

Cockfight*Fiction*

Eduardo turned off the truck and looked in the rearview mirror at the sunset fading into darkness behind him. He was both intrigued and unsettled by twilight, a time when the sun and moon could be seen together in the sky — two different worlds cautiously acknowledging one another. He opened the latch on the wire poultry cage strapped into the passenger seat beside him and lightly petted his bird. His touch was gentle — encouraging, he hoped — but not overly tender. “*Vamos a ganar mucho dinero esta noche, ¿no?*” he asked.

Gerónimo, his gamecock, lunged toward him with the precision of a viper.

Eduardo yanked his hand from the cage — his fingers narrowly escaping Gerónimo’s spiked beak — and unbuckled the seatbelt fastened tightly around it. “*Estás listo,*” he said, surprised at Gerónimo’s sudden ferocity.

All day he’d envisioned this evening in his head — yammering under his breath the different things he might say to the other handlers should Gerónimo win the thousand dollar jackpot. But worry always sullied his blue-ribbon fantasizes, leaving him tense and unable to think of anything but his need to win. Only now did the scent of possibility again present itself, providing Eduardo with a moment’s relief from the anxiety that had buzzed in his throat for months.

Eight weeks ago, he’d spent the three hundred dollars he’d managed to save since crossing the border — money he should have sent to his wife and sons in Mexico — on a gamecock bred from champion stock, hopeful that if nurtured the investment would triple his money. He’d purchased the bird from the cousin of a fellow *indocumentado* — a man he’d met doing under-the-table work at Tyson — and had since dedicated his nights to training Gerónimo in the fallow corn field near the boarding house where he rented a room.

Using a stuffed parrot he’d skewered to the end of a sharpened broom handle, Eduardo attempted to teach Gerónimo to bob and weave like Joe Frazier in the VHS tapes his grandfather had shown him of the fighter when Eduardo was just a boy. But training a gamecock had proved trickier than he thought; the animal was defiant and unfocused, and Eduardo lacked the forceful temperament to stun the bird into submission.

Today, however, Gerónimo showed actual promise — a tenuous confirmation that Eduardo had been wise to confine the bird in the



darkness of his closet for five days prior to the fight. This training technique had been suggested by the man from whom he'd purchased the bird, and Eduardo had followed his advice to the letter, only allowing Gerónimo the privilege of light when he opened the door for the bird's twice-daily feedings of grains, steamed vegetables, and liquid vitamins. For the first three days of his confinement, Gerónimo showed no progress, but on the morning of the fourth, he was aggressive and twitchy — the first indication that he might yet be transformed into something of a competitor.

Still, this marked improvement did only so much to calm the worry in Eduardo's mind. His boys needed clothes for the new school year. Medical bills had to be paid. And though his wife, Ignacia, did not remind him of these things during their brief phone conversations every Sunday, her silence made him think of them all the more. Just yesterday he'd reached under his mattress and felt for the money he'd earned in the last month. After counting out what he needed for rent and food, and putting aside a pitiful amount to send home, only seventy-five dollars remained. He gathered that money into a meager stack and tested its weight in the palm of his hand. It felt more substantial there, like something worth losing. But the thought that a single gust of wind could blow away everything he had slowly consumed him, conjuring within him a self-pity so strong his joints nearly buckled in its grip. He needed to justify his stay in America, to prove his family's sacrifices were not made in vain. Gerónimo, he told himself, was his last chance to make good.

Eduardo stepped out of the truck, holding the cage as far from his body as his arm would allow. In the distance he spotted the barn where the others were gathering. A single bare light bulb hung from the structure's center beam, illuminating the growing clusters of bodies hovering near the cockpit. As he walked toward the barn, the moon bounced in stride with his step and shadows widened his feet, lending them the appearance of tree trunks. The menacing posture was laughable — but Eduardo couldn't laugh, couldn't even manage a wry snort at the absurdity of the shadows' suggestion. He felt far too splintered.

Inside the barn, he greeted most of his fellow sportsmen with a nod of the head; a few he knew better were offered his light, noncommittal handshake. The gesture was received with distraction as all inside the barn focused on the octagon-shaped ring, fashioned from plywood planks, where two Mexican men readied their gamecocks for the first round by lunging at one another with their birds in arm. Off to the side, an empty steel drum lurked next to a card table covered in razor-sharp gaffs.



Eduardo went outside and joined the small line in front of the poultry scale. An older white man in line in front of him turned and looked over Gerónimo. “How old? Two years?”

“No,” Eduardo said. “One year and seven months.”

“Wow, he’s a biggin’.” The rooster in the man’s arms flapped violently at the sight of Gerónimo; the man clamped his hand over its beak to quiet it. “This old boy’s anxious to get in the pit. He’s a three-time champ.”

Eduardo looked toward the front of the line. No movement.

“I feed him a special diet that’s got the perfect mix of vitamins. I’m thinking about patenting it and selling it down in Mexico, maybe even the Philippines.”

“Yes, good,” Eduardo said, not fully understanding what the man had said.

“You a Mexican?” the man asked as he and Eduardo shuffled forward.

“Yes,” Eduardo said, with the hesitancy he had learned in this country.

“I figured. You fellas really like this sport.”

Eduardo offered a half smile. He hadn’t been to many cockfights in Mexico, choosing to avoid the dusty sheds where men lost whole weeks wages on bets. The little free time he had away from the job hunt he spent in bed nursing an imaginary backache and dreaming of a different life while Ignacia stirred *mole* over a wood fire in the backyard or read stories to their sons.

The line moved again, and the older man stepped in front of the poultry scale. “Good luck to you.”

Eduardo nodded.

When the man was through weighing his bird, Eduardo removed Gerónimo from the cage, flipped him upside-down, and stuck his feet into the metal ring that hung from the scale. The bird flapped his wings wildly and hissed.

A red-haired boy, no older than twelve, moved out of the shadow of the barn and crushed a beer can under his boot. He tightened the ring around Gerónimo’s legs and held the bird in place with one hand as he studied the scale. “How old is this guy?”

“One year and seven months.”

“He’s pretty big for his age. He’s gonna have to fight with the battle cocks.”

“But this his first fight.”

The boy offered a weak shrug. “The rules are the rules, man.”

Spit pooled in Eduardo’s mouth, and he forced himself to swallow. Gerónimo hardly stood a chance against the older, seasoned fighters



— but there was nothing Eduardo could do. A small chance for money was better than none. “OK,” he said.

The boy unclipped the metal ring around Gerónimo’s feet and handed the agitated animal to Eduardo. He wiped his dirty hands against his white T-shirt, depositing fresh prints among a landscape of older, faded ones. “Entry fee’s twenty bucks.”

Eduardo took a twenty dollar bill out of his wallet and handed it to the boy. He’d worked for four hours in some rich *gabacho*’s pig house, hosing shit and rotten bits of slop from the troughs, to earn it. When the boy folded the bill and stuffed it in his back pocket, something akin to jealous ownership scored Eduardo’s insides.

The boy consulted a graphed ledger and hastily wrote Gerónimo’s name next to another Eduardo couldn’t see. He grabbed a scrap of paper from a pile weighted to the ground with a chunk of limestone and scribbled a few words on it. He handed the paper to Eduardo. “Take this to the table inside. We’ll announce the order for the first round here pretty soon.”

Inside the barn, Eduardo found the betting table. Behind it stood a pregnant woman in sweatpants and a too-small shirt that exposed a few inches of her bulbous belly. She lacked the striking red hair, but there was no denying the boy at the poultry scale was her son; both of their round faces held the same mulish expression as if they’d been born wearing it. As Eduardo approached, she placed one hand over her middle, a gesture glaring and protective. He thought the woman’s belly to be almost grotesque in size. Ignacia had never been so big while pregnant. She’d been so slim, in fact, for the first half of her pregnancy with their oldest son that he’d questioned if she’d lied to him. Perhaps he had even hoped, for once a baby was born there would be no way out.

The woman removed her hand from her stomach and picked up a clipboard lying on the table. “What you need?”

Eduardo handed her the paper the boy had given him.

The woman took the paper when he offered it and read the words written there aloud. “Gerónimo v. Chupacabra. Which one you want to bet on?”

Eduardo didn’t really want to bet on any bird—his shot at the jackpot was already minimal — but he couldn’t disgrace Gerónimo, his only true companion for the last two months. “Gerónimo,” he said.

“All right, the betting starts at forty.”

He handed her two twenties.

“You don’t want to put down more? *Más dinero*,” she asked.

Eduardo looked at the woman, confused.

She waved her hand and sighed. “You know it wouldn’t kill ya’ll to learn some damn English. Name?”



“Eduardo Castillo.”

“Casilo?”

“Casti//o.”

The woman shook her head and wrote Eduardo’s name on the clipboard. “Take a seat on the bleachers. Cages go against the south wall.”

After putting Gerónimo against the wall, Eduardo took his seat on an empty bleacher near the top row. He watched the red-haired boy and another kid, his friend, roll in floodlights on casters that they arranged on opposite sides of the cockpit. He’d seen them perform this ritual before when he’d been to the barn and taken careful notes on lined paper, observing the way the handlers tied the gaffs to the cocks’ legs and stood on the side of the pit, encouraging the birds’ fiercest instincts.

The boys plugged the floodlights into a long extension cord that snaked around the cockpit and out the barn door to a generator in the bed of an old pickup. The two Mexicans, who’d been readying their birds for the fight when Eduardo arrived, now sat alert on stools near the referee’s empty chair and waited.

The pregnant woman walked out to the center of the barn with a bullhorn raised to her lips. “All right, ya’ll, we’re about to get started here.” The men still milling about took seats on the bleachers. The woman waited until all had settled. “No baby stags tonight, so we’re gonna start with the battle stags. Up first we got Rambo v. el Tanque. Nobody’s Bitch v. Mike Tyson on deck.” The woman looked around, then motioned for her red-haired son to come near. She took the bullhorn from her mouth and barked, “Where’s Jeremy?”

The boy pointed toward the field just outside the barn. “Taking a leak.”

The woman rolled her eyes and raised the bullhorn to her mouth again. “Godammit, ref, let’s go!”

No handler dared speak; only the squawking and shifting of caged birds could be heard inside the barn.

A few seconds elapsed before Jeremy hurried into the barn, still zipping up his fly. “Sorry, Lacy,” he said a little too quickly, as if the words were being ushered from his mouth.

Lacy raised her eyebrows. “Last time, ref. You ain’t the only one who can call a fight.”

Jeremy walked swiftly past her, his leather boots raising little plumes of dust off the dirt floor, and climbed atop the referee stool. With a quick flap of his hand, he motioned for the first competitors to be placed in the ring.

El Tanque and Rambo’s handlers came forward and tied gaffs to their birds’ legs with white string, while the red-haired boy and his



friend hugged the squirming creatures like footballs. Jeremy, head bowed, fiddled with the cell phone in his hands and then looked up from his perch and scanned the crowd. Eduardo stared straight at him, until Jeremy's eyes united with his gaze. Jeremy nodded and Eduardo, surprised at the recognition, offered a shy smile in return.

The first time Eduardo had seen him at the barn, he'd memorized the contradictions on his face — tracing, with his eyes, the distinguished grooves etched into his forehead from worry or concentration, the razor nicks along his jaw line that suggested the impatience of the young. Perhaps he was drawn to him because Jeremy reminded Eduardo of himself at that age, foolishly convinced of a thing like permanence. But as Eduardo watched him now, he knew it wasn't really Jeremy's boyishness drawing him in; no, it was something deeper down—a willingness to yield to whoever might snuff out the ever-present flame smoldering low in his stomach. It was almost imperceptible but Eduardo knew it was there. He felt it in himself, too.

When the razors were secured, the birds were lowered into the cockpit and held in place by their handlers as Jeremy counted down from three.

The gamecocks flew toward one another, their hackles fanned out like millstone collars. El Tanque jabbed Rambo in his eyes and wattle, while Rambo cinched his beak around el Tanque's shank. They flapped their wings riotously, flew over one another, and rolled together in a frenzied tumble across the dusty barn floor.

Jeremy watched the fight like a cat stalking a rabbit; he never took his eyes off either bird yet hung back patiently and waited with an air of self-assurance that seemed to grow with each splattering of blood inside the pit. Eduardo had witnessed this routine before — Jeremy undergoing a chrysalis-like transformation in a matter of minutes. But tonight there was something different about Jeremy, a beckoning change that made him seem, more than ever, on the verge of irrepressible manhood.

Rambo hopped toward el Tanque and slashed the bird's fluff with his gaff. Blood oozed from beneath his feathers, and El Tanque stumbled around the pit like a drunk. All eyes were on Jeremy waiting for the call, but Jeremy didn't flinch, didn't blink — just watched.

Rambo struck el Tanque again, this time in his puffed breast. More blood dripped from el Tanque's body and littered the ground; he teetered on one foot for a few seconds, then collapsed on his side. Jeremy raised his arm, indicating the fight was finished. Rambo had won.

The red-haired boy stepped into the ring and slit el Tanque's throat with a hunting knife, then grabbed the dripping carcass from the pit



floor and tossed it into the empty steel drum next to the gaff table. Rambo's handler hoisted him in the air in celebration. Relief pinged through the crowd. The pregnant woman raised the bullhorn to her mouth and asked for Nobody's Bitch and Mike Tyson to be placed in the ring.

After the battle stag round, Eduardo stepped out into the cool September night. Around him, handlers smoked cigarettes and told each other details of the scene they'd all just witnessed inside the barn. Jeremy stepped out beside Eduardo and asked for a light.

Eduardo shrugged. "I do not smoke."

"Oh." He took the unlit cigarette from his mouth and rolled it awkwardly between two fingers.

Eduardo pointed to the group of handlers gathered in a circle, cigarettes dangling between their thumbs and forefingers. "Those guys."

Jeremy crinkled his brow. "What was that?"

"Those guys, they are smoking."

"Yeah, right." A crimson flush blinked across Jeremy's face. "Hey, Bob, you got a light?"

A man telling a story to the group walked over to Jeremy, lit his cigarette, and returned to his circle without breaking pace.

Jeremy nodded to Bob, then brought his attention back to Eduardo. "Back again, huh?"

Eduardo was struck mute, unable to speak as if his jaw were wired shut. He took in small breaths of air through his nose, gathering enough oxygen to force the words off his tongue. "I need to sending money," he said. "My family."

"Yeah, a lot of you guys do that. Shit, Lacy'd be out of business if ya'll didn't." Jeremy chuckled and looked at Eduardo expectantly.

Eduardo laughed to be polite and nudged the ground with the tip of his boot.

Jeremy took a long drag from his cigarette. "I guess day labor don't pay too good, huh?"

"More pay here than Canelas, where I from."

"You got a wife and stuff down there?"

Eduardo couldn't decide whether or not to lie. If he said no, did he expect Jeremy to suddenly come to him? It was a silly possibility to even entertain. "Yes, my wife and two children, they are in Mexico," he said, instantly feeling as though he'd revealed too much.

"You must be anxious to get home then."

He wasn't. In this new country he was lonely and certainly not eating well, yet free from the pressures of family and friends in the small town of his birth. Who has a job, and who doesn't have one?



Who's afraid he's losing his job, and which farms are hiring? It was all anyone spoke of in Canelas, be it at mass on Sunday or in the talk among old-timers at *la Café Central*.

Nonetheless, he was surprised when Ignacia suggested he go to the States. She and the children would move in with her parents, she said. It was only temporary, after all. He'd send for them once he'd gotten steady work. Her cousin had done it; there was no reason why Eduardo could not. But he was hesitant. For the entirety of their eight-year marriage, Ignacia had always wanted more of him than he'd been able to give. Why now was she willing to send him across the border, to a place so far out of her reach? Yes, they were having a hard time making it, but wasn't everyone? Steady work was difficult to find, but they lived simply.

Is it better to stay and face starvation? she'd asked when he expressed his hesitancy to leave Canelas.

Eduardo knew their friends and family would never allow them to succumb to such a fate, and he was sure Ignacia knew it, too. But on her face he'd seen an unshakable resolve — a look so ugly and foreign, ill-fitted to this patient woman, to this wife to whom he'd given so little. So he'd said yes, he would go and find work in the States. Once he saved enough, he would come home, and they would buy a ranch of their own. But as soon as he'd made it over the border and climbed down from the unmarked truck where he'd been stashed with the others for too many dark, breathless hours, he gulped greedily at the indifferent air and knew it was a promise he could not keep.

Still, thoughts of home sometimes tugged at him. He missed the noise of his children; memories of their happy squeals caused a tightening in his throat that kept him from sleep some nights. "Yes," he said to Jeremy. "I miss my boys."

"That's got to be tough."

"What is 'tough'?" Eduardo asked.

Jeremy flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette. "Sorry. *Difficult* is what I mean."

"Yes. I am spending too much hours alone," Eduardo admitted.

"I hear ya. I been going up to Idaho in the winter the last few years to take care of this guy's farm. He runs off to Phoenix as soon as the first snowflake falls. Not that I can really complain. It's an easy job; he doesn't have anything but a couple goats and some chickens. Most of the time, I just sit around watching ESPN on his big screen." Jeremy stubbed out his cigarette and looked toward the darkened field where an easterly wind rippled through the tall grasses like an ocean current. "But you know, after a while, being alone starts to get to me. I feel like I'm the only person in the whole world up there. Even when I go to



the grocery store, people just look through me, like I'm wearing some kind of invisibility cloak."

Eduardo suddenly became aware of every muscle in his body; his skin felt at once tight and as if it might melt into a puddle at his feet. "Cloak?"

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "They act like they don't even see me."

Eduardo wanted to say that he saw Jeremy all the time — even at night when he couldn't sleep.

"You know what I think it is?" Jeremy continued, leaning in toward Eduardo as if telling a secret. "I think when you're, you know, lonely, people can sort of smell it on you, and they don't want to catch what you got. Because once you got it, it's a hell of a thing to get rid of."

Jeremy's words drifted past his ear, dissolving into space before he could pin them all down. But he didn't need to taste the weight of every syllable; the soggy tone of Jeremy's voice, its bitter echo — Eduardo knew it. Like a lingering chill, he felt it in his bones. He'd lived among its hollow rooms.

In the four months he'd been in Missouri, he'd taken three men back to his bed. The first one — an earnest boy of twenty, maybe twenty-two — had wanted to stay, to cook Eduardo breakfast in the morning — a suggestion as laughable as it was confusing. Is *this* how they behave here? He'd wondered. He'd sent the boy home with sweat still wet on his shoulders, and when he was gone, Eduardo felt an ugly tenderness travel the expanse of his chest. He didn't understand it; in Canelas it was always quick and nameless, in an alley, in his truck. There was no lingering touch, no eye contact. Breakfast was new and strange. Yet after the boy had gone, Eduardo found himself wishing he had stayed.

The other two men were older, mid-thirties like Eduardo, and more practiced. They asked for nothing but the physical, and so, returned Eduardo to a state of dull comfort. They didn't want to know his name and left his room unprompted when they were through. It was the way he always wanted it. Still, he thought of the boy who had wanted to make breakfast.

"Yes," he said to Jeremy now. "I feel sometimes this, too."

A wry smirk crept across Jeremy's face. "Well, there's things you can do about that. It helps to have a little company. Make a few friends, if you know what I mean."

"Friend? Sometimes I having friend come to my room," Eduardo blurted, emboldened by Jeremy's openness.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Lot of freedom here. No woman around. I can pass time with anyone," he said, hoping to receive a sign from Jeremy — a flicker of light in the dark. "Nobody to see what I do."



“Well, some of us guys are going down to Sharkey’s later to grab a beer. There’ll be a couple little gals around there I can introduce you to if you want.”

Eduardo frowned. “Eh, no. No, I don’t think so.”

Jeremy straightened up, initiating a tightening of his body that widened the distance between him and Eduardo. He adjusted the sweat-stained brim on his faded Bass Pro cap. “I guess you don’t need my help, do ya buddy.” He gave Eduardo a brotherly smack on his arm. “I gotta get back inside. Don’t need Lacy on my ass again. Good luck in your heat.”

“Thanks,” Eduardo said, as the moment floated away from him, up into the cloudless night.

When Eduardo walked back inside the barn, the first thing he noticed was the tall young blond leaning against the wall. She seemed so out of place among the dust and dry rot; her body, all angles and bones, was the kind that in some big city would be celebrated for its lack of character. He’d never seen a girl like that in farm-fed Monett. In fact, he’d never seen a girl like that in Mexico, either. No, those types of girls lived in the fashion magazines that flanked the check-out lanes at the supermarket, imprisoned in glossy print.

She hadn’t been in the barn — he was sure of it — and her presence changed the atmosphere in a subtle but precarious way. Not many women partook in the sport, which alone would have warranted her attention. But there was something else about the way she looked around the room anxiously, as if waiting for a lover to step off an overdue train.

Jeremy was changed, too; he sat too straight on his stool, passed little hiccups of breath through his mouth, and when he glanced the girl’s direction, both of their lips would curl into smiles, like their hearts were on the same timer.

Eduardo suddenly knew what was different about Jeremy tonight.

Lacy again stood in the middle of the barn. “We’re about to start the battle cock round. First up, we got Gerónimo versus Chupacabra.”

Eduardo startled at the sound of his bird’s name. For a moment, he’d forgotten why he’d come.

The pregnant woman stared at Eduardo. “You’re up.”

Eduardo clasped his palm to his head as if checking for fever.

“You gonna get your bird or what?”

“I go now,” he mumbled — still cloudy, unsure.

The pregnant woman looked annoyed. “You leaving or fighting?”

“Fighting. I going to get my bird.”

“Fine,” she said. “Hurry up.”



Eduardo found his bird's cage against the south wall and opened the latch. Gerónimo, eager to be released from the confined space, sprung out like an impatient jack-in-the-box. While Eduardo fastened the gaffs to the bird's legs, he tried to conjure something inspiring to say, but his mind was blank. He tucked Gerónimo under his arm and walked to the cockpit.

Chupacabra's handler, already inside the plywood ring, bounced on the balls of his feet and yanked at his bird's hackle feathers at intervals. Eduardo had seen other handlers do this same warm-up exercise — it was thought best for gamecocks to be as angry as possible when they entered the ring — but Eduardo had long ago decided on a different strategy: he would reassure Gerónimo. Finally, he thought of something to say. He held Gerónimo close to his ear. "*Miedo es un ilusión,*" he whispered. "*Eres un campeón.*" The words sounded thin to his ear, but it was all he could think of to say.

Jeremy shifted on his perch. "Y'all ready?" Eduardo and Chupacabra's handler nodded. "All right, then. Good luck, gentlemen." Jeremy pointed his finger toward the dirt floor, indicating it was time to lower the birds to the ground. He counted down from three while each handler held his bird in place.

From the first strike it was clear that Chupacabra had the upper hand. He moved with ease around the pit, avoiding Gerónimo's offensive moves by fluttering over his head. Gerónimo clucked and stamped, swiped at Chupa with his gaffs, but Chupa shrugged off his attempts as easily as one removes a sweater.

They fell into a sort of routine — Gerónimo striking and jabbing, Chupa gliding over Gerónimo's head, just out of reach. Eduardo knew Chupa's avoidance strategy would soon tire Gerónimo, leaving him vulnerable and easy to kill. He'd all but resigned himself to the loss, staring into the pit with a dream-like detachment, when Gerónimo got hold of one of Chupa's saddle feathers and yanked him to the ground. He forced Chupa into a tumble across the dirt floor and clawed at his puffed body as they rolled. Chupa struggled out from underneath Gerónimo and slashed him in his underbelly. Gerónimo's flesh cleaved, but he continued to jab and scratch at Chupa. Chupa cut Gerónimo again, causing Gerónimo's entrails to leak out of his belly with every quivering breath he took.

Jeremy kept his eyes fixed on Gerónimo but did not raise his hand.

A sourness flooded Eduardo's stomach as he watched Gerónimo stumble around the pit. He was prepared for spilled blood, unfazed by the site of it after so many years working the land. But this was different in a way he couldn't describe; perhaps it was Gerónimo's desperate little breaths or the growing dimness in his black eyes—



he'd never be sure. In future years, when he would recall the moment, he'd remember it only as something that seemed to mean everything, its importance on the tip of his tongue, incomprehensible yet pleading to be expressed.

He stepped inside the pit and tried to grab Gerónimo off the dirt floor. Chupa shrieked like a madman and nipped at his hands; Eduardo moved around him, tripping over his fanned-out wings.

Jeremy called time and the red-haired boy and his friend ran into the ring and ripped the snarling birds apart. Jeremy motioned for Eduardo and Chupa's handler to step off to the side.

Chupa's handler stepped close to Eduardo, so close Eduardo could taste his musk. "What the hell are you doing?" he yelled.

Jeremy pushed him back. "Let me handle this, Burt."

"I paid a lot of fucking money for this fight and this asshole's getting in the way of my win," Burt said, pointing a finger first at Jeremy, then at Eduardo.

Jeremy grabbed Burt's forearm. "Back off, man. I said I'd handle this."

Burt stamped his boot a few times against the hard ground, then shuffled up against the barn wall like a good soldier.

Jeremy cornered Eduardo, his mouth tight and humorless. "First of all, don't ever step in my ring during a fight," he said, as if explaining a rudimentary fact to a child who was old enough to know better. "You got that?"

Eduardo nodded his head. His cheeks burned with this scolding, yet it felt good to be in Jeremy's glare.

"Second, I don't know why you're even bothering with that bird. You can grab him from the ring all you want, but it ain't gonna do nothing. He's got his goddamn guts hanging out all over the place, for Christ's sake! Or are you too fucking stupid to see that? ¿Comprendes?"

The heat in Eduardo's cheeks traveled to his hands. He gathered his fingers into tight fists and squeezed, feeling the fire inside them contract like a heartbeat. "Let him finish," Eduardo said.

"Who? Your bird?"

Eduardo stood calm and steady. "Gerónimo must finish."

Jeremy shook his head. "You are unbelievable. A second ago, you were trying to pull him out of the pit. Now you wanna —"

"I pay for a full fight."

Burt rushed Eduardo. "No fucking way," he said, pushing him in the chest with the hard heel of his hand. "You disqualify his ass. Now."

"Back the fuck off, Burt," Jeremy said in a voice gravely low. "I'm not gonna tell you again." He put a hand on Eduardo's shoulder with something like pity. "Just let it go, man. It's over."



Eduardo shrugged away from his touch. Did this fucking *pendejo* think he owned him? He clenched his jaw until every muscle in his face flexed. “Gerónimo is not finished.”

Burt scoffed. “He’s got his guts hanging out all over the place!”

“I tell you already my answer.” Eduardo crossed his arms over his chest to demonstrate his resolve.

Jeremy moved in close to him and whispered, “You’re gonna be disqualified if you don’t calm the fuck down.”

And it was then that Eduardo broke open, splayed out and irreversible as the moment of impact. He slapped Jeremy across the face. “*Putra madre.*”

Jeremy stepped back, stunned. With one snap of his arm, Eduardo had knocked the swagger from his body, revealing his childish undergirding. He cowered and called for the pregnant woman in a cracking trill.

Lacy ran over to the pit. “Get the hell out of here!” she yelled at Eduardo. “You’re disqualified.”

The crowd clapped and whooped.

Eduardo grabbed Gerónimo, panting and nearly dead, off the pit floor and walked out of the barn.

When Eduardo returned home, he found a spot for Gerónimo in the field where he’d trained him. He wrapped his body in a towel and dug a hole with a borrowed shovel. When he was finished smoothing the last bit of dirt over the grave, he sat on the undisturbed grass beside it.

His thoughts turned to Jeremy, and the ache of loss came bounding back to him, fresh and tender as the moment it was born in the barn. He put his hand to his chest and felt for his lungs; they sputtered in the grip of the ache. The sensation was so unexpected. He wanted to wrap it in a box and hide it among his meager possessions, to preserve its awful preciousness forever.

He longed to call Ignacia, to swaddle himself in the even tone of her voice, but they’d barely spoken since he’d left. Every time he called, she was busy in the garden or needed to put the boys to bed, politely rejecting his attempts to converse as if Eduardo were a chatty neighbor instead of her husband. It was a startling departure from years past when Ignacia would’ve done anything to hold his attention.

He lay down on the grass, his arms tucked behind his head, and felt the weight of the country quiet push down upon his body. He looked up at the night sky; little pinpricks of light struggled through its engulfing blackness. It was a sky he’d still not gotten used to — a disorienting shield he would not recognize if woken suddenly and was forced to determine where he lay. He wondered how many more days



he would wake and think he was in Mexico. How long would it take to accept this place as his home?

The night before he left for America, as he and Ignacia were lying in bed, she had asked Eduardo to name a time when he'd been the most true to himself. She liked to present these grand introspective questions to him when he was just drifting off to sleep.

“What does that mean, ‘most true’?” he'd asked.

She thought for a while and then said, softly, “When you were able to forget whatever it is you think you are.”

“How could anyone ever do that?” he said, with too much bite in his voice. He'd turned on his side and pulled the covers up over his ears.

“I want you to be true,” she whispered, before falling asleep and allowing him to drink in the silence of night.

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