

Another Sad *Novela*

Edwin propped his head up and wiped the drool from his cheek. His eyes came into focus on the letters scratched into the desk: BKILLAS. A crudely sketched anime thug, all bicep and thigh, held the bubble letters above his head like Atlas. Edwin began tracing his pencil back and forth along the S, extending it towards the edge of the desk's linoleum surface. The pencil lead broke off, disturbing his reverie. He raised his head off the desk, expanding his view to include the bank of windows that flanked the classroom, and the cityscape beyond. The red and gray tenements appeared in high definition against the late morning sun. It was April, but the city had decided to skip spring and go directly to summer. The day was clear and too bright to hide from. Edwin cast his gaze across the river, which wasn't really a river he had learned but an estuary— a swirling mix of brackish backwash separated him from Manhattan.

“Why call it a river then?” He asked.

“Why do you call your *abuela, mami?*” Israel quipped.

“Sometimes its easier to call things what we think they are and leave them be, than to call them what they really are,” Ms. Maldonado explained, and class moved on.

The projects across the river stood low and squat, like molars in the city's mouth, they ground the whole into grist. Maybe they hadn't been designed for grinding, but so many things do more or less than what they are made to do.

The boy yawned and refocused on the foreground of the tableau, on the Southside's tenement rooftops. A weathered old man emerged from the tar roof suddenly like a magician's assistant— the hatch opened. He held a bottle of Presidente in one hand, placed it gingerly on a milk crate and then disappeared— the hatch closed.

Ms. Maldonado's voice disrupted his reverie. Edwin recognized the tone, and cadence of a righteous brand of frustration. She was preaching again.

"My father cut cane for the sugar companies. My mother raised nine children. It was not so easy as it is now. You boys have to come out of your Playstation and ball-playing cocoons. You can't all be basketball players and rappers. If your not six feet tall already- forget it. And ladies... you need to get over yourselves... coming to school late because you had to do your hair? That's inexcusable. Nothing is free and easy in this world. Life is like a bank. You got to make some deposits before you can start withdrawing fortunes." She paused to adjust her skirt.

"But Ms. Maldonado, you know I have to dress my little brother for school every day. I don't need you to tell me why I'm late every morning..." A girl protested, her acrylics rapping against the desk.

Edwin tuned them out and watched the old man reemerge, grey-crowned and smiling, a paper sack in his hand.

Diogenes unlatched the plywood door to his pigeon loft. The birds jostled against the confines of their cages, and cooed anxiously. He tossed handfuls of a seed mixture he has nicknamed simply *el poder* across the tarpaper floor. He named his mixtures for their goals, this one was designed to build power and stamina so that his pigeons could sustain flight all the way back from tip of Long Island or from some hay strewn field in the middle of Pennsylvania that he would never see. That was what the drivers were for. His task was to train the pigeons to feed them and nurse them, to exercise and evaluate them, to help them be the first to find their way home.

The wind had picked up. Diogenes picked up the flag from inside the coop, and dragged it along the cages to wake up any sleepers. He had been losing birds lately, and they hadn't joined the coops of any of his neighborhood competitors. Not any that he knew of anyways. As he undid the latch a vibration swept up his belly, and he coughed on his sip of beer while the birds rushed upwards, mottled and whirling. He swept the flag back and forth in the sky as the pigeons circled above the building. The Domino Sugar factory dominated his eastern vista, surrounded by a field of apartment houses and low-slung warehouses—defunct factories and artist's lofts. A Circle Line tour boat carved a path along East River.

Diogenes traced the skyline of the city with his eyes, put down the flag and replaced it with an old antennae, sketching out the landscape on the surface of the tar roof. He was surprised at his own concentration, occasionally glancing back to calculate an angle. He finished, smiled to himself, and tossed his makeshift pencil against the long defunct chimney, then knelt down to trace his finger along the lines of what appeared to be an EKG reading.

The line's path disappointed him somehow. He took a sip from the beer and imagined himself in one of the distant skyscrapers rose further downtown, where the skyline that had been permanently edited. He noted their absence, and imagined himself in a waterfront skyscraper that's windows reflected red. At sunset it looked like a second sun— a bloodshot nimbus of light.

Diogenes imagined the view from the window: the river's churning surface, tugboats dragging garbage barges downstream, the bridge arching to greet him. He retrieved the flag and waved the pigeons back home. The plywood door clattered open in welcome. The loyal birds returned to their homes and he guided the stragglers to

their cages. He felt filled with something, a mixture of nostalgia for the faces of people he had known, and a renewed affection for this space, his private piece of sky. He stepped back out onto the roof, and muttered something to himself, a response to an imagined conversation with someone long since passed. Then he sat down, momentarily at a loss, and ran the mouth of the beer bottle across his lips.

“That nigga’s crazy,” Edwin mouthed to himself. He smiled secretly into the crook of his arm, took a deep breath from his armpit and turned to the girl beside him, “That’s Polo Sport baby.” She paused for a moment, racing through responses, but settled for sucking her teeth and turning away. He flashed his best little boy smile, and retreated back into his hood.

Diogenes sat down on the milk crate and thought of his niece and of buildings and windows— of latches and doors. He has come to believe that every tragedy was predestined, that God had entrusted a task to his son, to write book that held the story of every soul. He used to think that Christ or the Madonna could change things sometimes that they held the power to intercede, but he didn’t believe that anymore. His wife prayed at least three times a week at The Church of His Divine word. She prayed feverishly for the health of loved ones, for safe passage, for salvation, but to Diogenes each tragedy was delivered with incomprehensible motives. The votive candles he shared their apartment with were just more light for the living to read by. Some of his wife’s friends even went so far as to pray for the characters in their favorite *novelas*. Their prayers went out months after their show’s productions, and a year after the

script had been set in type by a team of writers trading jokes in a Mexico City conference room.

Diogenes' own father had never bothered with praying. His father had been wiry and electric— quick-witted and handsome. His father told him that Heaven was something made up to comfort children and old people when they are afraid of tomorrow. Trujillo's men came for his father one day, when Dio was out swimming in the river. The soldiers weren't afraid of the too-bright sun. They came for you at their convenience. There were no cameras to hide from. The soldiers came in the morning before the sun would beat straight down on the houses, and light up their zinc roof with radiant heat. They came for him, and he left without a word. They wrecked the house more out of habit than spite, taking some letters, and an antique clock. His mother sprinted a mile over the next hill to tell her in-laws. Her mother in-law returned with her and they set to work, cleaning the house. So when Dio came home he found his mother and his grandmother sitting quietly at the table— waiting for the water to boil so that they could start on disinfecting the day.

He only learned what had become of his father from the *bochinche* that swirled around the *colmado* where people gathered briefly, between errands, en route to town or even the city. Most of the neighbors seemed to place the blame squarely on his father's narrow shoulders. "Such a mouth for a little man," he heard an old woman mouth to her gaggle of friends. His mother would only tell him that his father had "gone away." Only when he left for New York, as a grown man, did he ask her once again about his father, and she replied to him much as she had when he was a boy, "Only your father can tell you that story, and he has been gone for a long time."

Edwin straightened up in his chair, and opened his textbook to a map of the gold kingdom in Ghana. They were centuries and miles away by now, studying the French Revolution, but it had been one of the few lessons that had caught his interest. The idea of a gold kingdom had remained with him— a city made of gold, crowded with jet black people, darker than his own.

He rested his head against a bicep, and dangled his forearm off the desk. He studied the photograph of a golden mask in the little box beneath the map of Africa, fingering his chain. It was light, hollow. His fingers followed the links that lead to St. Lazarus- gold plated and glass-eyed. He had bought it off his older cousin with the money he made sweeping hairs off the barbershop floor. That was before he quit, tired of being ordered around by the corny, straight-from-Santo-Domingo brothers who owned the place and wouldn't let the radio stray from Bachata, telling him that Reggeaton was for the *moyos*.

He knew the girl from his time in the barbershop. She was light-skinned, too skinny and maybe a year or two older than he was. It was difficult to tell with her. She dressed young but walked old. She wasn't like the other young girls the brothers messed with, big girls who wore Old Navy sweatpants and bootleg T-shirts— always wearing their inside clothes outside. They were the kind of girls who were always busy taking care of their younger brothers and sisters, the designated housekeepers

Jahaira was different. She never brought little brothers by the shop for free haircuts or ice cream. She didn't leaf through Vanidades, and talk nonsense that broke the rhythm of the men's sharp banter. When she showed up in the late afternoon, no one strained his eyes to hawk her. She simply greeted the younger brother with a peck

on the cheek, and sat down in the far corner. He would pause and rub his hairy belly, tracking her as she found her way to the seat.

The younger brother was an efficient and talented barber. His fades were gradual, natural. His lines were crisp without seeming too calculated. "*Yo soy una maquina. Imaginate... un maquina!*" He called out when he finished a cut that he was particularly satisfied with.

She liked to watch him cut hair. Edwin noticed because he was always watching them cut hair, but they watched for different reasons. She watched the younger brother work the clippers because she loved his hands. In her diary she wrote, "His hands are like folded doves. Sometimes they open up and fly." On the opposite page a photo of their faces was stuck to the page. Little blue diamonds bordered their portrait. Inside the diamonds she kissed his cheek awkwardly as he grinned.

Edwin watched, or rather her studied, because he wanted to learn. After a year they had promised to teach him, and if he was good enough he could get a training license, and then a full license, and finally a chair of his own. If he got a chair, he could get a ride. He would start out with a Maxima, and work his way up. All the hottest girls in his grade went out with guys who had cars, or else they didn't go out with guys at all because their parents were too strict or crazy with Jesus. Edwin's family didn't go to church, but Israel was always off on a Pentecostal retreats. He'd return triumphant, bragging about how much pussy he got out in the woods, "Up against a tree, like that son! You don't know," humping against a streetlight to demonstrate. Always talking too loud so that everyone had to listen.

When Jahaira spoke aloud she became lost, wandering through a warehouse full of words— searching for just the right one but never finding it. She knew better than to speak at all in the barbershop. Her rambling thoughts would just get run down on a highway of clipping Spanish. It didn't make her feel left out. She was happy to laugh with the men, and watch the brother shape hairlines into perfect arcs and triangles, but it was different at school. There was no corner for her to fold herself into.

“I jus wan go home Miss. My *mami, dique*, she say I got to pick my brother up from school.” Her name rang out in the afternoon classes, but she was out.

After five years she was still in ESL classes. The teacher's who knew described her as good-natured but slow. She made friends with girls fresh from Santo Domingo, and taught them everything she knew about the neighborhood— about American culture. After the girls had learned what they could from her, they moved on. Jahaira would see them dressed to go clubbing on a Saturday night, walking out to some boy's car wearing a gold backless dress— their hair freshly highlighted. She knew that she was missing something crucial, a vibrant smile or deadly hips. In a crowd, she faded quickly out of focus, her face like so many others— her future predictable, the inheritance of their mother's chores beckoned.

The younger brother never took her dancing which was okay because she couldn't really dance. She didn't have any sisters to teach her, and her mother stopped dancing when they left the Catholic Church. “Dancing is sinful and it leads to greater sins,” her mother parroted the Pastor of The Church of His Divine Word. So they never danced. Instead, he took her for long rides along the Parkway, beneath the Verrazano where the horizon stretches further than the eye can follow, where there landscape is less crowded. He promised that when the summer came he would take her

out to Jones beach, and they could play in the dark, cold water. She had asked the brother why the water wasn't clear and bright like back home. "*Es mas sucio aqui,*" he said and his gesture took in everything- the streets, the people, the sky. But they never made it to the beach, and she didn't mind if they never made it. The open horizon was enough. They would park beneath the bridge to watch the boats and the joggers pass, and eat whatever snack she had prepared. From a passing car, they looked like what they were: awkward lovers caught in the half-light of the deep afternoon.

On the way home they would stop at his cousin's apartment in Sunset. The decor was sparse: a red leather couch, a small table, and a massive entertainment center. Park. His cousin was a cop who worked the noon to midnight shift. The younger brother liked to have a TV on wherever he was. As soon as they walked in he picked up the remote from the coffee table and clicked it on. An overweight talk show host appeared. He was interviewing a bikini-clad singer in a hot tub brimming with bubbles. The younger brother took hold of Jahaira's narrow shoulders, brought her closer, nuzzling into her like a faun. She expelled too many feeling to name in a low hiss and then sucked the air back in, drawing with it the flesh of his neck, biting gently. He pulled her shirt over her head, and held her larger, darker nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He pulled her down on the couch, and pulled up her skirt, pushing aside her underwear he entered her. Afterwards, he slept soundly with one arm around her and she watched *Lagrimas de Amor* a novella that told the story of a beautiful orphan who is taken in by a wealthy family while her mother combs the streets of Mexico City desperate to find her.

The younger brother was always careful to drop her home before midnight, and early on her mother would scream at her for staying passed nine, but after a while she stopped noticing. Jahaira would disappear into her room for hours. She wished she had

a computer, so that she could chat with other women and get advice about her man. He was her man, but it had occurred to her that she wasn't the only one. She itemized and catalogued her faults as evidence that she did not deserve him. If only she could correct herself, if she could swell up and become something more than herself maybe they might get married some day. Not that it had to be that way, but the idea surfaced in her sometimes and she would feel the urge to write something. She wrote this poem before she called him, before she told him, before she revealed the contours of her interior world and became lost within it.

Tears of my Heart

Sometimes my heart cries for you.
It cries for horizons that
we might never know.

It dreams of beaches and sky.
The promises of your breath in my hair.
The dream of lightness and air.

My heart wishes that we could find
a place where we can be alone,
away from this sea of stone,
beneath a blue sky.

When Diogenes heard the phone ringing he had a premonition. He fled to the bathroom hunkered down on the toilet seat, and ran the water in the sink, so that he wouldn't hear his wife crying. It wasn't until she built to a crescendo of high-pitched screams and began beating on the bathroom door that he admitted defeat resigned himself to whatever sorrow might greet him. "Why like this? Why like this?" She screamed. She tore at his chest with her fingers. She dug into him for support, but fell to her knees. He stared at a framed painting of the Last Supper. All the apostles sitting politely, unaware that it was the *last* supper, unaware that it has all been planned beforehand, all of them except Judas, the architect of tragedy.

Edwin didn't hear about it until second period because nobody ever showed up to first period unless you needed somewhere warm to eat your butter roll. Israel had brought the newspaper so that he could show it to everyone in class. It made the local section of the Daily News, in the crime blotter where tragedies were reduced to the bare essential, wedged between Man Stabbed in Projects and Livery Car Driver Shot.

Girl Falls from Window

Williamsburg: A teenage girl fell five stories to her death in an apparent suicide. Police and family would not comment on a possible motive.

Edwin held the paper so close to his face he could smell the ink. Outside the classroom window, the river rippled white in the kicking wind. The current was swirling in tight thumbprint circles, pulling the freshwater out to the sea.

"That's fucked up. I heard it was that girl from the barbershop," Edwin commented.

"What girl from the barbershop?" Israel snatched the paper back.

"Theat skinny girl that the little brother was tappin'."

"Stop lyin'!"

"She was in there every other day, ask that big-headed boy," he gestured across the room. "He gets his haircut there."

"Nah, I believe you. So you think it was cuz of him," he leaned forward whispering.

“I don’t know. She was all quiet and shit. Who fuckin’ knows?” He shrugged and pulled the paper out of Israel’s hands.

That afternoon when Edwin walked home past the barbershop, he thought of her again and turned his attention inside, trolling for something real: a feeling or a thought. He combed through the his memory and found some images of her, moments in the shop or at school, but they were blurred as if he had never really seen her, never really looked at her and seen her real face.

It has been three weeks since she passed, and Diogenes still hadn’t figured out why she did what she did. No one ever stated it outright, no one pronounced the words that describe her act of surrender. The family didn’t want an autopsy. They didn’t know what they were afraid of finding, They just knew that they were afraid. Diogenes wife began staying with her sister overnight. They held hands in front of the television and cooked more than the remaining children could possibly eat. They prayed more than they had before while Diogenes spent most of the day on the roof, preparing his pigeons, reciting their names and shielding his eyes from the sun, trying to predict which one might find its way back home first.