

Cosas

Esteban y Casamiro were headed for a place that did not exist and they were out of cigarettes.

It was already dark before they got started.

Time had been spent deciding where, and then more time went by trying to get into the blue and rusted Nova. An hour—hijo de fucking puta, an hour just getting the key to turn, Casamiro spat, rubbing his hands together once he and Esteban were finally inside, a pinche fucking hour—pounding the door, the locks and windows. It had taken what was left in the only disposable lighter between them and the edge of a flattened Coke can to pry through the thick layer of dead leaves and the better half of a December's-worth of rain, snow and ice on a car that Esteban had won in a card game, but had never gotten the title to.

The fans in the dashboard spun with no sign of giving warmth. Y hoy es mi cumpleaños, Casamiro moaned and both men began to laugh. It could just as easily have been, neither of them had any idea when it was. Esteban thought Casamiro to be a few years older though had never seen the papers Casamiro claimed to have lost before they met up picking outside a place called Sublimity. And although Esteban knew that he himself would be forty in a couple of weeks—still good-looking enough to pull a woman's attention, but too old in a busboy's uniform to hold it—his own birthdays, each year progressively headed more and more towards nothing in the twenty years since he'd stood on the dock in Mariel Harbor.

He turned the Nova onto Chicago Avenue and at the corner of LaSalle it stalled. Ave María, Casamiro spat, Santa Madre de Mis Pinche Frozen Nalgas. And he cursed the day, the other cars, their drivers and their horns and their mothers and their sisters and their wives, and the pelting he and Esteban got from a salt truck as they pushed the car to the center of the boulevard, before he goddamn goddamn goddamned his lack of a hat, boots, gloves.

Put a madre, cake, cake, Casamiro yelled from the island median as cars threw slush on them, beautiful womans should be bringing me cake in bed right now, goddamn it!

Esteban looked up from under the hood at Casamiro—wire-haired, fitful as a child, throwing balls of slush—and wished to God the man would find a rag and blow his nose.

Truth was, Esteban recalled Casamiro's cumpleaños had come and gone at least four times in December. No mames, mamita, hoy es mi cumpleaños, Casamiro had insisted on Pearl Harbor Day in a voice that reminded Esteban of molasses pouring even though they both knew—knew all too well—that when Chela was in the alley behind the Lawson Y, her knees were already liquid from a pint or so of Southern Comfort, and then it was just as easy to give her a buck and tell her it was a ten. Chela was there Christmas Eve too, and he was certain of two other times they had staggered back to their room that Casamiro had said they really could use a birthday.

Casamiro's cumpleaños had also fallen on the first of the previous August: a day, Casamiro had told all who would listen in the kitchen where they had worked, Lake Michigan would glitter como La Pacifico; the sun would be beating down on your shoulders like it ain't got no business; and in las betwixes and the in-betweens, with las cervezas y las congas, the mujers ain't going to know what hit him, so by night falls you ain't going to see nothing but tetas glowing in the moonlight, yo.

The other dishwashers had smuggled cases of beer into the trunk and back seat of the Nova with each load of garbage they emptied. Alvaro, the sous-chef, a fat guy from Guadalajara who punctuated nearly every sentence with like I give a fuck, obstructed the surveillance camera mounted at the backdoor with the portion of his ass that never quite fit into his cook's whites while the busboys loaded a side of beef and crates of corn, onions and tomatoes.

That particular cumpleaños brought on two uncontrollable nosebleeds, a sudden case of violent diarrhea, a sister from Bogotá who needed to be picked up at the airport, three hangovers, an unexpected case of summer flu, a bee sting that resulted in weeping hives, a migraine or maybe just a sick headache; there were children who couldn't be left alone, and a wife who was due any minute now, until around dusk—when the vatos who had brought their congas were hot, and the cervezas was coldest, and the smell of slowly charred meat clung to damp swimsuits and bare skin; and then around midnight, rockets left over from the Fourth of July leapt off the sand and whirled in spirals before splattering across

the water—nearly every Spanish speaking employee from the restaurant joined in in the six or seven spontaneous choruses of *Feliz Cumpleaños to Casamiro*.

Esteban had lost count.

Though quite clear to him was the half hour spent squatting on his haunches in front of one of the exposed toilets that lined the wall in the communal bathroom the next morning. Esteban had been negotiating the razor-sharp cuts of sunlight that lined the hallway back to their room when he heard Casamiro telling someone, *Sí, sí, yesterday, yesterday was mi birthdays; today we go to church, Esteban and me, to thank mi santo patron; we're a people muy religioso, you know, señor*. With the exception of a sock and strand of blue glass beads Esteban remembered watching him take off of a woman nobody knew but everyone danced with on the beach, Casamiro was naked at the payphone. He crossed himself and mouthed, *Esculpame Padre*, at the peeling radiators that ran across the ceilings. Esteban had followed him back to their room. Alvaro had been sleeping on the floor and merely turned over and cuddled the Hefty bag of dirty laundry when Esteban accidentally kicked him.

When he woke later in the afternoon, Esteban found two of his toes were broken and in need of taping before he could get them into the dress shoes required with his uniform. There was no sign of Alvaro. Esteban dressed in the light that peeked around the blinds. Fumbling towards Casamiro's bed to wake him, he heard Casamiro sleepily tell him, *Go back to bed, 'mano, I taked care of everything, all in the sack; you knowing me, cabron, I taked care of every pinche thing, we supposed to be at church, es mi cumpleaños, compadre*.

Esteban found that he still needed his sunglasses when he returned to the Y an hour later. So hot, and his eyes stung, the world swam with each step. Joe Dent, the front desk manager, was standing in front of the building smoking. Hammy, too sweet and pink—sweaty even in air conditioning—there was an area around Dent, a haze of English Leather, drinking, an over-ripe cheese, neglect that Esteban avoided except once a week when he paid their rent, and even then he held his breath. But Dent had pulled him in, grabbed him by the arm; *you boys give good party, the smelly man had said*.

Esteban scraped frost from the inside of the windshield with the sleeve of his jacket. A hole in the Nova's muffler growled as he

revved the engine back to life and guided the car around the median toward the highway. On the entrance ramp, Casamiro squawking directions of up and down rather than right and left made Esteban wish the radio worked, and trying to block out the noise beside him he found himself and remembered vaguely remembering Dent on the beach at Casamiro's August birthday: bright red and white striped from sunburn, outside the Y the day after, Dent told him that he had never seen so many sweet honeys in his entire life, and Esteban recalled Dent shirtless and drunk—belly sagging over the waistband of the dress pants he had rolled over his fat white calves—rubbing up against women who called to each other their disgust, hurling insults at him in Spanish while smiling sweetly in his face. Esteban wondered how he had known about the party; tried to remember a time Dent would have overheard them talking about it in the lobby. Dent asked about a woman named Maritza—you know her, he said, medium-sized, nice figure; I think she had a thing for me, he told Esteban—and Esteban told him that all the women there were named Maritza.

Dent's mouth was open as though he was about to say something, but before it could come out Esteban had escaped. The lobby was cool. The ancient security guard sat splay-legged and heavy-lidded in one of the chairs absently tapping his nightstick on the floor beside him. At one time elegant in the sense of the efficient and the serviceable, over the years the Y seemed to have been carted away, hollowed out rather than worn thin by decrepitude. At one time there had been a cafeteria, dances on the weekends, a barbershop, a vibrant community of men—in the military, or away from studies over summers, shifting places—that had changed as transience came to mean something broken and reproachful, dirty, evil. The cafeteria and barbershop had been emptied and closed with no signs of reopening long before he and Casamiro moved in there; the ballroom, Dent told them he'd seen pictures in a drawer somewhere that showed it packed with people—men in uniform, girls with corsages—was closed off with thick chain and a padlock. And although there was always an antiseptic sharp that hit the back of his nose when he entered the building and the floors each morning had been polished to a waxy shine, Esteban knew how to negotiate jagged rusted edges in halls and passageways where lights no longer worked; the cushions on weight benches had split open and

been repaired with duct tape that had begun to fray, the shower room grew small mushrooms and furry green moss, a black mold that dyed fingertips and stained trouser and shirt pockets could be picked up nearly anywhere.

He was heading up in the elevator trying to think how Dent had known to be at the Fullerton Avenue Beach at the right time, in the right place. It seemed that Casamiro hadn't moved since he had left. The shades were still drawn and Esteban could hear him snoring. He woke him to tell him they no longer had jobs.

Casamiro searched the glove compartment, the back seat, the floorboards, and the side-panels without telling Esteban what he was looking for. When we get there, Casamiro said, I'm ordering room service and all the pornos I can hold; I want one of them bathrobes and I ain't going to be wearing nothing underneath it so you just going have to be looking the other way, 'mano, 'cause I don't be caring.

The bald tires on the Nova caused them to slide between lanes easily, involuntarily, as if the car knew more than Esteban did.

Five dollars a night's tips had gotten rolled into a pair of under shorts and hidden in the hollow aluminum tube of Esteban's bedstead without Casamiro's notice for the year or more since they had been in Chicago; between craps and cards, he had nearly tripled it. So between the time that they were fired and when the first of the cold weather showed up, Casamiro hadn't found a need to give himself a birthday.

Right away, they had been so certain of getting jobs at an expensive restaurant in the Gold Coast not far from the Y. The woman who had taken their applications assured them they would hear from her by the end of October; yes, they would both work as bus-boys; yes, there was the possibility of advancing to the position of waiter; it's our policy, she smiled.

But the first snow of the season had been falling, and Esteban's arm ached from wrestling Casamiro for the worm. He had watched a puddle of mescal that lay on the bar disappear between Casamiro's liver-colored lips. He was sucking bits of the worm from his teeth as he told the bartender, Y la puta don't even bother to give us the time of day when we go back, just looks at us like she ain't never seen us before and hands us applications with that same smile what

she put on for us before. ¡Y cabron! he loudly added as two women were sitting at the opposite end of the bar, *Es mi cumpleaños!*

Put me a kiss here y here y there, y aquí porfa mamita, Casamiro's smooth whisper had come across the dark between their two twin beds. Nights Casamiro had brought a woman past the front desk or up the fire escape ended with Esteban's headlong skid round the slick black quick coil into drunk dreamless sleep, sleep in which he didn't want for anything: no beautiful women sat in his lap, nor was he surrounded by peaceful blue water for as far as he could see; no sudden turns of fate; nothing. The moment the lights were out, his own snores usually drowned out implorations or muffled cries of satisfaction. Only once or twice could he remember being awakened; and even then it wasn't the sound of fucking less than three feet away, but his own private excitement that out of nowhere scooped him up and pushed him repeatedly against the rough over-bleached sheets, rhythmically, in tandem with the squeak of bed-springs and the rich smell in the room. Mamita porfa, Casamiro had said, I need you to, I need . . . *es mi cumpleaños*. Esteban turned his back to the twisting of sheets and the sound of a mouth opened to draw in a silenced O, as he mentally counted the thirty-seven dollars and twenty-three cents left in his pants pocket.

The Mission on Polk would be serving New Year's Day breakfast, but that would mean six dollars spent in either roundtrip train fare or parking the Nova once they got down there; they could just as easily have the two-fifty breakfast at the diner up the street if he could get Casamiro out of bed early enough.

One hundred and twenty-two dollars and seventy-nine cents, meals at the Mission downtown until they were able to find jobs minus three dollars train fare plus bus transfers to Pilsen where Alvaro was throwing a party at a Mexican bar was what he had been holding the night before. Cigarettes—three packs—and drinks for the two of them and Alvaro and a prayer to La Virgen del Cobre that somehow, somewhere—if they went to mass in the morning; if he went to confession the first time he had a chance; and if they each swallowed the twelve grape seeds at the stroke of midnight that promised and promised—they would stumble onto, fall into, come across some money; not a whole lot, Señora, he prayed, just enough so they would have enough. If they could avoid Dent in the hall, for a week; a week was all he was asking for, a week.

Fifteen dollars went for the cab back to the Y because la rubia who needed to have two champagne cocktails, who took two or three puffs of their cigarettes before putting them out, couldn't take a bus or a train, which were free after midnight.

A lady, Estebanito, must be treated like a lady, he was told, take some notes, amigo. And he did. At midnight on the dance floor, la doña rubia allowed Casamiro's hands to roam freely under her shirt as the DJ played a mariachi version of Auld Lang Syne; she giggled and excused herself when she belched and farted in the cab, and she giggled again as she dusted the confetti from her hair onto both men's laps; she climbed the fire escape without protest or much effort in her high heels, and from the alley, Esteban could see that la maja wore no panties.

She must have taken the half pack of cigarettes Esteban had remembered leaving on the dresser, so in the combination glare of new morning and florescent light of the diner, he y Casamiro passed the one crumpled cigarette left back and forth by placing it into the ashtray between them with the filter in the other's direction. Each of them was wearing what he had worn the night before: Esteban in his only suit; Casamiro in the blue leopard print sharkskin sports jacket that had cost them seven dollars at the Goodwill the day before. And although neither of them had bothered to put on socks for the couple of blocks' trudge through slush and new fallen snow, Casamiro had taken care to adjust his bright orange pocket square into an orchid-like flourish and splash cologne onto his unshaven cheeks before they had left.

Between the clatter of dishes and orders called out, silent between sips of coffee, they were in good company with a group of four men in wrinkled tuxedos who said nothing to each other, and an old woman dressed in an indeterminable number of coats who had talked to a wire cart full of things.

Later the same breakfast—two eggs, two strips of bacon, two sausage links or patties, two slices of toast and all the coffee you can drink for \$2.50—was being vomited steps from the doorway as the man's three tuxedoed friends laughed uproariously and Esteban y Casamiro were leaving. Clapping their hands together, stomping and rubbing their ears in the hallway outside their room they found they had been locked out.

A cellophane candy wrapper—something he hadn't eaten, would never have eaten; someone else's, but something for which he couldn't think what he wouldn't give to eat now—stuck in one of the Nova's air vents giving the cold air it blew a clatter. Esteban's shoes had lost the shine he had given them the night before, and were shrinking from puddles of slush and rock salt, cutting at his bare ankles, but it hardly mattered, he could no longer feel his feet.

A zebra's ass, Casamiro said.

¿Qué? Esteban asked.

The answer to what is black and white and red all over, Casamiro responded as if Esteban weren't there; it ain't like everything got to have just one answer to it, you know, Casamiro continued, entonces yo digó a zebra's ass. His eyes, which were boyish and surprisingly doe-like in the middle of his leathery bald head with its comically thin moustache, were fixed somewhere else. Some place con palmas, he said, some place we ain't gonna have no troubles. Warm, pero, no too warm; cool but not all that cool; maybe with fir trees y párajas, ¿no? Warm but cool, but warm, he said.

As the heat began to work, Casamiro seemed to settle in, become calm; satisfied that he had made a decision about where they were headed, nearly circling and curling himself like a dog in the seat next to Esteban. Casamiro is thousands of people all trying to jump out at once, Esteban had once offered as explanation for a broken cue around a pool table where everyone said it seemed like a friendly game; he seemed like such a nice, easy-going guy, a man told the police after Casamiro had smashed beer bottles, kicked over bar stools and walked out. You never know, the guy told the cop while adjusting his shirt and tie clearly trying to shake off any sign that he noticed the sudden sweat that had broken out all over his body, You never know, he said.

Which was true.

Even though his eyes were open and he was still talking, Esteban could never tell if Casamiro was asleep or awake. It was all the same to Casamiro. Esteban had seen him pick an entire row, load a truck, run a forklift, clear shipment after shipment from pallets in a warehouse, hose dishes, clear out garbage and mop floors while snoring, rhythmically, evenly snoring as if he were being rocked. It had taken some time sharing rooms with Casamiro for Esteban to get used to battles, conversations, discussions and lists that never ended. I'm

watching, I'm watching, I'm watching, cabron, Casamiro might yell out in the shower-room or whisper when Esteban thought him to be asleep. Dead drunk or full and lying on his back on the beach, inventories—diamond stick pins, left in the finest silk tie, that matched handmade shirts—filled the space in between conversation in the way that most men Esteban knew or had waited on rattled off sports statistics and weather predictions.

As Casamiro situated all the fans within his reach on the dashboard to blow heat directly on him, he was making a list of luxury automobiles—cars that said money, that brought about women who knew how to love; cars that said he was muy muy rico and you should be the fuck outta his way you pinche pendejos, he said—as he snored and swore at the same time. Even as the Nova moved out onto I-94 the grinding strain of the engine against Esteban's efforts to keep it moving forward, at least achieve the speed limit, created a constant lulling hum, Casamiro was never still. Moving, fidgeting, but with his eyes—closed, opened, then closed again—in the same way that Esteban had seen him dress himself, walk outside and cross streets and highways by swaying his body into motion—Damn it, damn it, damn it all to hell, he'd call in the direction of the horns—and more than once, Esteban had watched while he turned full circles in the center of a freeway, in the middle of Chicago Avenue yelling ¿De donde vienes? ¡De donde vienes, hijos de putas, get out of the water you socotrocós, socotrocós, outta the water, comemierdas, outta the water! he'd yell, turning, uncoiling an oblong loop; Go back, get back, go back, he'd shout until he had reached the other side—awake or asleep, Esteban couldn't tell—hungry, ready to go find someplace to eat; someplace dry, he'd say.

Tragame, tragame, mamita, you know me, you can't never get enough of me as usually, mamita, or you like the girls now?; pues, te gusta la papaya, ahora, Casamiro was asking the lock to their room—sweetly, gingerly, as if it were Chela on her knees in front of him—when they got back from breakfast that morning.

Casamiro let his key clank against the terrazzo floor and shoved his hand into Esteban's pants pocket, turning it inside out, sending all the change left between them in a clatter to get to the other key. ¡Chingao! ¡Hay que joderse! Casamiro's voice echoed down the hallway when the door wouldn't yield to the force of his weight and Esteban pulled him away by his collar.

Years of living in places like this—rented by the day, by the week; where most of the furniture had been bolted to the floor and all the knobs had been broken off the radio; sometimes overcrowded, rooms-full of men, stinking of work and stale pleasure, sleeping on cots, on the floor, wherever they could, sometimes as many as they could sneak past managers and desk clerks to keep rent cheap, share food, do better, get out, forget places like these even existed—Esteban knew what needed to be done. He knew what Dent needed to hear.

Casamiro had broken free of Esteban's hold and taken the elevator. Esteban stooped to scoop up the change and took the stairs two at a time, thinking he could offer Dent what was left in his pockets with the promise that he would have the rest by the end of the week; they could—he and Casamiro—wake early, stand for day labor, get caught up; Maritza's easy laugh and black bra straps came to mind; how many nights at parties and in bars over the past year and a half had Esteban danced with her wishing that it was ten, twenty years earlier and he still had had something to offer her, something to say—Alvaro would know where he could find her—he would say he wasn't suggesting anything, a date but not a date really, they could all go together, a bunch of them, just to make Dent feel as if he was something special if only for a minute, is all it would take, *porfa*.

He reached the lobby as the elevators opened to Casamiro already pointing and shouting, *Cáncamo*, into the empty hall.

¡Cáncamo! I'm talking to you, *sí*, yes, *Cáncamo*, Casamiro shouted.

And although Dent turned bright red and gripped the edge of the desk, he easily slipped his lips over a top row of teeth so evenly spaced, so perfectly aligned, that were he not such a young man Esteban would have sworn he was wearing a plate.

No *comprendo*, señores, Dent grinned.

¡Cáncamo! Casamiro yelled again. He was headed with his index finger pointed directly at Dent's breastbone when Esteban grabbed his arm.

Mr. Dent, Esteban started as he began to explain that they would only need a few more days, very little time at all if you really think about it; they had been down on their luck but just a little bit, you understand, Mr. Dent, he said. And Dent nodded and grinned his

understanding. Mr. Dent, Esteban started looking into the clear clear blue eyes of the man who was easily ten years his junior who could neither tie a tie properly nor keep breakfast off his shirt if it was indeed a clean shirt that he was wearing, please, he said.

Por favor, Señor Socotroco, Casamiro said sweetly.

And Dent grinned and nodded, No comprendo, back.

If we could just have your understanding, for a couple of days, Esteban continued, Mr. Dent. Just a little more time, a kindness, he was asking for, only this once. Esteban said, he could take care of this, knew of a guy once—pretty low on the heel, no mames—started to do landscaping, another who bought a snow plow, Dent had to have heard of guys like that. He could take care of this, Esteban said and then he heard himself say something about Luck. Luck was changing or there was to be a change in Luck or Luck would do something in such a way at such a time that it caught Esteban off guard as if a kidney or a lung had come out of him and lay bleeding, still vibrating on the desk in front of them.

¡Buche! ¡Chanco! Casamiro spat though imitating Esteban's calm tone.

Dent grinned, No comprendo, and ignoring Casamiro began to tell Esteban about everything that he wished for. A long line of things: a Lamborghini topped the list; World Peace was at its end. Short of reaching into his own pocket and paying it himself, really, really, there was nothing he could do. Three hundred and seventy-five dollars: the week that was overdue, the current week, and now a week in advance, which he needed of course because they had proven themselves to be unreliable about payment. He wished he could help, wished that there was something that he could do—really, he did—but he said that as his mother had said, if they were horses—wishes that is—then beggars would ride.

Esteban might have heard himself say it as he fingered the remaining bills in his pocket, but he wasn't sure; Casamiro was straining to break free of the hold that he had on him.

These are our policies, Dent told him, and he wished there was some way around it, but there simply wasn't.

Entonces, quiero mis cosas, Casamiro sneered.

No comprendo, Dent said looking puzzled.

¡Quiero mis cosas! Casamiro began yelling, straining at Esteban's grip, ¡Mis cosas, quiero mis cosas! Although Dent had become even

redder, he simply shrugged his shoulders at Esteban, turned and began to walk back into his office.

He wants his things, Esteban demanded, our things from the room.

A suit made of terciopelo; twenty-five pairs of hand-lasted shoes, Casamiro began to list.

That's not possible, Dent told Esteban and cut his eyes as if shooping a gnat in the direction of Casamiro who in Spanish had begun to innumerate pieces of jewelry—in platinum; rose, white, and twenty-three karat yellow gold; pocket watches handed down from son to son by Castilian ancestors; combs encrusted with emeralds women in his family had worn in their hair since Isabel; a strand of pearls he swore to God to be so long it was wrapped seven times around Marco Polo's hand and wrist when he first returned from China—were in a lacquered mahogany box lined with blood-orange silk underneath his bed upstairs.

I can get your rental agreement, Dent offered without moving, You see until we at least get the overdue balance, your personal effects remain in our care, when we get the money we will happily return your things . . .

Is no right! Casamiro hissed and even though he was speaking in English, Dent pretended not to understand and offered that he would happily continue to rent to the two of them. Is no right! Casamiro yelled with such force that spit flew from his mouth and clung to the ridge of Dent's brow. Is no right, you have fucking no right, Casamiro howled. And clearly Dent must have understood ¡Al la puñeta, hijo de puta, besarme culo—maricónito, marica—besarme culo! because his reaction was to pick up the phone and demanded they leave before he called security, before he called the police.

Esteban couldn't say what it was—tongues clicking, the purr of a tambourine, a hiss that like a snake's jeer would come in wavering belts of heat over row on top of row of raspberries, blackberries with brambles like razors outside Sublimity, grapes and apples in Upstate New York where all the backs stooped over picking next to him laughed and laughed as he panicked, looked over his shoulders, poked the handle of a hoe into the soft earth around him, No snakes here, cabron, they'd laugh, a cicada, a cricket, the sound the power lines, the phone lines make when they swelter in heat like this, pero

no snakes, but then he had been fresh out of the lime orchards, the cane fields, and even nights when it was snowing outside and all the men sleeping in the room with him were racked with fever and coughs from flu, there in Ohio, when he'd lie as still as he could thinking about what it was that he was never going to become, his body would betray him and would repeat, wrench at the waist, twist his shoulder in the act of bringing down sugar cane close to where the fishing is fine near Lake Okeechobee and a cubano he remembered seeing on the docks at Mariel, remembered pissing next to in the end rows, drunk weekends, lived in the house with a bunch of other vatos next to Esteban's until they pulled him out of the lake bloated near to splitting from Kingsnake bite, a cubano, then, Esteban guessed, to be the age that he is now, cracked open moist-red in places like overripe fruit; a sound like the screams the smelters let go when as they emptied in the factory near Gary where, working nights, everything seemed like days strung into months of flu, and the dark traded itself for light the same way that groceries, rent, work clothes and tools were deducted from weekly paychecks that made forgetting in bars on weekends a hole dug into the next week's groceries and overtime at the end of the month to secure the next week's rent at dark and poorly kept places with doorways crowded with dirt, debris and stink like the one where they found that little mexicanito who couldn't have been no more than nineteen with a few scraggly hairs on his chin, Loco they called him, couldn't speak more than a few words of English yet barely spoke at all, who was only bubbling from his mouth, wheezing out of the stab holes in his back when they turned him over, senseless; it was a waiter's nightmare where tables to be cleared and coffeed multiplied and dining rooms lengthened and anger was a gigantic gourd-like fist full of beans shaking overhead, at his side, from directions that Esteban had no idea what direction it was coming from, had no idea what to do with it when he found it, caught it—but regardless of what it was exactly, for some reason he let go of Casamiro's arm.

¡Jódete y abierta el culo! Casamiro howled as he flew over the desk.

Dent dropped the receiver and was backed into the small office by the force of Casamiro's fingers shoved into his chest.

You can't, Dent started. No, you can't, Casamiro answered.

Esteban followed them in, looking around the empty lobby first before shutting the door behind them.

Casamiro was in the middle of a list of things—a mina bird, an owl, eleven persimmons, a bat, a stand of flamingos—that had Dent understood he still wouldn't have understood. A plot of land big enough to grow fields of casaba on, a lemon tree, box seats for the next Sox season, a beautiful woman—hermosa, hermosa, hermosa, Casamiro demanded, punctuating each word by jabbing his index finger into Dent's chest—who cooks with red pepper and onions and cilantro all night. ¡Y hoy es mi cumpleaños! he yelled.

Large as Dent was, he managed to shrink from under Casamiro's assaulting fingers and in his attempt to place his desk between himself and Casamiro he knocked papers and baskets to the floor.

All three of them could hear the dial tone coming from the end of the wire dangling off the edge of the desk when Dent asked, what do you want?

What do I want? What do I want? What in the fuck do you think that I want, you estúpido motherfa . . . two things, idioto—Casamiro sneered holding two stubby fingers against Dent's lips—mis cosas y mis cosas, he said bringing his face close to Dent's.

He didn't make the rules Dent told them as he backed away. He was only doing what he was told, he said as he blindly stepped as far away as he could only to be halted by his own chair. There were policies and procedures that he had to follow, a whole list of paperwork that needed to be done once they were all paid up . . .

Dent was saying and when the phone began to screech along with Casamiro's scream ¡Hijo de puta! as he took steps backward, aimed and shoved the desk into Dent's hips causing him to fall into the chair, pinning him against the wall.

Casamiro jumped on top of the desk and squatted in front of Dent and smiled a wide toothy grin.

What do you want? Dent asked.

What do you want, Casamiro parroted.

What do you want? Dent asked.

And in Spanish, Casamiro said he needed socks, and had a preference for hand sewn undergarments made of Irish linen; a cup of coffee, not just any coffee, coffee like they used to get back home, but he wanted it here, very sweet, very black with a little bit of rum in it would be nice; there was, he explained, an orange grove in the middle

of a warm wet Florida morning where he'd like to walk wearing a cream colored suit, smoking the longest puma he'd ever seen.

What does he want? Dent asked Esteban. But before he could answer, Casamiro asked it back. What does he want, what does he want, what does he want? Casamiro cawed like a blackbird.

What do you want, señor Dent, Casamiro asked, what is it you are wanting here in your tiny little office with your big fat body. What is that you are so wishing for, so aching to have? What is it you are wanting from me? What can I get for you? What would make you happy? Casamiro yelled. Would you like to fuck me is that what you want, Casamiro howled turning his ass so that it brushed up against Dent's nose. Is that what you want, is that what could make you happy, is you want to fuck me! You want to fuck me!

Dent's face broke into red open cries of no, no, no, no. Esteban had no idea what Casamiro said after that, what had taken him by surprise was how he matched each of Dent's wails, each wide sob; he could not tell where the clawing sound that seared the air came from, coughing that burned through to his skin, as he watched the face of the man in front of him consume itself with the desire to be anywhere, anywhere in the world but where it was that he was.

It made him sick, it made him shake, it made him feel as if he would be turned inside out until, Vamos, Esteban said jerking Casamiro by the arm, Vamos.

¡Sola vaya! Casamiro called out in the lobby, but by then Esteban knew that he had no idea to what he was saying goodbye or why he was so sweaty.

Exits for Waukegan, Kenosha flickered by quickly and without displays of familiar touchstones—a McDonald's sign; golden arches; numbers sold—not even so much as the lights from a strip mall in the distance, though outside of Racine porn and firecrackers were available at discounted prices and cut-rate bargains passed as the windows of the Nova began to fog up from Casamiro's open-mouthed snoring.

Milwaukee went by as brushes of color with each pass of the windshield, through bleeds of condensation that ran down the insides of the windows as fewer and fewer cars passed and the city fell behind them. The effortlessness of their motion and the hum of the engine, the wheels on the road; were it not for the broken white

line in front of him Esteban would not have been able to tell if they were moving. He was tired and hungry and wanted to sleep.

As soon as he pressed the button that opened all of the windows, lines of wide silk pennants—yards and yards, miles and miles of them; first black, then a dark purple that was shocked into a deep blue in the cold moonlight air—unfurled and fluttered out of Casamiro. And he began throwing fistfuls of stars, diamonds—the Sea of Cassiopeia; the watch given to him by the president of the United States—in the air.

They drove this way for a while, for miles, until they were just past Sheboygan when the Nova began to sputter and tick. It had begun a slow roll as Esteban threw open his door and began to walk in front of it along the empty highway. Casamiro followed trailing plates of mofongo con langosta, a shiny black grand piano, and a vineyard on a warm evening in August.

Esteban could no longer tell if they were walking so quickly or the Nova had finally stopped and was rolling backwards. He could feel the headlights sliding off of them. He pushed on into the dark. It was Casamiro who stopped short in the highway and frantically began patting his pockets. My keys, he yelled, Esteban, did I forget to get my keys? No he answered, as he watched Casamiro bring two fingers to his lips and blow a fat white plume into the cold night air, no.