

## NELSON

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I thought about Nelson on the subway this morning.

I was watching a boy and his grandmother sitting arm in arm across from me. The boy must have been about seven years old. He was cute, bright-looking. The grandmother was in her fifties—a butterball with dyed-black hair and a quick glance. They were talking about their weekend plan to go to Great Adventure.

“But grandmas can’t come,” the boy decided suddenly.

The woman pretended to bristle, her brows shooting up.

“Grandmas can’t come? Why not?”

“Cause they won’t let you in,” he said.

“Why is that?”

The boy bit his upper lip for a moment, then raised his face, expressionless, toward hers.

“Cause they don’t have a room for grandmas there. It’s a big place. You’d get lost.”

The woman tucked in her smile and shook her head, faking disgruntled surprise.

“Imagine,” she said. “No grandma room.”

“Nope.”

“I’m just going to have to call them up and complain, now won’t I?”

I watched as she stroked the boy’s hand, as she hugged it to her chest. Then she let it go

and patted his knee while he tugged absently at her flabby triceps, looking with a child's coolness at everything in the train.

Then I realized I was thinking of Nelson.

I have a snapshot of him in the community garden standing in front of a bunch of sunflowers. He's wearing his ratty kimono, as always, with a trowel stuck under the sash like a dagger. His white hair is coming loose from its ponytail. He's fat. He's sweating. And he's smiling, poor guy. He's got the face of a rotting jack-o'-lantern—droopy, garish, almost abandoned. You're caught suddenly, implicated by the sheer profligacy of that smile. You want to kick it, it looks so degenerate. So perennially hungry. Something inside you, surprisingly familiar, jerks awake. A suspicion: Some Grannies will eat you with butter and syrup.

I watched the boy and the woman get off at 34th Street. She was chirping and bellowing, half to herself, half to him. Maybe to her there wasn't a difference. She was thinking for both of them. She gripped his hand tightly.

But in the boy you could see did not have equal room for her; there was only room for the world's pouring in; he barely felt her grip on his wrist and fingers. But the connection of flesh would remain, I conjectured, still thinking of Nelson. A patina of Granny sweat and oil collected in the ridges of a psychic mountain she had coaxed into shape with her soft pale hands.

Of course, it wasn't like that with Nelson. Not exactly. And he would have cringed at the feminine comparison. But I lump him in with the world's Grannies because he defies any other category.

In the snapshot, the sunflowers are tall and full with gargantuan blossoms. They dangle facedown above him like shower heads. Dust hangs in the air. You can see it caked in the lines of his face, collecting in the thinning fibers of the kimono. It's August or so, late 1980s. Through

the fence, chrome and asphalt quiver in the heat. Skid marks rise like ghosts from the pavement and brown the city sky.

In the tenement building overlooking the garden, we—his boys—are tucked away in the nursery: Giddy, Julio, myself, others. He has stupid little Granny names for us. I'm Cactus. Julio's Squirt. Giddy's just Giddy, short for Gideon. We sleep through the day like exotic caterpillars, wound in a curtain of Christmas tree lights. All else is darkness, narcotic catalepsy.

We stir only at the first hint of nightfall, the call of Nelson's feet on the stairs. We get out of bed and slip dutifully into our respective kimonos. Nelson has a collection of old silk kimonos that he likes us to wear when we're in the apartment. Mine is a dark, rich blue with red and silver dragons on the sleeves. The stitching's coming loose, the fabric's grease-stained and crumbling. But it's still silk, and it's a cool luxuriant mulch on the skin. He likes to touch us through it—his own Lazarus boys up from the tomb. The light in his eyes goes out, comes back. It's juicing him, pumping him full of vitamins, vital signs.

“Aw shit,” you say, but you only pretend to shrug him off.

“Fuck off,” you say, but he expects it, just as you expect the boorish compliment and the slime-pie grin mechanically slung at the side of your head.

If you meant it, though, he'd back off quick, sullen-hurt. He can't tolerate this kind of rejection, the light of your frowns snapped steely shut. He'll sit in the hall with a bottle of Jack, weeping, gouging the skin off his arms with a nutpick. I've seen him. Unreachable, slumped there, repulsed-enthralled by his own sagging body, the knobs and bobbins, the rusted pistons, the insect juice thinly running out the cracks. . . till he passes out.

So you allow him his inventory, impersonal enough. It's like he's counting stars is all, and you can see that he's truly happy for the race of man still lucky enough to have stars to look

at.

1976, the Bicentennial, was Nelson's favorite year of the world since Creation. He had Bicentennial beer mugs, Bicentennial pillows, Bicentennial salt and pepper shakers. The wallpaper in the living room was deep red with tiny eagles on it. He also had brass eagle book ends, I remember, and a lamp shade with Washington Crossing the Delaware on it—a collectible now. There was a signed photograph of President Truman in the bedroom and one of Ike above the sink in the kitchen next to a poster of the Statue of Liberty. And besides all this, he had fought in World War Two—Okinawa. That's how old he was.

That particular story is in Nelson's eyes, as unreadable as the expression of a cave or a pothole. I'm not sure what he remembers, if anything. In front of him, Giddy tells us he lost his nerve; they brought him back to the States in a cage. Nelson winces at the broken confidence, if that's what it is. He turns toward Truman for exoneration, huffs the dust from his forgotten medals, then stares darkly into some imaginary distance, his world of battle stars and jousting tournaments just as alien to him as to us, now. Maybe that's what frustrates him most. He leaves the room silently, completely broken. The sleeve of his kimono brushes lightly on the wall.

I never knew for sure what was true about Nelson. He got checks from the V.A. addressed to N. Blutfeld. I remember that most personal letters were postmarked Chicago and were thrown away unopened. So at some point in the '50s or '60s, from Chicago I guess, he came to New York, to the Lower East Side, to East Sixth Street, and there put together his own little cloister. His treks—aside from the annual pilgrimage to Liberty Island—were confined to the grocery store, the Union Square farmer's market, and a steakhouse-turned-hustler-bar on West Tenth Street.

The way he looks at us, you'd think he's forgotten. You'd think he'd found us curled up

in the garden, shrunk and loveless, at the roots of ferns. Or we were delicate birds, flailing, skewered on hibiscus pistils. Gently did those Granny fingers coax the breath back into us. They daubed the blood from broken feathers and placed us in a jeweled box on the window sill. There we lie, weakly sipping sugar-water from an eyedropper. And our eyes are the eyes of the Blessed Babe, and our skin is the skin of the Holy Infant, but our cocks are big and hard and randy as a yak's.

“I think you're having a stroke,” says Julio. “Too much sun?”

Giddy tells him to take a bath, he smells bad. Nelson smiles and walks over to him. He takes Giddy's face in his hands and feels it over like a blind person would. Giddy submits, a kind of nervousness in his eyes, fear of caving to something inside himself. Nelson is almost rough with him, fingers on his face. He's only moving the skin around, massaging it, but you feel like you're watching a forced confession. Giddy doesn't move. Light streaks of dried dirt are left on his cheeks and forehead. He's kept his natural smirk throughout. He's stood his ground. He doesn't even deign to wipe off the dirt.

“Why don't you take a bath,” he repeats. “You smell like a goat.”

Nelson looks at him for a minute, bites his lip as if to cry, then laughs uproariously. He bangs his fist on the table. Giddy's expression doesn't change. He plants his feet a little further apart and then scratches his crotch, reclaiming himself. Nelson retreats, oddly buffeted by this single gesture, and resumes his portrait of a slobbering perv. Giddy, with a shift of the hips, his cock defined through the thinning silk, asserts his young yak's power. Nelson watches, smiling bedraggledly.

“Such a snot,” he slurs. “Little shit.”

Giddy grins at us. There's Cheez Doodle dust at the corners of his mouth. He walks

away, swaggering a little.

They're both crazy motherfuckers. Giddy was the first, according to Julio—practically suckled at Nelson's breast. "Precious, aren't they?" sighs Julio, carefully paring a thumbnail. "Little boys smearing their shit on each other."

At 18, Julio is the oldest of us, and the most ambitious. He has plans for a career in fashion. His only possession, other than his clothes, is a box filled with 10 year's worth of Italian Vogue. You can't tell him shit about shit, and he can wear an old jersey like it's silk chenille.

"I'm cooking, Nelson," he announces. "Give me 10 dollars."

Nelson glowers.

"Gimme ten, Nelson. I'm cooking tonight. Growing boys can't live on hot dogs and rice. How 'bout some shrimp for a change. *A paella.*"

"Oh, a spicnic?" says Nelson, then yuks at the joke.

"Funny, *abuela*. The cash?"

After dinner and a couple of six-packs, we leave. We've exchanged the kimonos for our habits of work: jock straps, cutoffs, tank-tops, sneakers. No jewelry, earrings or otherwise. No leather. We market ourselves for the unimaginative set, your basic Jersey or Westchester john. But we each carry our own peculiar talisman. Julio's is a dented gold cufflink he found in an elevator at Bloomingdale's. Mine is a Statue of Liberty key chain stolen from Nelson. And Giddy always wears the same pair of socks, though he'd deny more than any of us that there is anything to it. He'll tell you it's easier that way or he keeps forgetting to change them. And Giddy's like that: smelly socks, sloppy clothes. I've seen him at Rounds in a black sweat shirt, navy corduroys and flip-flops-with socks. It's his ass that saves him. Ka-ching, ka-ching, every time. It's a thing of reverence to Nelson; he fears to touch it too often.

Nelson watches as we leave. He stands in the doorway clutching a beer, his fat hanging tired, his sadness uncorked. Old Mrs. Rodríguez sweeps the fourth floor hall. The bristles halt as we pass, fauns' hooves disrupting her neat mounds of dust. She averts her eyes, grits her teeth, sends a poisoned sigh up the stairwell to Nelson. As Grannies, they can only wonder at the summer night, at following one's footprints through bars and parks and video arcades, through the beating heartway of the city where the darkness is your mother. Where you step out from trees and phone booths, sneakers quiet on the pavement, asses out, nylon shorts riding slightly up the crack. Leaves move against the street lights and headlights. Jaguar, Volvo, Buick Skylark. There's a breeze coming across 53rd Street. It fans the upper branches of a ginkgo, drops down, lifts your hair, then stops. The man beside you lights your cigarette. He's new at this, can't make up his mind what he's doing, how to treat you. He hasn't offered to take you into the bar. You ask where he's parked. He's not parked; he takes the subway. You excuse yourself: You have to be somewhere. Conveniently, the Volvo has driven around the block and pulls over. The window slices down. A figure, not old, leans over and motions. You step to the curb. The locks flick on the door. You get in, feel the air conditioning, sit back. Maybe next time it'll be the Jag.

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This morning, when the boy and the woman got off at 34th Street, I was tempted to follow, just to watch them. They triggered feelings I thought might not come again. She represented some kind of cowish security, purity of some sort. Which of course is bullshit. For all I know, after a few bourbon cokes, she'd be grinding a hot iron into his back. But that's bullshit, too. I could see she had dreams for him, though they were probably not as lavish and specific as she

had had for her own children. And he could never disappoint or hurt her quite like they had. Maybe because she didn't have the energy to love like that anymore. You could tell, by the easy way they interacted, that he had a separate life with his parents. She was safe, then; she wouldn't be held responsible for any of his failures. She might feel bad, but she would not be responsible. Her dreams were Granny dreams and her arms an open circle.

In a peculiar way, it was the same with Nelson. He used to cuddle us by twos and threes in that lumpy, beer-sour bed, the radiator hissing through the middle of January while his heavy fingers roved constantly over us, even as we slept, kneading his fantasies into our dreams.

I have one more snapshot of him taken the winter of '86 or '87. He's sitting at a card table painting a plaster cast bust of Bacchus or someone, to set in the garden when summer comes. He's looking down, a long lock of white hair hanging over his face. In the dim background, you can see one of us—Giddy, it looks like—stretched out on the sofa. Red Christmas tree lights on the wall behind. And, though you can't see them, there are beer cans and ashtrays all over the place.

It's in the context of winter that I think of Nelson most. It was bone-cracking cold the night we met. It was about eight in the evening and I had been walking through the West Village without coat or gloves, hepatitis buzzing in my veins. I couldn't even make it into the Ninth Circle. I sat on the steps bracing for the next wave of sickness—like time-released venom—and looking at my hands. I could see the sidewalk through them. When I held them up over my eyes, I could make out the deli across the street and the fire station. A woman in a fur coat steered her pugs across the street to avoid me. She kept glancing over her shoulder as she walked toward Waverly Street. When I lowered my hands, they were dripping with puke. I had puked on the steps and all over my shoes.

There was a voice behind me, gruff and rumbling. I thought it was the bouncer shooing me off. I grabbed the railing and tried to get up, but slipped down in the salt and vomit of the steps.

“What the hell are you doing, joker? Has the kittens lost their mittens?”

Eyes glared drunkenly, some bum grinning in my face like he knows me, eyeballs lunging, tongue hanging out. I tried to turn. He grabbed the back of my neck with one hand and slapped the other onto my forehead.

“Just hot as an iron, little shit. No mittens, no jacket. You ain’t no cactus in a heat wave, joker.”

His jowls jogged around as he growled and hooted. All I could see was his face. Rubbery, papery. His white hair blew into my eyes.

“Come on, cactus.”

He was prodding me, shaking me. I tried to bat him off, “Goddam-motherfucker,” tried to cover my face. When he stretched out his arms, they were two black wings unfurling beside him. They closed in and smothered me in damp wool. The street lamps snuffed out, and the fire station. I wasn’t cold anymore. I could see my parents’ house back in Northport. I could see the back of my mother’s head. She was standing at the dining room window, facing out, talking on the phone and smoking. Through the window, in the front yard, my father had pinned me down on the grass by the sprinkler, and was strangling me with his belt. I could see close now, and we were both soaking wet. The sprinkler kept washing the blood off our faces. Jets of water—*chz-chz*.

Tenth Street jerked into view, but muddled, like a brief reflection in a shattered mirror. Then darkness again. It felt like I was being carried, handed from person to person, through the

streets. I saw the red digits on a taxi meter. Passing lights cut through my body. I was a giant chunk of flabby space absorbing everything. Everything except the person beside me on the seat boiling over with presence, not saying a word. Just his breath seething in and out of him like he couldn't stand another second of his body's demands, though later I learned this was how he breathed when Happiness came and sat, cross-legged and lotus-hooded, on the shaggy pillow of his heart.

“Almost there, Cactus.”

I was prodded awake by a short, skinny Latino kid with long hair.

“Better get up and eat something, man. You've been sleeping like a log. . . like three logs, man.”

I looked around me. Everything was dim and red. Red Christmas tree lights were strung over the walls. Outside, it was night and I thought I saw snow coming down.

“You got hepatitis, man,” he said. “You look like shit.”

He held up a mirror. I looked at myself and nudged it away.

“Three shits,” I mumbled.

He laughed and tossed back his hair.

“I'm Julio. That's Giddy.”

He pointed to a kid by the door in his underwear who stared at me and picked his nose with his thumb.

“You been sleeping for two days,” said Julio.

He handed me a glass of orange juice and watched me closely as I drank it.

“Good,” he said. “Now go meet Nelson.”

“Nelson?”

Julio handed me a dark silk robe with strangely shaped sleeves and a silver sash.

“It’s one of Nelson’s,” he said. “He told me to give it to you. It sounds fucked up. Just put it on.”

The boy in the doorway snorted.

“It gets him hard,” he said. “So wear it. ‘Cause he ain’t gonna like you much for yourself. He don’t like pussy wipes.”

“Fuck off, Giddy,” said Julio. He laid his hand on my wrist. “Listen. Just stay up for a few minutes. He wants to see you. Then you can sleep some more if you want.”

I got off the bed shivering. I felt old, stick-like.

“Go on,” whispered Julio, taking my place on the bed.

I slipped my arms into the awkward sleeves and pulled the garment around me. I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to imagine who I was supposed to be meeting.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Julio.

“Don’t worry,” Giddy echoed. He plopped down on the bed, too. “Just make sure he likes you.”

I started toward the door, my feet sliding through empty beer cans and Entenmann’s boxes. I could hear a TV and a radio playing. The same red wallpaper and Christmas lights in the hallway. I passed the dark cave of a bathroom and an open closet. A robe, like the one I was wearing, was fixed with thumbtacks to the wall. “Kimono,” I said, remembering what it was called. In the kitchen, a picture of Eisenhower hung on the wall by the sink. The linoleum was cracked and peeling. One corner held a stack of terra cotta planters and bags of potting soil.

Last was the living room, such a jumble of trash and furniture it took me a while to find him. The first thing that took identifiable shape was the sofa, an over-stuffed piece in gold velvet

directly across the room. Then the lamp next to it with the shade of Washington Crossing the Delaware. The strings of red lights were the only other source of illumination. He was sitting, like in the photo, hunched over a card table, working in the dimness at some project. It was the hair I recognized—that white, horse-mane hair. I waited, watching him. With a tiny brush he was painting a plaster statuette. As I stepped toward the table, he looked up. I froze. There was nothing particularly daunting in his eyes; they reflected, if anything, a wholesale emptiness. Yet I felt his mind prowling around me, stealthily sniffing, quite close. Like a mother hyena might sniff at her pups. It gave me the prickles. It wasn't fear of the man I felt, but a strangely painful sense of inadequacy.

Without a word, he went back to painting. I kept still, watching him. He bent still closer to the plaster bust and kept dabbing at it with the brush. He was painting it silver.

“What's that?” I asked.

He opened his mouth but didn't say anything. A vexed expression came over his face, almost manic, then faded. He's crazy, I thought. I crossed the room and sat on the sofa. I was sleepy again and, guessing that I wouldn't get the bed back, stretched out where I was. The prickly feeling swept over me again, and this time it scared me, though I didn't know why.

I looked up. I suspected that Nelson was watching me. He wasn't. Then I noticed a figurine on the mantle of the gas furnace—a brass eagle's head about ten inches high—turned in my direction. On the wall above that was a painting of an eagle in a nest, a paint-by-numbers-looking thing in a bulky gilt frame. There were eagles in the window curtain, eagles in the rug, in the wallpaper. I realized I didn't know where I was in the city. I started to say something when all at once—but slowly—the eagles rose from their various perches and mounted together as one thing, like a huge black bush casting its leaves and branches in all directions. It was a bush with

red flowers, red pulsing pin-points. Those lights, when I woke, were like my first memory.

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I'm looking for someone on the train tonight. Someone familiar who I don't know at all. Like the grandmother. I have a feeling of uneasy expectancy. I look under hats, behind hair, through reading glasses. Nothing. Above ground at Union Square, my mind hurtles west along 14th Street, then turns down the West Side Highway toward the piers. I never spent much time with the pier queens. All the jabber and jewelry was Julio's interest, though I never knew he was hustling there until the night he got mauled.

I got back to Nelson's at four or five one morning and saw him sitting on the gold sofa, bandages wrapped around his head, his arm in a dishcloth sling. His lap was piled with old issues of Italian Vogue. He was crying silently, angrily. Nelson was pacing around the apartment, lifting things, rearranging things, as he always did when emotions got high. His hair was a stringy cloud around his head.

"What happened?" I asked.

Julio looked up from the sofa. His eyes, framed within a crack in the bandages, were unable to travel the distance between us.

Sometime in the early 2000s, I ran into Julio in Midtown. He was coming out of Diamond Fabrics with a gorgeous trans diva in a vinyl catsuit. I hadn't seen him for awhile. He had some gristly muscles on his upper body, but the rest was still small, gaunt Julio. He hadn't lost his old swish-posse poise, but it came off strangely with his new pectorals. He was dancing at The Gaiety on 46th Street, he said, and was staying at the House of Dior uptown. He introduced

Lady Magenta Nefertiti Dior—or something like that—who acknowledged me with a certain shift of the hips, her eyes cutting to the middle of my forehead. She was very young, 17 tops. Julio laughed at my reaction, whatever that was, and said something in Spanish about the boy from Northport. I was bartending then for a place in Chelsea, so I told him he should come by sometime. Before we parted, I asked about Nelson.

“*Mira*. He’s nursing some little Dominican number. Shrunken-up twaker in a head rag always sitting out front. Last I heard.”

Julio shrugged his shoulders defensively, as if he thought I expected him to know more. I asked about the cousin we stayed with in East Harlem the month after we left Nelson’s. As he spoke, his eyes wandered restlessly down the street. I stopped listening to what he was saying and looked at the ridge of scar on his upper lip. It cut protuberantly through one side of his mustache. He caught me looking, but kept up a steady stream of talk. I could see the resentment in his eyes—cool, fortified. He might have still been sitting on the sofa, looking out at me through the bandages.

*Yeah, well fuck you, man.* That’s what the eyes said.

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The gold sofa, given any light, will seem to be creating its own. The flame seeps from the velvet, a film of iridescence, thinner on the tops of the arms and cushions where the pile has worn down. But even there its sheen persists, impervious to damage from shoes and cigarettes. The window behind it is boarded up as if specifically to protect it from the sun’s prying rays. The

light from the lamp swims softly over it, or the Christmas tree lights lift it into existence, the velvet pulsing a dim brick color under the red bulbs.

Someone is always sprawled there, lavished in its lumpy grip. You don't sit as a rule; you extend. Let it carry you, like some soft boat or carriage, away from the ruckus, the dingy clutter, the scarecrows. It is the seat of the prince, of the favored child. The seat of dreams. Giddy lies there, legs up, bent, the hem of his scarlet kimono slipped down to his waist. He has white, thick, nearly hairless legs.

“How much they give you anyway, Nelson?” He's asking about the V.A. checks. “Two hundred? Three hundred?”

Nelson sits in dusty suspension, bent over the card table, studying a map he has made of the garden, every bush and stalk accounted for.

“How many Japs you have to skewer for that? Huh, Nelson?”

Julio sits cross-legged on a stool, a dark lotus. His stitches are out and his hand works fine. They didn't, however, patch the lip well. Bs and Ps are hard for him to say. He glances dully out into the room.

I'm there, too, somewhere. It's our last summer on Sixth Street, 1988. The summer of “Spiderman”—what they're calling it on Avenue C.

Giddy tries to sit up. You watch his gaze groping around, searching for the person across the room. An unlit cigarette dangles from his mouth:

“No one I know remembers that war. How old are you anyway?” He has managed to light a match, but the cigarette's gone. He moves his legs to look under them, his whole crotch showing. “How the fuck old are you, Nelson?” His eyelids droop. Julio leans forward and, keeping his balance on the stool, blows out the match without making a sound. “Shit . . . you're older

than Uncle . . . fucking . . . Sam.”

Nelson crosses the room, sleeves flapping, toward Giddy. He bares a tooth-poor grin. He lifts Giddy off the couch and carries him triumphantly to the bedroom. Julio moves to the sofa, melting into the velvet, just the ends of his hair sticking up, the pile’s length, through the cushion. Nelson’s back shortly, sucking on a beer. Then he’s back again, a strange new color overtaking his face. The room shrinks. The sofa looks shabby in the daylight, all elbows under you. Nelson’s hands are tangled in his hair. He circles the room, tramping debris, then recedes.

It could have been an hour before we went back to find them. Nelson was standing at the bedroom window, looking down at the garden. Giddy lay on the bed. He was stretched out diagonally on his back, his arm tucked loosely around a pillow at his side. His face was gray like wet newspaper, and his mouth and nostrils clogged with puke. Julio swore and left the room, trying to pull me along after him. I made the mistake of staying. I waited for a minute, staring at Giddy. Stepping back, I could avoid the face. I looked at his hair, parted naturally on the side, the back fanned out against the mattress.

I asked Nelson if we should call an ambulance. His head turned. One hazel eye showed through the drape of his hair. It was clear, assured, dry. Each word, as he spoke, was a building collapsing: “I thought I said no needles in the house.”

The weight of the body on the bed seemed to seep out into the room. I concentrated on breathing. No point in saying we had shot up outside. The hazel eye slid over to the bed. He moved toward it, bumping me inadvertently out of the way. I watched from the doorway as he climbed up on the bed. He stretched himself out over Giddy, right on top of him, and stayed that way all night. In the morning, we had to call the cops to get him off the body. We didn’t know

what else to do. The coroner came and three officers. There was some questioning, some requisite badgering, but no charges were pressed. They didn't bother to take Nelson to the precinct; he was too distraught to feign coherence. One officer gave me the number of Covenant House. That was it. And they took the body.

Nelson disappeared for two weeks. We thought he had jumped in the East River, but he finally showed up in the garden one evening, ragged and dirty and raging through the sunflowers. When he had finished with those, he trampled the corn, and when he finished with the corn, he yanked up all the morning glory trellises. Mrs. Rodríguez on the fourth floor had to run down to protect her young tomatoes. She stood by her patch with a lifted hoe, spitting obscenities. Julio and I watched from the window, laughing, egging them on. Nelson staggered around her, flapping his arms and making faces. She caught him off-balance, pushing him over with a thrust of the hoe. He lay there squirming on the ground, cackling. Twenty minutes it took us to get him upstairs.

The corn was ruined, but the morning glories and sunflowers more or less recovered. Mrs. Rodríguez's tomatoes did well that year. They were as big as softballs by the end of the summer. Julio said she used magic on them. He also said she used magic on us, on Nelson, to poison his household. Other boys moved in, none staying long. It was constant flux. Nelson seemed to be plucking them right off Houston Street. Crack vials competed with beer cans for floor space. Neighbors complained. There were fires in the kitchen and kids crashing in the hallway. Things were stolen, broken; President Truman was defaced with a marker. Nelson didn't seem to notice.

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After running into Julio that day in Midtown, I decided to walk over to Avenue B. I almost changed my mind when I hit Sixth Street, unsure of what I would do when I got there. Just walk by, I thought. It seemed strange, suddenly, that I had not been on that block for more than ten years.

When I came to the building, old Mrs. Rodríguez was sitting on the stoop. She was flushed and dusty from working in the garden. Her broad face grew sullen when I explained who I was. She muttered something in staccato Spanish. Then she sighed, her chest and shoulders wilting slightly. I noticed a new light fixture over the entrance and different colored tiles in the hallway. There was also a panel of intercom buzzers.

“You’ve changed,” she said, squinting at me. I couldn’t tell what kind of change she deemed it. I doubted she really recognized me. Her eyes moved skeptically over my clothes, down to my Pumas, back up to my hair.

“I remember your tomatoes,” I said forcefully.

Her eyes brightened.

“*Mis tomates,*” she nodded, sitting straight again. “Carrots, potatoes, *espinaca*. All the best.”

She grabbed the railing and pulled herself up. She was a little fatter, a little squatter than I remembered, yet she walked easily down the steps. Motioning for me to follow, she headed toward the garden. I stood on the sidewalk, watching her, feeling something lift in my chest. It was the same feeling I had had when the Ninth Circle closed, and Rounds, too, after that. Like watching hundreds of cigarettes lit up in the dark, flames flickering, disclosing here and there a wrist, a forehead, the edges of a cupped hand, the shine of an eye, a glance. And each of these things is a

night of your life, a person in your life. Then darkness. Then you are taking another breath; it might as well be your first. You check your footing. The past is not there.

I hurried to catch up with my old neighbor. She led me in through the small, still-rickety side gate. White, red, and purple clematis were blooming here and there on the fence. It was late afternoon, and the shadows of the buildings lay over the garden. Things were much tidier than they'd been when I lived there. Few weeds and less mingling of flowers and vegetables.

I followed Mrs. Rodríguez between a half-dozen plots. She moved quickly, her head of dyed raven hair swinging back and forth. She pointed at pot of nasturtiums on a weathered stool, at a small turtle pond edged with broken slate tiles. Soon we stood at her plot of tomatoes. It was early July, so the fruits were just forming. She stood protectively over them, clasping her hands in joy at the future.

At the end of the garden stood a patch of sunflowers a yard or so high and just starting to bloom. I walked toward them, moving between plots of roses and day lilies, squash and bell peppers, all beautifully tended.

The sunflowers were a smaller variety than Nelson grew, and the patch was not as big, maybe forty plants in all. There were a few open blossoms, but nothing to approach the hubcap-sized ones I remembered. I turned and looked up at the tenement. My eyes skimmed the windows of the top floor, then moved off. The neighboring buildings were not as I remembered, though I couldn't specify what was different until I realized the facades had been scrubbed of soot—as was the case all over the Lower East Side—to make the area attractive to affluent newcomers.

*“¡Esta muerto!”*

Mrs. Rodríguez was scowling, her feet set firmly, her hands in tight fists at her side. She

stood at the portal of Grannydom, defending it against sniffers, prowlers, infiltrators. But her gaze wavered when I challenged it. It moved hesitantly to the back of her building, up to the top floor. Inside, through a veil of reflections on the corner windows, showed tiny, blinking, red Christmas lights so faint I wondered if they were there at all. If I tried hard enough, I might have been able to see someone there—the dwindling hulk of a man looking out.

“*Esta muerto,*” said Mrs. Rodríguez, with less assurance this time.

She spat on the ground and headed back toward the gate.

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