap."

"I'm okay," I repeated. I wasn't and I tried to stay awake, to be polite and involved in the conversation but the first thing to go when I got sleepy was my English comprehension.

"Believe it or not," El Único's father, The Pope, piped up. "We'll drive out of the snow in about forty-five minutes. It might look warmer even if it isn't."

"Really?" I said which is what I always said when somebody happened to be speaking English too quickly for me to understand them. "Thank you," always followed. El Único's parents laughed which was my clue to slip into a nap until I

was better equipped to handle the English.

Riveting though the bleak, white-encrusted countryside was for this mostly barefoot, flathead Indian from the equator, I must have preferred at the moment to see the insides of my eyelids because for the next hundred or so miles I was out like Selena Villanueva. Of course, unless you followed Venezuela's beauty pageant drama for the past five decades, you wouldn't know what I meant by that analogy. Selena Villanueva was the handpicked auburn favorite for the crown in 1982 who, upon finding herself racked by nerves the night before the pageant, took a few sleeping pills and missed the pageant. Missing the pageant is somewhat of an allegory considering she died that night and missed a whole lot more than a chance at becoming Miss Venezuela. How completely fortuitous for Aurora Tipitin, herself considered a back-jungle underdog by oddsmakers B.O. (Before Overdose).

Anyway, when I was awakened by the opening of a car door, my eyes recorded that the snow had vanished to reveal a different world altogether. The Pope had stopped the car for a bite to eat at what was El Único's favorite hamburger joint from his years at university in this North Idaho town called Moscow. I rubbed my eyelids that ached from two days of drying by recycled airplane air and eyeballs strained by a need to squint out the white blindness of winter. Inside, the four of us squeezed into a yellow vinyl padded booth to feast on giant hamburgers with cheese and three meat patties accompanied by giant orders of pre-formed potatoes El Único's family coached me to call, tater tots.

These were dipped in a sweet tasting mayonnaise-ketchup combination they called Thousand Island Dressing, and all of it was washed down by Pepsi-colas that came in cups the size of sand buckets. I'd forgotten about this food proportion problem American's seemed to have which not so incidentally could be directly correlated to their size in individual stature and global importance. It isn't a wonder that American Football was born in America. What else could you be any good at after you had gotten that big from eating so much food? The body at some point becomes a weapon. It's simple science. When the body becomes a weapon against itself you'd think a nation would start eating right, right? Not in America, Land of the Excess. The hamburgers were delicious and I was the first one finished if that counts for anything. I think the Pope was impressed I could put it away.

After lunch or dinner, (I wasn't sure) we drove across the university town to a trailer park to call on El Único's maternal grandmother who lived alone in a white trailer with a sun-faded green stripe and Astroturf on the steps and porch. Photos of El Único as a child and young man were on the fake wood panel walls in matching fake wood frames with photos of his younger brother and sister. The Grandmother pushed homemade chocolate chip cookies at me that out of politeness I forced down my throat to nudge their way between the forty or so tater tots and three beef patties that had just preceded them to further strain my Pepsi-cola stretched bladder. I wanted to crawl into a snow bank and die so labored were my internal organs at that moment. I made my way down the

narrow hallway of the singlewide trailer to the washroom. It was like being on a plane all over again. I sat on the toilet and prayed. Minutes passed but nothing else did. I began to sweat from non-productive nervousness. I feared others would begin wondering what was taking me so long in the bathroom. We still had two more hours in the car before we reached the home of El Único's parents and I was damned if those tater tots would still be with me when we did. I pushed and pushed until I felt it being forced back up my esophagus. I panicked. Should I force myself to throw up? That would be the most honorable and direct route to alleviate my suffering but I'd never get away with the amplified sounds that would send through the tin cup of a house the Grandmother called her home, sweet home. I pushed some more. It wasn't working. I knew somehow a tater tot had gotten turned on end to fashion the perfect plug for my colon. With an apple shoved in my mouth I would have been dressed for the spit. I pulled up my pants and tucked in my shirt.

On my return to the living room I was met in the narrow hallway by the Grandmother carrying a dish with four, foil wrapped packages. "Have an ice cream bar?"

Chapter Fifteen

The next three hours of my life were the most physically uncomfortable 180 minutes of my adult life until even they were upstaged by a new endurance mark less than a week later when El Único lowered the arctic boom that I had prophesied would bring about my death by freezing.

After we had arrived at the family home and my stomach had stretched to the equivalent of a second trimester which I could only gauge by the pregnancies of my sisters, we discovered that two double size beds had been pushed together in El Único's childhood bedroom. Before we went to sleep that night, however, the beds had been steered a safe and chilly distance apart. The chasm between them would have made the Grand Canyon blush. Still under the retentive influence of a pound of beef, tater tots, cookies and an ice cream bar, I was momentarily relieved to be relieved of any obligation to intimacy but the hours I stared into the blackness of the bedroom that night were the darkest and most uncomfortable hours of my adult life. My toes were turning numb.

The next day, El Único's younger sister and brother arrived for the holidays and the household spirit index spiked with a wonderful dinner but El Único began crashing again before the dessert was served. There was no animation in his voice or behavior and it was as though he had had two of his

three dimensions surgically removed. His family was wonderful to me perhaps because they had been conditioned to be hospitable, perhaps because they felt a need to compensate for their son-turned-human-freezer or perhaps because I reminded them of Miguel. I thought that must be it. I didn't remind El Único of Miguel, enough. Miguel had indisputably won the race for El Único's heart. I couldn't deny the dead man that. I could be a lot of things but I couldn't be El Único's first love. Miguel had visited El Único's family home. He'd charmed the family. He'd slept in that bedroom, no doubt under a more favorable proximity, even made love to El Único there. El Único wasn't about to let me compete for that memory so he had no choice but to disqualify me. I couldn't feel my feet.

On Christmas Eve, there had been a howling start to a severe snowstorm while we were tucked six to a pew inside an all candle service at the United Methodist Church. Without warning me, El Único disappeared at one point during the service to appear some minutes later in the balcony above us with a very large woman named Kim to sing an a cappella duet of O' Holy Night as the wind whistled through the stained glass. The whites of my eyes must have looked exaggerated with my brown skin in the dim candlelight. El Único's brother leaned into me to whisper an explanation.

"They sing this every year he comes home. It's been a Christmas Eve tradition since he was in school here."

El Único had a melodic voice made for harmonies and their voices had evolved over the years to accentuate the piece. It was as though El Único had

his own version of La Misa Saltando. I didn't need an excuse to strive for a deeper bond but I thought telling him about my history with the Church might help us connect on a different level. I needed to break the Miguel Spell if that was what he was under and any chance to demonstrate how different Miguel and I were, needed to be explored.

In the candlelit darkness, El Único returned to the pew. I squeezed his leg and he smiled. None of us knew that the power had been knocked out by the storm since the service hadn't been relying on it electricity so the shock of emerging into a dark city had been made all the more spooky as if the candles had transported us back to a pre-electric time. In another Christmas Eve tradition that struck me as somewhat dangerous, El Único's family and I kept our candles lit inside the cramped car for the drive home to light the home candles with the light from Our Father's House. It was a nice tradition and on this night particularly practical. Without power to light the tree and illuminate what would have been a night of gift opening, the family voted to retire early to give Santa Claus some extra time to find his way around in the dark. El Único and I carried candles to his downstairs bedroom and I prayed he'd be in the mood to talk. I needed to reach him. We had to connect and somehow exorcise the still-meddling Spirit of Miguel.

"Hearing your voice sing tonight was very special for me. I have never heard you sing before. Do you know that?"

"You have. You just don't remember."

"Really?" I protested. "When?"

"I sent you a cassette tape of a demo recording I made with a woman when I was going to school in Albuquerque."

I was embarrassed. "Oh my God. That's right! I have heard you sing before tonight." My compliment was backfiring. "Did I ever tell you about my singing debut at the Basilica in Caracas when I was a young boy?"

Well, doubly fortunate, I hadn't already told the story about La Misa Saltando and as a bonus, El Único was in a listening mood. In three quarters of an hour I had brought him up to date including my mission to Lisbon and the installation of Father Mateo as a priest in the Catholic Brotherhood.

"I would like to hear the recording of your voice as a child," he told me which made me instantly regret not carrying a spare copy with me everywhere I went. 'Nothing like an Ave Maria to set the mood for a night of lovemaking, right? Well, I knew we weren't heading there since I couldn't feel my feet or my ankles but I nearly perceived an improvement in the global temperature. It could have been the candle heat, I suppose. In fact we didn't make love that night. We hadn't been intimate since the night of my arrival in Denver, but we had had a good talk and I felt closer even if I didn't feel warmer.

We awoke the next morning to Christmas festivities and a white Christmas made all the more delightful by a giant snowdrift six feet high and thirty feet long that had been sculpted in the backyard by the storm's winds overnight as we slept. After a breakfast of pancakes and scrambled eggs, El Único, his sister,

brother and I put on winter clothes that we borrowed from The Pope to explore and excavate the snowdrift. There had never been invented a Christmas toy more entertaining. El Único appraised the white giant and decided immediately to begin construction of a tunnel and as he began descending into the drift at an angle from the top, his sister, Krista, began excavating the tunnel from the bottom. His brother, Jeff and I, took turns sailing off the drift on a runner sled until we were wet and cold. El Único's mother announced through a part in the sliding glass door that hot chocolate had been prepared and Jeff and I made a dash for the house. El Único and Krista were so intently focused on their self-assigned task, they could not be lured away. I watched them from the kitchen window with El Único's mother who could only shake her head.

"They are such stubborn and thick-headed children, just like their father," she said. And in the next minute, The Pope had joined the tunnel building crew. I was content indoors where I helped her prepare the Christmas Meal, Idaho-style. At this point, I was cold beyond any hope for recovery. I had played in the snow so long the skin on my legs had turned fire red and itched madly from the cold. After I'd showered, as El Único's mother had suggested, I could no longer feel my skin by touch. Great white fingerprints that disappeared in an instant were the only proof I had that any circulation of blood remained in my lower extremities at all. My testicles had retreated so far up into my body it caused me to walk differently. It was happening, just as I predicted it would.

Two days later, El Único's parents drove us four hours to the airport to put

us on a plane back to Denver. To avoid speaking to me, El Único slept the entire two-hour flight. All we had done in Idaho was eat and sleep. He could not have possibly been tired. I stared out the window at the white planet below. Eight days of my scheduled twenty-one day visit had managed to creep past and already I was frozen from my toes to my heart. It was a painstaking process, freezing to death, but El Único's every gesture, message and signal made it clear; I was no longer the number one object of his affection...I was no longer desirable...I was no longer welcome. I should have gone home to The Soup Bowl where I belonged but because my brain was the last to freeze, I continued to reason hope that he'd eventually want to be with me.

He invited some friends to his apartment to bring in the New Year with us, which entailed watching New Yorkers in Times Square. There was no kiss at midnight and when it came time to go to bed, El Único rolled onto his side with his back to me. This had become his drill and it had become mine to concentrate for the next hour or so to transcendently enter his dreams to convince his subconscious that it should feel sexual arousal and act on it. Every night this only served to give me an unanswered erection. Those are the worst kind.

El Único returned to work almost immediately leaving my days unstructured and remarkably lonely. I made a few dinners and had them waiting when he returned home but the attempt at domesticity left us both empty and

my efforts unappreciated. I was fooling neither of us. My arms were useless in their frozen state.

On January 5, El Único took me downtown to a small cabaret theatre where his ex-boyfriend was still appearing in a Broadway musical review called "Forever Plaid." After the show, we went for drinks with this Gregory who proceeded to tell me that El Único had dumped him because he "had all these unresolved feelings for Armando." El Único blushed. His feelings for me had since been resolved. He hadn't bothered to bring his friend up to speed and it was a moment of embarrassment for everyone. I chose not to read any hope whatsoever into Gregory's statement. My hands tingled with the last sense of touch they would ever know.

On January 8, both of us counting the days we had remaining in this forced occupation, El Único took me back downtown to a new theatre in the same performing arts complex to see Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical "Aspects of Love." I was pleasantly impressed by the modernity of the new theatre, its neon-trimmed balconies and boxes and the immensity of the stage. We sat in the first row of the first balcony, which gave us the best possible vantage of the stage. The show was minimalist; everyone dressed in beige and the set dressed in black allowed the music and the lyrics to take the lead. The anthem of the musical, Love Changes Everything, haunted me for weeks afterward as I could not get the tune out of my head as it played on continuous loop with one minor substitution in the lyric. It was Time, not Love that had changed everything for

El Único and I; the way we lived, the way we would die. As the gradually freezing of my shoulders ensured I was no longer capable of an embrace, giving or receiving, I accepted that after twelve years, I had to get on with my life without El Único; that in fact, he was no El Único, —not the only one for me. He was no longer for me, at all. I had been misdirected and disillusioned to think otherwise. My waiting, my fidelity had amounted to nothing but wasted years of my life. With my brain, not yet frozen solid, I grew angry and resentful and terribly anxious.

On January 12, El Único took me to his hotel with him to prepare for a party to be held later that evening for the employees of another hotel affiliated by ownership. We spent the day decorating a large ballroom in a winter theme using white Christmas lights and giant paper snowflakes to form twinkling chandeliers that reached from the ceiling to the floor. In another room we used white sheets to create an Arabic tent, inside which an authentic Iranian psychic had been hired to tell fortunes and the future of the guests. Shortly before six o'clock in the evening, El Único and I went home to shower and change clothes. El Único explained that I would be his date for the evening. My mouth had already frozen shut so I could not protest.

We returned to the hotel where El Único gave me a number of jobs to do. We served meals at one point in the evening, tended bar and picked up dirty dishes. El Único was very good about introducing me by name to everyone he knew, which was mostly everyone as he had once managed the hotel whose

staff was the guests at the party. If the first ice crystals weren't already forming on my brain, I might have detected that El Único sounded proud to introduce me, to show me off to his friends and his co-workers. Freezing to death is a funny thing if you've never had the experience. Toward the end, everything seems fuzzy, out of focus. Words seem softer, nicer somehow. Smiles, though blurry, could be considered almost warming and touch, well, I could see El Único holding my arm or placing his arm around my shoulders or squeezing my thigh when we sat next to each other, but I of course felt none of it. He had been drinking. I'd watched him getting drunk. He was trying to get away now. We both were. We had only to let go. That's all. Let go.

El Único pushed me into the tent with the Iranian psychic. I protested and emerged at once but his friends pushed me back inside. I had long held psychics and conjurers as evil, the occult.

"Please sit down and tell me your name," the old wrinkle face woman beckoned me.

I sat down but pretended I didn't understand English. She barely spoke it herself. She had a dark face wrapped in robes and eyes the color of glass cleaner. I tried not to look into them. Incense was burning inside the bed sheet tent and music, tinged with finger bells, was playing softly from a boom box in the corner. The woman's grandson sat off to the side reading a comic book in case there was need for translation. He sort of broke the mood of the tent but I was glad he was there. He smiled awkwardly at me. He didn't want to be there

either. The old woman reached for my hands and closed her eyes. I was too tense to relax my frozen fingers and she sensed that. "Relax, relax," she chanted in a whisper. "Your heart has gone cold. This is not good." She shook her head and said it again. "This is not good." There was a period of silence, then "I don't have your attention. I must first get your attention," she said. She opened her pale blue eyes and began to scan my body seated before her. "Here," she pointed with her bony finger to the top of my right leg. "Here you have a birthmark of some kind, a dark patch. This is true, isn't it?" I recoiled instantly in horror. It was true. I had a burn mark from the ironing mishap during El Único second visit to The Soup Bowl. She wasn't finished. "And here," she was drawing a circle with her hand around my stomach. "Here there is a mark but it is more defined." I watched as the circular motion of her hand began to take on edges and corners. She was clearly tracing a letter F with her hand. "You have the marking of a letter from the alphabet on your stomach. This is odd." I scooted back the folding chair I was sitting on and tried to speak.

"I—This, I'm sorry. I must leave." I was not breathing correctly. I pushed my way through the tent opening and this time, the look on my face must have communicated that I would not be going back inside the tent again. El Único intercepted me from his laughing friends and led me away down the hall.

"You're not all right. What did she say to you in there?"

I couldn't speak yet. I held my frostbitten hand out in front of me to

signal I needed more time. As we walked I looked down at my white shirt inside my sport jacket. I had bled and the letter F could be made out clearly in blood. I pulled my jacket closed and looked down my pant leg to see a brown stain on my pants precisely the shape and location of the mark on my leg. The old woman had extracted the scars from my life through my clothes. How did she do that? Why? "I'm not feeling well," I finally told El Único. Maybe I could just sit in your office a while or in the car until you're ready—"

"I'm ready. Let's go now." He diverted our direction out a side door and we emerged into the parking lot, his black car parked across the snow-piled lot a short distance away. When we reached his apartment, I removed my stained clothes and tied them inside a plastic bag that I would take to a dumpster the next day while El Único was away at work. I had grown used to disposing of clothes once they revealed the mark of my beast within. As always, there was no broken skin on my stomach or my leg; no evidence to explain the phenomenon of my stigmata. As I lay in bed next to El Único, I had but one thought, the Ice Man Cometh. I no longer delayed his arrival.

On January 16, the night before my flight home, El Único took me to an indoor rodeo that was part of the larger National Western Stock Show that was held every January in Denver. We sat on the bleaches an inch apart and said nothing to each other the entire evening.

The following morning, El Único drove my frozen corpse to the airport. I begged him to drop me off at the curb and insisted there was no longer any

reason for him to come inside but he insisted. It was his duty after all to make sure I got on that plane and never came back. I fully intended to comply with his every wish. When they announced they were boarding my flight, I looked deeply into El Único's green eyes and I said, "Well?" There was nothing else to say. He put his arms around me and he squeezed. Then he released me and turned to walk away. He did not turn back again. I watched until he was so far away I could no longer make out the colors of his clothes in the crowd. I was frozen completely solid, my feet welded by ice to the floor where I stood. Icicle tears had pushed their way out of my frozen cranium to immortalize on my immovable face. I would have to start a new life with new idols to worship. I would not forget this moment of frozen emptiness as long as I lived and I would not permit myself to see El Único again or fall for one or a dozen of his well-thought promises of affection for a period no shorter than ten years from that day, January 16, 1993. A decade would have to pass before I could believe again that I could trust, that I could love, that I could breathe and not be betrayed. It would take ten years for me to thaw from El Único's Ice Age. By then, I would be the love that Time forgot. A decade to recover. A decade to forgive. A decade to forget. Time, after all— time changes everything.

For Armando

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