

Tu Sufrimiento Shall Protect Us

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Edgar first hears the screams while he's undressing and Mercedes is changing clothes in his baño. He doesn't normally get involved in the shit that goes down in this vecindario – best to let the justice gangs handle it – so he ignores it, tries to shut it out, until the shrieking peters out a minute or two later. But then he figures that Mercedes might not appreciate having to step over a corpse out in the hallway so he pulls the door open an inch and takes a peek.

That's when he sees the super from across the hall in Apartment 1B rising up out of the floor all herky-jerky like a fantasma. The old man, the viejo, is as dark and wrinkled as a prune and his chalk-white hair is as desarbolado as a just-used mop. He's wearing a rumpled beige guayabera splattered with red splotches and from the waist down his body disappears into the floor.

Edgar shouts, "Hey, you!" since he can't think of anything better to say.

And the viejo just stares at him like *he's* the ghost. His eyes are plums – it's as if he doesn't have lids – and his mouth is wide open in a silent scream.

Edgar shuts the door fast. He's about to open it again, to confirm he's had one

too many shots of tequila, when he decides he doesn't want to know. He's leaning against the door when Mercedes strides out of the bathroom dressed in a black leather bra and panties.

"What's the matter, Edgar?" she says.

She walks right up to him, shoves him aside, and pulls open the door, even though he's standing there bare-assed. They both stare out into the empty hallway.

"Nothing," he says. "I'm just drunker than I thought." The memory of what he's just seen has already started to fade as Mercedes draws closer.

"I sure hope not," she says.

A skip of a heartbeat later he's sprawled in bed with this bigmouthed morena, a puertorriqueña, he thinks, from her "I'm-too-good-for-Dominicans" 'tude when he met her up at Arturo's Bar on the Concourse. After a few shots of Patrón, she'd changed her tune to: "You'll do just fine, papi." She carries a camouflage-green gym bag with her, which Edgar didn't give much thought to, until she starts pulling out some crazy-assed, weird-shaped "toys." He couldn't even say what they were for. Maybe he should put a stop to it right now – he's not into this kind of scene – but he figures he'll go along with it and see how it plays out. So he does what she asks, handcuffs her to the bedpost, spansks her brown ass red and all the while she's screaming, "Dame fuerte! Dame duro!" She's laid a black leather whip next to her on the bed. From the dozen pink scars running down her back to her ass he knows she's played this game before. A little spanking is one thing. But whipping?

So she's moaning and barking orders and shit when she says, "Tell me you love me. Tell me!" Well, since he's known this muchacha for all of about three hours he feels weird saying those three words to her – words he'd never said before in his life. And the fact that she *knows* he couldn't mean them after just a couple of hours of drinking and bullshitting, makes it all seem a little twisted, so he ignores her orders and leans in to kiss her instead.

She head butts him across the bridge of his nose.

"Tell me you love me, condenado!"

He pulls back; his nose is spurting blood.

"You don't love me, hijo de puta?" she says. "You don't like what I did? What are you going to do about it?"

He gets up. Sure, she's hot, and, yeah, he wants to please her and shit, but he realizes as he's wiping blood off his face that he's had enough of her psycho games. He should have called time out as soon as she zipped open that bag-o-crazy-ass, but he couldn't get past her smoking body.

"We're done here," he says.

She calls him a pendejo, a total pussy. She's looking for a real man, she says. He's a limp-wristed, dickless zángano. She keeps the hits coming. He knows she's trying to piss him off so he'll smack her around a bit, like she wants, but he's no idiota. Women always think they can manipulate him into doing things. So then she starts shrieking. Shrieking like a fucking opera singer trying to crack glass. Now,

he probably shouldn't do this, but he reaches into her bag of tricks and straps a red rubber ball into her big mouth, stretching those full lips real wide, and finally, finally, shutting her the fuck up. He's gone soft after the head butt, but something about that ball in her mouth makes her eyes gleam excitedly and – he's not going to deny it – makes him rethink whether or not to end their little party.

That's when the lock on the apartment door jangles. He turns and the door swings open and an old lady in a housecoat just stands there.

“Todo está bien?” she says.

He cups his hands over his huevos and screams, “What the fuck?”

It takes him a second to recognize her. Mrs Guerrero. His landlady. The super's wife. She kind of reminds him of his tía Candita back in the DR, with her coifed snowy hair and soft wrinkles except she's a cubana blanca. She's wearing a white housecoat, a bata that makes her look like a Latina spirit haunting the projects, and she's carrying a hardcover book in the crook of her arm. Taking a look at Mercedes, she says, “Dios mío!” then spins and slams the door behind her.

Now Edgar's thinking, “Shit, I'm going to be evicted.” And while this rundown building on Bruckner Boulevard isn't exactly a cabaña on the shores of Bocachica back in the DR – back before the proxy war between the chinos and americanos destroyed it – it's a roof and a bed in a borough with a kickass militia, and he sure as hell doesn't want to have to start looking again for a place to stay.

He wraps a sheet around his waist and chases after her, leaving Mercedes

squirming on the bed. But when he catches up to her at the end of the corridor, he doesn't quite know what to say. "Look, I'm sorry about this... If we were too loud, I mean. It's not what I usually..."

She waves an open hand in front of her, pressing the book she's carrying to her chest. "No, no, I'm the one who's sorry Mr Ramirez. Really I am." She speaks rapid-fire English with a slight accent. "I heard the... I was just concerned."

He catches the title of the textbook she's carrying, *La Psicología de La Economía Nacional, 4ª edición*, and then he hears it again. He thinks it's a police siren until he realizes it's coming from below them. A scream. Followed by a deep groan. They're standing in front of a stairwell, which Edgar thinks is crazy because in the two months he's lived here, he's never noticed it before. He looks down stairs that lead to a basement – a basement he never knew existed until this moment.

Doña Guerrero frowns, adds some wrinkles to her forehead. She tries her best not to look down there, though her eyes kind of dart back and forth real fast.

"What is that?" he says.

She opens her mouth and closes it a few times before speaking. "Mr Guerrero's taking care of the problem. You don't need to concern yourself." She gawks at the necklace he's wearing, an azabache, a dime-sized onyx stone in the shape of a human head. Then she puts a hand on his shoulder and pulls it away at the touch of his bare flesh. "Again, I apologize for intruding, Mr Ramirez." Her lower lip trembles and she hugs her bata a bit tighter. He looks from her face to the bottom of

the stairwell, which is as dark as el culo de una olla and dead quiet now. Then he remembers that he's standing there buck naked with a bedsheet around his waist and blood gushing out of his nose, talking to a frightened woman. So he just nods, and heads back to his apartment wondering whether his days here are numbered and where the hell he's going to find another apartment that will take him in with just a bare-bones Grade 2 background check, which was all he could afford.

When Edgar gets back, the gleam in Mercedes's eyes is gone, replaced by a glare, and he has to think twice before pulling that red ball out of her mouth. She swallows hard and says, "Un-fucking-cuff me, right now, cabrón."

And just like that he forgets all about Doña Guerrero and the sounds that had been coming from the basement. He sits on the edge of the bed and watches Mercedes step into her panties, wishing he shared her kinky tastes.

She finishes dressing and pauses in front of one of the canvases he keeps stacked in the corner of the room – his painting of the sunny, white-sand beaches of Santo Domingo pre-proxy war. Mercedes's long brown hair is draped over one shoulder and she has an expression he hasn't seen before, like she's considering something profound. "Not terrible," she says, nodding at the canvas. She puts on a pair of red-framed glasses and, just like that, the illusion of superbitch is shattered by a weird Clark Kent Effect. She's become the wholesome Puerto Rican girl next door. "And sorry about the nose."

After that night, he finds it hard to sleep. The screams are loudest in the mornings. A man's choking voice comes from somewhere beneath him, which is strange because he lives in a first-floor studio and there's no basement in this building. At times the cries sounds like a poodle being dragged under the wheels of a car. The shrieks rise up through the floorboards like a living thing, rattling his spine. A vague memory tickles him.

For the first time in his life, he looks forward to going to work.

At the end of the night-shift waiting tables at Conchita's, he makes it home through a blinding snow squall at 4 a.m. The drifts are shin-high and his frozen ears feel like they're about to fall off. He hates this weather, the way it's crept inside of him. Every time he paints a new canvas or draws in his sketch pad he finds himself adding rain or a hailstorm or a snow-filled landscape. He feels like the cold is killing a part of him. At least the tormenta keeps the streets clear of the justice gangs that comb the city for "terroristas" to string up on the nearest lamppost. When he trudges into his building's foyer he stomps the snow off his boots, waking up the security guard – a Pakistani he mistook at first for a Latino – who operates the explosives scanner. When the kid isn't dozing, he's staring off into space obviously engrossed in some retinal movie. So much for protecting the tenants from the goddamned terroristas.

Edgar stands there in the lobby, which stinks like Pine-Sol and vomit, and hunts through the pocket of his parka for the swipecard to his front door when his

cell phone rings. He knows from the merengue ring-tone that it's his mother. She calls him first thing every morning as soon as she wakes up. Unlike most of the evacuees from the DR, Haiti, Korea and all the other countries where the proxy wars are raging, she's landed on her feet, even met a guy from Albany, a Filipino, a fucking garbage collector, who took her in along with Carmela, Edgar's sister, a few months ago and treats them okay. He'd better, if he knows what's good for him. Edgar flips open the phone.

Twenty minutes later, he realizes that he should've taken it inside because he winds up leaning against the wall by the elevators – he can't find his swipecard while he's on the phone – listening to his mother ask him a bunch of questions that, as usual, she doesn't even give him a chance to answer. "Why don't you visit this weekend?" she says. As much as he loves her and Carmela, there's no way he wants to spend three fucking hours going through security at Amtrak. "I'll make sancocho," mami says. "I cooked some last weekend for your little sister, but she's put on too much weight, la pobre." His mouth waters whenever she yaps about Dominican food. He'd swear she does it just to torture him. "Are you bundling up, m'ijo?" She bitches, as usual, about the snowstorms sweeping through Albany, as if they were something unique to upstate New York and not happening across the entire East Coast – "Something to do with the bombas nucleares dropped on Taiwan," she says, as if that's a great revelation – and she goes on and on about the new guy his sister is dating. "He's not too bright but he has beautiful teeth."

Somewhere in the middle of her gossiping she sneaks in an embarrassing question about whether Edgar's remembering to bag the salchicha whenever he gets laid. "¡Mucho cuidado, hijo!" (More "breaking news" via mami-gram: the chinos introduced some nasty STDs that can kill a guy within forty-eight hours. No kidding.) She also asks, of course, whether he's wearing the azabache she mailed him last week, the tiny onyx stone prayed over by a bruja back in the DR, which is supposed to protect him from evil spirits and voodoo and all that mystic bullshit she believes in.

He can't resist giving her a little grief. "Yeah, a lot of good that stuff did us."

"M'ijo, don't say that! We made it out safely!"

She doesn't mention papi, of course, or the other unlucky dominicanos who weren't so lucky, and how many of them wore azabaches. He doesn't buy into this brujería business – not really – but his philosophy's always been, "Why take any chances? Better safe than sorry," so he humors her by wearing the necklace.

While she's lecturing him about having respect for things he doesn't understand, he peels off his gloves, stuffs them in his coat pockets, and notices the dozen or so steps that lead to a cellar. There are stairs here? Red light bleeds from the side of the metal door, which is slightly ajar. The light flicks off a few seconds later and Don Guerrero, the owner and super of the building, comes out, locking the door behind him. He looks older than his wife, in his seventies maybe, and thin. His face is pale and sweaty, like he's just French-kissed el diablo or something, and

his gray hair looks gritty. He smells like he hasn't bathed in days and ignores Edgar as he walks by. Edgar is worried that maybe he's giving him the cold shoulder because his wife had told him about that little incident with Mercedes last week.

When he finally gets off the phone, Edgar enters his apartment and is about to shut the door behind him when he hears it again, real faint. A far-off bellow followed by the same deep moaning. He considers complaining to the super, but thinks better of it. The last thing he wants to do is get on this viejo's bad side. But there's something about that scream. It's as if it's coming out of someone's fucking soul or something. He can't help it. He sets down his coat and heads back out into the hall. Faruq, the security guard, is oblivious as usual; he's sitting thirty feet away, near the entranceway, bobbing his head to the beat in his earpiece, his eyes closed. Maybe he's just pretending not to hear the yowling, minding his own fucking business, Edgar thinks, like *he* should be doing.

The wailing gets louder as he moves toward the rear of the hall. Stairs. There are stairs here? Three steps down, he stops to listen. Someone's in agony down there. He descends the rest of the way and presses his ear to the cold door.

He slaps his hand against the metal and says, in a half-whisper, "Hello?"

The screaming stops.

But two seconds later it turns into a deep howling and then into mangled words, like someone trying to talk with a mouth full of marbles. He barely makes out two words being repeated over and over: *Kill me, kill me...*

“So what did you do?” Mercedes asks.

Edgar shakes his head.

He leans forward on his elbows at the bar counter and sucks on a Corona while the snow drives against the window, covering up the Arturo’s neon sign. He and Mercedes have struck up a weird friendship after their night together. Knowing that they’re not sexually compatible has somehow made it easier for them to talk. They’ve fallen into a comfortable routine heading straight to Arturo’s every day after work. Edgar gets off at 4 a.m.; Mercedes finishes her shift at Santa Anna Hospital a few blocks away at 3:30 a.m. Arturo’s is emptier than usual tonight. Most of the regulars apparently decided not to brave the tormenta, so tonight there’s only him, Mercedes, Omar the Kenyan bartender, who sits on a stool watching a reality game-show about the proxy wars on his laptop, and Sofia, the mejicana in charge of the explosives scanner, who’s packing a semi-automatic and reading the Spanish edition of The Enquirer.

“So what happened?” Mercedes says.

“I thought I heard someone walking down the hallway and I got my ass out of there. Went back to my apartment and turned the 3DTV on loud enough to drown out the noise.”

“Are you kidding me? You didn’t tell the security guard? Call la policía?”

“The cops?” He raises an eyebrow and takes another swig. “Right.” No ataques

terroristas by the chinos have taken place in three years and the policía – despite their ongoing turf war with the justice gangs – have gotten much of the credit for that. But “suspicious” people, mostly blacks, Latinos – Asians, of course – get picked up for questioning, only to be held, uncharged, until they’re deemed “safe” to be released, though no one can say when that’ll be. That explains why he hadn’t seen more than a handful of chinos since he got here from the DR four years ago. Probably for the best, he supposed. The justice gangs would smash in their heads or string them up if they brazenly walked around the city at the wrong time. “No, no policía.”

Mercedes nods sympathetically, as if she knows what he’s thinking.

“Plus, what’s that security guard going to do?” Edgar adds. “Tell the landlord? The old man already knows what’s going on down there, whatever the hell it is. He’s involved. No, I’m staying out of it. I need this apartment.” His family spent too many nights in fucking bug-infested public shelters, unable to afford the background-check clearance needed to rent an apartment.

He and Mercedes sit for a while without saying anything. A bolero plays softly in the background.

“Do you regret leaving the DR?” Mercedes asks. “Not staying to fight the chinos?”

“I was just sixteen. Mi mama didn’t give me a choice. And after the rebel chinos killed my father, she swore she’d keep me and my sister safe.”

Mercedes downs the rest of her Johnny Walker Black. She handles her whisky a hell of a lot better than her tequila. “You draw?”

“Hmm?”

“You deaf? I said, do you draw? I saw the paintings, all the sketch pads, in your apartment. You’re really good.”

“Oh.” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’ve been painting since I was a little kid.”

“Have you tried to sell them?”

He shrugs.

“Don’t you have any ambiciones?”

He wanted to say, sure, he dreams of opening up his own gallery, studying art history. But saying the words out loud would make it sound ridiculous. So he bided his time waiting tables at Conchita’s and worrying about some rebel terrorista setting off a fucking suicide bomb at the restaurant. Ambiciones? The truth was he felt lost at sea. All he had was his mother, his sister. He was glad at least they were upstate where it was safer. With all the destruction lurking around every fucking corner of the city, it felt good to escape into his sketches and canvases and actually *create* something. “I wouldn’t mind hooking up with a nice Latina – someone smart, aguzada, like you – and making a baby who didn’t have to want for anything.”

“That’s sweet. Really sweet. That’s your problem, Edgar. You try to hide it with

your macho swagger, but you're a big softy."

"Thanks."

"I hate softies."

They laugh. "What about you, Mercedes?"

"My aspirations? I don't know. This seems pretty good right here and now."

"Now that's just sad," he says, though he can't help but agree with her assessment.

"Let me ask you something," he says. He'd been meaning to raise the subject for a while and this seems as good a time as any. "Aren't you afraid that your little game might get out of hand? That maybe one night you'll be picked up by someone who likes it even rougher than you do?"

"Now you're getting me horny."

"I'm serious."

"Don't worry. I'm good at sizing up men. Plus, I carry a taser as a backup, in case I ever miscalculate. But I have to say, I don't have anything as effective as that black stone you wear around your neck."

Her comment catches him off guard.

"An azabache, right?" she says.

"You know about azabaches? I didn't realize puertorriqueñas believed in that stuff."

"Actually, I don't. But I heard about it. So you believe in...la brujería, Edgar?"

She delivers the line dramatically, leaning close and wagging her fingers as if casting a spell.

“Nuh-uh. I just wear the stone to shut my mother up.” He shrugs. “It can’t hurt, right?”

All at once the music stops. The bar goes dark.

“Shit!” Omar the bartender says. “Another fucking blackout. Everyone out!” It’s near closing time anyway, and with the explosives-scanner now non-operational it makes sense for Omar to shut things down.

It’s unsafe at night when the blackouts roll through the city, but fortunately the sky is beginning to lighten from deep black to the perpetual gray they’d all gotten used to. They get up to leave.

“Daytime’s almost here. Time to go to sleep,” Edgar says. “I feel like a fucking vampiro.”

“Only tanned and less charismatic,” Mercedes adds.

Edgar turns the corner and there’s an ambulance and six cop cars with flashing lights in front of his building.

A crowd of locals buzz around the cars like flies circling a pile of mierda, but they keep their distance from the authorities, like he does. At least with the justice gangs you know where you stand. With the policía, you can never be too sure.

Some of these people could be tenants from his building, but with the hours he

keeps he doesn't normally see his neighbors and anyone with half a brain knows that it's safer to keep to yourself anyway.

"What happened?" he asks a heavy-set woman with a cane who's moving extra-slow because of the snow.

"They found a body. Somebody hanged himself."

He moves closer to the entranceway. The snow is coming down harder. He makes out Doña Guerrero standing in the building lobby. Two EMTs carry a gurney with a corpse on it.

The wind gusts and the white sheet covering the body lifts.

It's Don Guerrero.

Edgar stands outside the gated bodega on the corner of Watson and Bruckner for two hours, freezing his balls off, waiting for the cops to leave so he can return to his apartment.

When he finally gets inside, he pulls the blinds down. What the fuck happened? Had the old man really offed himself? He wanted to know, but sure as hell wasn't going to go ask the policía any questions.

There's a knock on his door.

When he opens it, the cubana is standing there. Her hair is disheveled; she's out of breath.

"Doña Guerrero," he says. "Lo siento..."

"There's no time for that!" She grabs his elbow and pulls him out into the hall.

“I hadn’t planned to tell you this so soon, Edgar, but I have no choice…”

He follows her to the rear of the floor to the stairwell. There are steps here?

She descends to the door at the bottom of the stairs, holds her hands together, looks up and says, “Dios mío, please help me find the words to explain this in a way that he understands.”

She flings open the door and pulls a cord that flicks on a light bulb, revealing four cement walls, barren except for a rectangular head-to-toe mirror.

She pulls him into the room and shuts the door behind them.

“Look, I’m sorry about your husband. Really, I am, but – ”

“Shhhh!”

She slides the mirror to one side, unveiling a circular hole in the wall that she steps through. He’s hit by the stench of sweat and garbage and something else he doesn’t recognize. Another bulb blinks on, illuminating images he has difficulty making out at first.

The room’s ceiling extends so high that he can’t believe they’re in the same building. Glinting metal tools – hacksaws, wrenches, drills – line up neatly against the left wall. A wooden table with restraints sits in the middle of the room. And a water hose extends from a faucet near the ground. Pressed into the far corner of the room is a three-by-three foot cage and inside of it lays a naked man, a hood over his head, curled in the fetal position. A rusted coffee can in the cage overflows with shit.

At the sound of our footsteps the man lifts his head up. “Please, please, please.”

Doña Guerrero picks up a wrench and clanks it against the bars of the cage.

“Shut up!” she yells. “Shut the hell up right now. I’m warning you!” The caged man flinches and moves his hands over his ears. His thumbs are missing and his fingernails have been pulled off.

The old woman reaches into the cage and snatches off the hood.

A chino.

“This is what’s been keeping us safe since the attack three years ago, Edgar.”

He’s not sure what to think at this point, other than he wants to get the hell out of there as fast as possible. This woman is out of her fucking mind.

“Don Guerrero and I trapped it three years ago. It’s bound by a magnificent spell, a complex brujería. Every day – without exception – it has to suffer. As long as we offer up its pain, its agonía, the city will remain safe from the terroristas. You must never show it compassion. Never show it kindness. But also never let it die. La brujería makes his spark more difficult to extinguish. He can tolerate more pain than others. And it is our duty to deliver that pain and keep our city safe. Do you understand?”

He takes a step back. The stench is making him dizzy.

“Once a month you must offer a basin of its sangre to keep this place hidden. As long as you make that sacrificio, no one will hear its screams, no one will even pay notice to the stairs that lead down here.”

“I don’t... I don’t believe in any of this.”

“I don’t need you to believe. I need you to do it because you must. Because of the consequences if you don’t.”

“Listen, santería, brujería – whatever you call it – it’s all just crazy Latino superstition.”

“Zángano! Do you think this is something unique to our culture? It runs much deeper than that. What do you think keeps the South safe? Government policy?” She spits on the floor. “No, people like us. People who have made the ultimate sacrifice.”

Edgar wonders why the terroristas would bother targeting Lexington, Kentucky or Asswipe, Tennessee. Then he imagines old Southern crones with warts on their chins, sitting in rocking chairs on their porches while caged chinos in their storm cellars cry for help.

She grabs his wrist. “I’m an old woman, Edgar. I can’t keep this up. And my husband, que en paz descansa, well, he proved weak.” She crosses herself. “After what happened to your father in Santo Domingo you should want to do this.”

He’s startled at first when she mentions his father, but then he remembers that she has access to his family history as part of the standard background check.

“And after what I saw you doing to that girl in your apartment that day... I know I can count on you, Edgar.”

“Has perdido la mente! This is crazy.”

“But necessary. You are strong enough to do what has to be done. Do you know how many hours of the day I spend praying for forgiveness? It is a terrible burden, I cannot deny that. But how many thousands died in the gas attacks in the subways? How many hundreds of innocents have been murdered by building bombs? We’ve stopped all of that! We can protect our city!”

He needs to get away. He pushes past her, and runs.

“Come back, Edgar! You have a responsibility! Come back!”

A day passes.

The shrieking is intolerable now. It seeps up through the floor and into the bottom of his feet and works its way through his bones into his heart.

Edgar’s lying in bed. He can’t sleep.

He hates what the fucking chino rebels have done, but he has no choice. What’s happening down there is beyond criminal, beyond immoral. It’s fucking depraved. He has to do something to stop it.

He needs to talk to someone so he pick up the phone and dials without thinking. “Hello? Mercedes...?”

Edgar sneaks down the stairs and pushes open the door, which is unlocked, as if the old bruja is inviting him to enter.

He swings the mirror to the side and steps through the hole in the wall.

The chino is no longer in the cage. He's hanging from the ceiling by his wrists like a side of beef, the hood still over his head.

He gasps when he hears him approach. Then he speaks: "Pleeeeeease."

Edgar pulls off his mask.

"Está bien, está bien..." Edgar says. "Everything's going to be all right." He searches for the key ring, which lies next to the row of tools, and undoes the locks on the chains. He slowly lowers the man, holding him up so that he doesn't collapse to the floor.

"My arms," the chino says. "I can't feel my arms."

Edgar rubs his hands over the man's bony shoulders to get the blood flowing. Then he turns on the hose and cups some water in his palms. The chino laps it out of his hands like a thirsty dog.

"She's crazy, she's crazy," the chino says. "Her and the old man."

"I know it. Don't worry, you're getting out of here."

"My name is Cheung Lu. I have a wife, a son. I've lived in this country my whole life..." He starts to cry then. "Why? I delivered some food to them one day and the old man grabbed me from behind, pressed a handkerchief against my face..."

Edgar doesn't know what to say, so he just holds the poor guy. They sit there for a minute and he feeds him some bread, which he promptly vomits.

That's when Edgar hears the old bruja shout in the distance. "¿Qué hiciste?"

¡No! ¡No!”

Doña Guerrero steps into the room. It doesn't matter. There's nothing that the cubana can do to stop him. And if he knows Mercedes, the policía are already on their way anyway.

When she sees that he's unshackled the prisoner, her eyes widen and she lurches backward, almost as if he's slapped her.

She's holding a glinting object in her hand, which she points at him. He wonders for a second how she got bullets past the explosives scanner when he realizes she's handing him a radio.

“Oye! Listen!” she hisses.

He takes it from her.

“...tactical nuclear weapon of some sort has been detonated,” a voice on the radio shouts. *“It's not clear if there are any survivors! I can't imagine how anyone could have lived through an explosion of that magnitude...”*

“Quickly,” Doña Guerrero says. “Quickly!”

She picks up a whip and lashes the chino across the face with it. He screams in agony. Bloody tracks appear across his left cheek.

Edgar grabs hold of her forearm when she tries to take another swing. “I'm putting an end to this. Enough!”

She drops the whip.

“Albany has been obliterated. And now the question is how the President will

respond to this brazen...

“Albany?” he says. He releases Doña Guerrero. Mami. Carmela. He clutches the radio so hard his hand shakes.

The bruja gasps for air. She picks up the whip and strikes the chino again. He’s now curled in the fetal position. She draws blood from his back, his ribs.

“*Because of you, Edgar,*” she gasps. “Because of your actions, people have died today. Dios mío, what were you thinking?” Her lips are trembling as if she’s about to cry. She slaps Edgar’s face. Then she stoops down, her hands on her knees, as she struggles for air. “Without my husband... I can’t do this alone. For three hours, every morning, every afternoon, every evening, you must make it suffer. Terribly. Like the cubanos suffered. Like all dominicanos suffered.”

“You’re not... He’s a human being. An Americano...”

“Stop thinking that way! This is no game we’re playing, Edgar. The stakes are too high! What we do here is what’s keeping us safe from the terroristas.”

“I never agreed...!”

“None of us chooses the burdens that God gives us to shoulder.” She places the whip in his hands and closes his fingers around it. “One man suffers. *Millions* live safely. You can do this.”

She raises his arm.

But he shakes her off and throws the whip to the ground. “I can’t.”

“Then we will all suffer.”

The message light is blinking on Edgar's answering machine. When he presses the button it's Mercedes.

"Listen, hijo de puta! I don't know what the fuck kind of game you're playing, but I did what you asked. I went to your fucking building, even called the fucking policía because I thought you were in trouble!" There's a long pause and when she speaks again she's crying. "Why did you lie to me, Edgar? There were no stairs! No cellar! No fucking chino in the basement! I can't believe I was so stupid to believe a single word of what you said. The cops are taking me down to the station later today to answer some questions. Just stay away from me, okay?" Another pause. "I thought we were friends."

He paces back and forth, his hands on his head. Something snaps. He lifts his painting of the Dominican seashore and throws it to the floor. He tears up the pages of his sketch pads and slams a chair against a wall until he's holding two legs that he uses to smash a mirror, then he pulls open the door and runs down the hall, past Faruq, through the entranceway to the icy sidewalk. Mami. Carmela. The snow has turned to rain, and he's shivering and crying. The nightmare won't end. It won't end. Mami. Carmela.

Faruq stands at the doorway and shouts at him: "Precipitation today is Code 4! It's not safe out there!"

Edgar turns and heads back to the building, the warm raindrops streaking

down his face. He walks past the explosives scanners half hoping that the stairwell to the basement will be gone again, erased from his memory for good. But it's there. And he remembers. Why had he ever seen them to begin with? Why had he seen the viejo rising through the floor that night? And then it dawns upon him.

His azabache. He removes the necklace and the stairwell vanishes into the shadows of the long, dark hallway. He squeezes the onyx stone and the steps reappear, becoming clearer or fuzzier depending on the strength of his grip. His head is spinning.

He descends and enters the antechamber, pushes aside the hanging mirror, and steps into the basement. There's no sign of Doña Guerrero.

"Is someone there?" the hooded prisoner says. "Is it you again? Help me. Please help me."

Edgar picks up the whip. His hand is shaking. He holds it over his head.

And brings it down across the chino's already bloody back. The chino shrieks.

He strikes him again.

The scream is louder, more high-pitched.

He has to protect the city.

He whips him again and again, until the sound of the whip is drowned out by the wails, though he can't tell whether it's the chino's shrieks or his own.

He never hears again from Mercedes, but he believes deep in his soul that she's still

alive, that she's been spared.

Edgar picks up the brush and paints the red sky with a flourish. How many years has it been since Doña Guerrero disappeared, since he relieved her of her burden?

"Tu sufrimiento is what protects us. You understand, don't you?" The chino is gagged and blindfolded; Edgar keeps it that way so that it won't tell its lies about itself and its family. So that it won't beg. So that it won't look at him.

Edgar hears an emergency siren in the distance. No!

He throws down the brush and picks up the hose.

The chino's naked, scabbed body is tied to a wooden slab in the center of the cellar. It's missing an arm. The table is inclined so that its feet are slightly above its head. Edgar grabs the hose that extends from a faucet on the wall and holds it over the prisoner's head, blasting water through the gag and into its nostrils. After a minute, the chino chokes and its body spasms over and over until it lays immobile. Edgar pulls out the gag and slaps its face until it spits up water and gasps. The chino is missing its left ear. Its face is one big, purple bruise. Edgar turns up the water pressure and shoots water into its nose and mouth causing it to inhale water again.

The siren fades.

"You see? You see?"

Edgar slips a hood over the chino's head and turns back to his mural.

He considers turning on the radio again, but thinks better of it. There had

been reports of an alliance between the gringos and the Chinese government to stop the rebels once and for all. “Because of us, chino. We’re safe because of us! ¡*Por nuestro sacrificio!*” Edgar still has nightmares about what he did to the chino on the day they made the announcement.

Edgar stares at his blood-stained hands and then rubs them together rapidly.

The chino’s breathing is labored. Doña Guerrero was wrong about their endurance. After the last one died Edgar had to head down to Canal Street to find a replacement before the terroristas could strike again.

Edgar stares at the mural of the red sand beaches, the red-leaved palm trees that line the shore, the crimson waters stretching into the horizon. Something is missing from the mural. Something.

And then he remembers.

He bends down to where the blood trickles from the chino’s bandaged ankle stump into the wash basin and dips his brush.

And then he speckles the sky with precipitation. Snow. Red snow that occludes the orange sun.

“We’re safe,” he says.

The End