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Fujiflex crystal archival print and acrylic, 16 x 20 in

COUTESY: THE ARTIST

RY COODER

A Real Mexican Street

The Chingasos

Uncle Betto's musty one-room gift shop on the north end of Olvera Street was called "Artisanes de México"—an uptown name for a strictly downtown joint—specializing in plaster saints, tin mirrors, and huarache sandals with soles cut from authentic Mexican automobile tires back when "Hecho en México" was la verdad. There was a heavy fragrance of perfumed wax from the candle shop next door, and of frying lard from the café across the way called "Mi Tierra," where the tourists were sent and which us kids referred to as "my dirt"—as in, cockroaches. Mexican kids were also regarded as authentic—up to age twelve.

As a teenager, I started to get blamed for a lot of things, like wearing high drape pants and breathing. If you want to grow up frightened, try being a poor, no-talent Mexican kid on the streets of Los Angeles—but I was good at music, so I had something of my own inside that protected me. And yes, I did a little time at the Atascadero Juvenile Farm up north; who didn't? It was nice to get out of the city for a while.

I grew, somehow, like a weed grows in the cracks. I formed a conjunto with cholos from the neighborhood. As "Johnny Dolor and the 5 Pains," we were hip for los años cincuenta, featuring el mambo, el swing, el boogie-woogie. I played a little saxophone, así como Big Jay McNeely; a little guitar, así como T-Bone Walker; and sang así como Johnnie Ray, who was very big in that moment. We were presented at the Club Rendezvous on Central, at La Bamba on East 1st in Boyle Heights, and at The Big Union in Vernon. Then I had the big idea to bring in a white chick singer—which was taboo, you dig—and we made a little money. (Risky outfits and dirty moves, things our girls would never do.) But when musicians make a little money, the scavengers always come around. A Filipino pusher got the 5 Pains on the hook and they started disagreeing about everything—tempos, keys, hairstyles—but it was the girl that broke up the band. Jealousy is death in a musical organization.

Then the Club Rendezvous was raided for dope, and I took the rap for the club owner. Uncle Betto required it; the man was a compadre, or some such old-timer bullshit. *Underage White Girl Held Captive by Pachuco Dope*

In order to get jobs, you had to bring the new Hit-Parade sound and clean up the act.

Fiends! Public Demands Swift Justice!! Uncle's uptown lawyer, Charlie Lupino, cut a deal for a five-year stretch, but that's no comfort station they run up there, cabrón. "Mr. Lupino saved your sorry ass this time, and don't you forget it." (Uncle had a big voice for a small man; everyone said he talked just like Cesar Romero.) Joey Tube-Face was the only one who ever came to visit me behind the walls. He brought me a jar of Vaseline, a towel, and a comic book. That's a true carnalito, eso.

I did the whole five. (What's five years; I would have wasted my time having fun anyway.) When I got back to the Street, Betto's health had turned up bad, and Cousin Maggie was running the shop assisted by her Chihuahua dog, Louie. Pinche rock and roll was coming on strong in that moment: beach music, featuring white guys with blond hair and good teeth. (I had heard of Santa Monica and Malibu, but our people didn't go to the beach, you dig; we went to Elysian Park, above Chávez Ravine, or Whittier Narrows, on the east side.) In order to get jobs, you had to bring the new Hit-Parade sound and clean up the act. Uncle said it was "a good thing." "Marihuana Boogie" was out: "Sus canciones feas give to our people a bad image." My fault, yet again. The 5 Pains scattered to the 4 winds, and I went to work for Uncle full time. The deal was, I could stay in the apartment upstairs if I agreed to "take an interest in the family," as Uncle put it. Even with stomach cancer, he was still a tough man, still the boss.

In this way, time passed. One day, there was a message for me: *Go to 41st Place and Long Beach Blvd/auto shop in the back/outside dog is chained up/take the cardboard boxes in the shed/no alarm system/don't use Joey he will fuck up/take Droopy take Shorty.*

"Johnny, you going back to jail now?" Maggie said.

"An errand, nada más," I told her. "I like Olvera Street; it's below suspicion."

It went like this: Ten P.M., El Sand Box XXX Girls 24 Hours, at 14th and Alameda Street. Joey was waiting in the parking lot. We rolled south, giant semis—all amber lights and chrome stacks—crowding my '54 Bel Air. (Joey: big nose, ducktails, Sir Guy shirt, khakis, wino shoes.) God makes two kinds of air—uno para nosotros, the pobrecitos; uno más para ustedes, los ricos. On Alameda, the air was bad. La gente was hunkered down for the night in their casitas with the dry grass and dusty rosebushes, trying to rest before their little piece of job started up again, making its insane demands. This is the neighborhood of Los Negros y Los Mexicanos también—the people who once came to Los Angeles from deadly places they couldn't tolerate any more: the white South; the border wars. There was mutual distrust at first, followed by the discovery of mutual interests: cars, clothes, music, dancing. They gave it a name: La Treinta y Ocho, The 38. We all had "La 38" tattooed on our right shoulders. The races got along okay, despite what you may have heard. With the segregation, there was no place else to go.

The little wooden house on the corner was dark. I parked in front and cut the motor. 41st Place was quiet as a tomb. "What happens now?" Joey said.

"We take some cardboard boxes. Betto is paying good."

"Betto is good when he's asleep; I know him. 'Joey will fuck up.'"

"He recommended you."

"Liar. I'm staying in the car; Chico Sesma is on the radio right now."

"I can get you Lupe, I can get you Elizabeth."

"Lupe says my body is bad; Elizabeth is saving it for Jesus."

But the mention of the girls motivated Joey, and we walked, leaving the car radio on low. The gate in the chain-link fence was unlocked. The backyard was crammed with cars under tarps—fat fenders meant wartime vintage and before—some rusted out, others gleaming in fresh paint. Night scents: White King laundry soap, jasmine, motor oil. Sounds: ranchera music, police sirens, television. A big grey pit bull with a jaw like a cement mixer came out of his doggy casita and looked us over. I donated one bean burrito in tin foil and he forgot about us. I shot the lock on the shop door with Betto's .38 automatic. (Gunshots at night are no biggy in La 38.) Inside: twelve large cardboard boxes, taped up. We hustled the boxes down the driveway to the street and loaded them in the ranfla. In and out in ten minutes.

"Too easy," said Joey. Tiene la razón, old Joey. On the radio, Chico was laying it down. "Lonely Nights" by Little Julian Herrera rang out.

Ten thirty, El Sand Box parking lot. I busted open a box: nickel-plated auto parts wrapped in newspaper—lights, mirrors, hubcaps. Fancy wire spoke wheels caught the light from the giant green XXX sign. One gleaming yellow plastic steering wheel that said "Chevrolet." A suicide steering wheel knob with tiny engraving: *Jesús es mi Señor.* A chrome-plated 45-speed record player that fits under the dash. One thing for sure—chingasos in this condition are like saints' relics to the low-low veteranos who drive the old cars and dig the old songs, and very hard to come by. But strange cargo, it seemed to me

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Lupe was done with her shift.

"Come outside and talk to Joey; he's asking for you," I said.

Lupe made an effort. "Hey, Joey, ¿qué pasó?" (Lupe: up in the front, down in the back. Indio face, pachuca hairdo.)

"No tengo pussy in a long greasy time," says Joey. (Women want respect, I have told Joey many times, but he is not the most subtle of cats.)

"Joo got anything long and greasy, joo keep it, cabrón," she said, holding up a chrome bird with glass wings. "In where did joo get estos?"

"Auto shop on 41st Place."

"Cuarenta y uno? Joo stole from the Ruelas Brothers?" She put the bird down and stepped back. "Chin-*ga*. Ahora lo verás, hombre."

Hernan, the manager, came out in his shiny black Western suit, purple shirt, Beatle boots, and bad rug. "I don't want these pachucos hanging around my place," he told Lupe, putting a hand to her breast. Lupe showed him a rusty hat-pin, and Hernan stepped back. Joey showed him his blade. Hernan pulled his little throw-down piece. My under-the-seat sawed-off settled it.

"Get your ass back in there," he said in an unfriendly way.

Lupe says, "I got to go piss."

Joey says, "Let me see."

They went behind the building, then Joey came back. His pants were wet in front, and it wasn't Coca-Cola.

The pay phone was disgusting to use. I called Betto's house and Tía Louisa answered. (She takes her teeth out at night.) *¿Quién habla?* Buenas noches, Tía, it's Johnny. *¿Qué?* Johnny, your nephew. ¿Está Betto in la casa? *Betto no está, fué por Mexicali.* Betto drove all the way over there? *El Greyhound boose.* ¿Cuándo he comes back? *No says cuando.* Did he leave un mensaje for me, Johnny? *¿Johnny quién?* Johnny Dolor, your nephew! *Ningún mensaje.* Gracias, Tía. *Por nada, señor.*

"She says Betto took a bus to Mexicali. Now what?"

"You been set up again."

"Betto is Treinta y Ocho."

"The old ways are gone; it's a bitter world now, mi carnal. Creo que some pinche cabrón is trying to tie the cascabel on the gato." Tying the bell on the cat, meaning me. How right he was.

The Religion

Lupe and Elizabeth came out wearing church clothes and mantillas. "We need a ride to church for midnight Mass. Hernan won't take us; he's mad with us," Lupe said.

The Plaza church is situated on the north end of Olvera Street. Personally, I tend to avoid religion, but Elizabeth took my arm and pulled me inside. She has the big Madonna eyes in the sad Madonna face, and men made room for us. A drunk mumbled, "Fíjate que chula," and felt her legs as we passed.

I knew him, a sorry-ass pendejo named Bartoloméo. I showed him the blade. "You touch her again and I will cut your eyes out and Louie will have them for lunch over there, pendejo," I said. You got to make it plain sometimes.

"Sorry, Johnny, I didn't know," he said.

The Irish Padre mumbled; the altar boys stood around. The place was packed with families, fruit pickers, and po-

liticos who never saw a lettuce field or got sprayed. The crowd made a rustling sound, babies crying out. Elizabeth whispered the words at the right time. She pulled me up, she pushed me down. I spied Uncle Betto in the back row in his old-timer guayabera shirt and lid.

The Padre cut it short and ducked out. (He drinks, I happen to know.) Lupe and Elizabeth joined the line for Communion as Betto came shuffling along. I slipped in behind him. (I was baptized as an infant and took Communion maybe once. I don't recollect either. I believe in God, and the whole bit.)

The under-padre was up front with the goodies. Betto knelt and got his, and I was next. "Did you see Jesus, old man?" I whispered. He stumbled in surprise and I had to hold him up. We went and stood in the back. "I got the shit. Pay me, tío mío," I said.

"How do you dare in La Casa de Dios!" he hissed.

The under-padre took the walk with the smoker, followed by the altar boys, city councilman Espinosa and the chubby wife, and ten little kids holding flowers. Nobody paid any attention when Betto collapsed onto the floor. Outside the church a full mariachi band in charro suits and hats went into "Pobre del Pobre." It was a big scene in the plaza—those who couldn't make it inside, plus a tamale girl with a pushcart, a Tri-tip man with his oil-can barbecue, and a peddler selling tiny Mexican flags and plaster statues of La Virgen. The little kids threw confetti; the families held the niños up to see. The mariachis cut it short; the councilman had some words. (El Señor's gig is to make very sure la gente behave themselves: *No more zoot suit riots, cabrones, or we will deport your sorry ass.*) Espinosa put his hands up for quiet:

> My friends, I am here as a simple man of faith. "Yes," you may say, *"Tiene un corazón humilde."* My eyes fill with tears to think of my sainted mother, born and raised a few streets from this place. Mi esposa, also a saint, was joined to me here. Los niños, consecrated. You may say, *"En esta noche, he is in great pain, ¿por qué?"* ¿Por qué? Because they are trying to destroy a true man of the people, a humble public servant! They say, *"On his knees, he feasts on the crumbs from the tables of the ricos!"* Mentirosos! Cobardes! I call upon God the Father to smite them! La venganza will be mine, this I believe! Viva Los Angeles, viva los Estados Unidos! If we work hard, we can achieve anything! ¡Gracias a todos!

Espinosa cut it short, and the mariachi went into the national anthem. Elizabeth stood at attention like a good citizen, then disappeared into the crowd. Lupe assisted me to carry Betto outside. His face was wet; his breathing was rough. We parked him on a park bench, and Lupe fanned him with her shawl.

"What ails you, old man?" she asked. (Uncle's house was full of bottles—a museum-grade collection of drugstore medicines going back years—but the cancer was la verdad. I knew he was tight with a nurse named Mildred who lived around the corner. Mildred gave him morphine shots and was stacked up top.)

"I'm dying," he whispered.

"Remain a little while," I said. "What was the need for the ranfla parts of Los Hermanos Ruelas? Tía Louisa said you went to Mexicali, ¿qué pasó?"

"I wanted to see la tierra de mis padres once more, pero our God prefers me to die like a dog on Olvera Street." He reached in his coat and pulled out a large envelope and shook it at me. "Don't fuck up, pendejo."

Lupe wiped his face. "Hernan fired me in this night, he put his hands to me again, and I don't like anyone to put his hands to me unless I want him to. Chin-*gaaa*, pienso que el señor se *murió*," she whispered.

Uncle Betto had cut it short. His size 7 boots tipped sideways, barely touching the ground. I closed his eyes; Lupe made the cross.

The mariachi hit "Canción Mixteca," the anthem of the exiled and the homesick. The flag peddler sang along. He was blind; I recognized him from the Street. Some pinche cabrón set off firecrackers, and a few cops waded in giving attitude, but la gente was getting happy con tamales y champurrado, and nobody gave any thought to them. They took off, the sirens blasting in the night.

A cop walked up. "No sleeping on city property."

"Yessir, boss."

"I've seen you before."

"My uncle has a shop over there."

"Catholic crap."

"Correcto, boss."

"Move along." He banged the bench with his nightstick.

I shook Betto. "Vámonos a la casa, tío mío, it's way past your bedtime."

I hefted him down the sidewalk to his '64 Cadillac, making it look good, and tucked him in the back seat. I sat in front and tried to read the papers inside the envelope by the light of the streetlamp. There were three things: a passport, a plane ticket, and a message. The passport was issued to me, Juan García y Vega, born 1930, residing at 38 Olvera Street, Los Angeles, California. All very accurate, since the information came from Uncle, I assumed, along with the photograph, taken years ago when I was doing the act. I had never seen a passport before, only heard tell. The ticket was a round-trip fare on Aeronaves de México—destination, Mexico City. The note said, "*Check the boxes, go to the airport restaurant, you will be contacted. El Finito is watching.*"

In every segregated, marginalized community, there has to be a fixer, since nothing can be done by conventional means. In ours, he was known as *El Finito*. I had never seen him, only heard tell from Uncle Betto. "Don't never take little pinche business to *El Jefe*. You better be right." The relationship was not about money, but rather something interesting you could do in return. *El Finito* liked surprises.

Lupe and Elizabeth came down the sidewalk looking for me. "Please drive my uncle to El Sand Box," I told them. "Call the cops and say there's a guy asleep in his car. I have to run an errand; it may take some time."

"You want to take a dead man to a strip joint and leave him in the night? That is cold," Lupe said. Elizabeth cried when she saw Uncle in the back seat.

I turned and spoke to Betto. "Adios, old man. I'll do it, but you really left me in the dirt this time." He made no reply.

The Obligation

The Mexican immigration officer stamped the book and said, "Bienvenido a México, señor." The airport restaurant was bright pink with photographs of exotic tropical birds in little straw hats.

After a while, my head stopped spinning. "Pinche flying is a crock," I said out loud, and a man in the next booth laughed, and when he turned around I got a shock. It was Ramón Blanco, my old bass player from the 5 Pains.

"Johnny!" he said.

"'Món!" I said.

We hugged. He got his beer and sat down across from me.

"'Món, you are looking very dap. What's the hustle?" (Fawn-colored gabardine, silk tie, two-tone shoes, hair died black. Ramón was always a dresser.)

"The Felipe Urban Danzón Orchestra."

"Sounds very uptown."

"No, it is strictly downtown Mexico City. La gente comes after work; they bring their dancing shoes in plastic bags. Six P.M. to midnight, regular as the clock. And you?"

"Well, I'm here doing some business for Uncle Betto, you remember him?"

"Johnny, it is a miracle to see your face. I'm going to light a candle for you; I'm getting closer to Jesús every day."

"Gracias; I can definitely dig it. You come here to eat, 'Món; is that why you're here right now?"

"We're playing a danzón contest in Havana. Felipe Urban is a good orchestra for the Mexican working class, but the Cubans want it faster all the time. If Felipe set tempos like that, our audience would revolt. The Castro regime is trying to revive the old styles; they don't want to lose the history. The past is dead, but that's how commies think. I don't care, I just like the women. Come with me, we'll go out and poke around."

"I got business here, like I said. A delivery."

"Johnny, I don't mean to protrude, but I have a strong feeling you could do much better in Havana with that load you got, pardner."

"And what load is that, pardner?"

"An old friend is waiting for you. He knows you won't let him down."

"I don't have friends in Havana, 'Món."

"Johnny, you see the two hombres over there by the cash register? Plainclothes, on airport detail, and you know why? Contrabando, amigo mío. They have finished with their shrimp cocktails, and now it's time for business. I am very sure you don't want Javier and Enrique to go busting open your boxes, cabrón. No telling what they're going to find, comprende?"

Years ago, we used to see a harp player from Michoacan who claimed to be over a hundred years old and a campanero of Pancho Villa's, which I never doubted.

"I'm starting to."

"Cubana Airlines is down the hall, on your left. Your ticket is paid for, your boxes are checked through to Havana. Your contact will smoke Olvidados."

"Why me?"

"I'm ignorant, happy to be that way. I always said you were a good leader."

"I don't recall you saying it at the trial."

"I came into a small inheritance around that time. A ticket to Mexico City was included. Adios, Johnny-Boy."

Ramón left the restaurant. The waitress came over with the check. "Only people from Los Angeles wear those kind of shoes," she said.

"Romeos, we call them."

"I dream about Los Angeles; I pray to La Virgen to take me there." She reminded me of Elizabeth, so I put too much money on the table. I could stay here with the girl on a real Mexican street, I thought. LA has not been so berry good to me.

"¿Cómo se llama?" I asked.

"Esperanza."

"How would you like to go por Los Angeles conmigo, all expenses pagados?"

"But you are going to Havana."

"Maybe I don't want to go there."

"Maybe I don't want to be a waitress all my life."

"I'll try the mole on the way back."

"Cuba is anti-Catholic. I will light a candle for you. Vaya con Dios."

"Igualmente. I should have went in the candle business."

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The man behind the Cubana Airlines desk did not appear to be a minion of Satan. "You are reserved at the Hotel Nacional," he said. "The bartender is a personal friend of mine, a good man to know. Se llama Chano."

I forgot about the waitress in five minutes. The stewardess on the Cubana Airlines plane would make J.P. Morgan forget about money, and my name ain't J.P. She was chocolate brown and soft like suede. Tall and rangy in the African style, with the Caribbean tonality to the Spanish. Nothing like her had ever been seen on Olvera Street, ese vato.

"Bienvenido, señor. ¿Quiere algo para beber?"

"A happy Mother's Day to you, too, chica. Tequila, por favor; it's cheap and it hits. Muchísimas gracias." She looked at me funny. I didn't blend in with the rest of the passengers, none of whom I liked. I have seen straight-life folks get crazy drunk off one or two tequila shots on the Street, like Laurel and Hardy on grape juice. Then the trio comes over and sings "Bésame Mucho." Then the rubes try to sing along, and the cats always say, "Berry berry good, señor; joo are maybe a leetle beet Meheecano, ¿que no?"

Years ago, we used to see a harp player from Michoacán who claimed to be over a hundred years old and a compañero of Pancho Villa's, which I never doubted. He wore a white campesino outfit, a big sombrero, and a moth-eaten serape, and he didn't play very well—but he had six fingers on each hand, which gave him extra notes. Uncle Betto paid him to sit out in front to give authenticity. Then one morning he died in the middle of a tune. The big wooden Veracruz harp held him up on his bench until a tourist tried to give him money, and he just toppled over. The lady fainted. Her husband threatened to sue the city, but Uncle slipped him a little cash and threw in a free tin mirror. The undertaker said the old man was just skin and bones under the serape. Betto kept the harp in the shop for color until one morning it was gone, and I wondered, who'd want an old harp with half the strings broken? But I missed it around the shop; it smelled like the desert and gave the place alma. That happened in the good old days before I went inside the walls.

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We landed at José Martí airport in a light rain. The arrival zone was deserted except for a customs official trying to get next to a very young, very fat under-assistant customs girl with incredibly white teeth and a radiant smile. It caught my eye, because LA cops are never social and never smile, not in my direction. The stewardess cruised right by them with the pilot, a hard-looking vato with styled black hair, gold teeth, and the mirror sunglasses all the pilots dig. She called him Papi. Papi looked like he was getting plenty.

A skinny cat in a dirty shirt was waiting with my boxes when I got outside the terminal. "I am Pupi," he said cheerfully. "My car is here." He pushed his way through a pack of skinny cats in dirty shirts who tried to push and pull me into their cars. They were rough, but Pupi was rougher.

"Any trouble? Did they open the boxes?" I asked.

"My brother is jefecito of customs; everything is normal," he said.

Beyond the lights of the little airport it was pitch dark. On either side of the two-lane highway the land was thick and black with trees and smelled like the jungle. There were no stores or houses, or cars—except an occasional lopsided truck or a motorcycle streaking by in a cloud of spray and oil smoke. "How far are we from town," I asked.

"Fifteen kilometers."

"Where are we going? What's it all about, Pupi?"

"The group is waiting for you. You will be very pleased to meet an old friend." Pupi clammed up after that bit of classified information. He hunched over the wheel and drove like mad, dodging giant potholes in the road, which was in worse shape than Alameda Street. A rubber tube cinched up with rags ran from a large plastic jug through a hole in the dashboard.

"What's this for?" I said.

"Gasolina," he said.

He passed me the pack—a Cuban brand, not Olvidados.

The further in we went, the older it got. Pupi dodged the holes; he knew the way. "My Plymouth is all I have," he said. We pulled up in front of a large, dilapidated old house on a dead-quiet street of large, dilapidated old houses with no lights showing and no people about. "And now, we are here," he said.

Inside, the joint was packed with Cubans dancing to fast loud salsa. The temperature outside was at least 90, but inside, it was 110 and climbing. All the women wore the same tight pants in shiny striped cloth and their men held them close with one hand down the back of their pants, a style not yet seen on Olvera Street. A light-skinned girl with blond hair grabbed my arm and shouted, "¡Familia!"

The people stopped dancing and looked at me. She said I was the man who brought the good stuff and it was a great day for Cuba and so forth. They all cheered and saluted. Thanks, I said, it was nothing. They cheered and clapped and danced on like there was no tomorrow—a real wang-dang-doodle, as el señor Howling Wolf used to say. One guy used both hands inside his girl's pants. "Move it well; God will provide," he said, winking at me. The girl wiggled her tongue at me over his shoulder.

I followed the blond woman downstairs to a very overgrown backyard featuring a large water fountain with three beat-looking angels with harps, not working, and fancy iron benches now rusted to pieces. A skinny yellow-eyed cat appeared and opened a side door to the garage and then stepped back into the shadows. Inside the garage, something long and metallic appeared to be floating a few inches off the floor: a 1956 Cadillac Fleetwood sedan up on blocks. It was covered with a thick layer of dust, but the chrome gleamed and the paint looked almost new. A light went on inside, and there was Charlie Lupino, in the back seat, dressed in a double-breasted suit and hat, smoking a cigar. "Johnny Dolor, the last Pachuco," he said in a dreamy sort of way, like he was drunk or high.

The bell is on the cat's tail now, I thought; but I was cool. "Órale, they said an old friend was waiting," I said.

"Always nice to see an old friend. Come and sit here with me. This is the Cadillac of El Bárbaro del Ritmo, the late, great Beny Moré. When the time is right, we will drive this car down the Malecón in triumph."

"Who is we?"

"The Society of Sincere Men, a band of heroes and patriots. Their cars are old and in great need. They have suffered. Do you see these tears?" I didn't see any tears.

The car radio played a danzón. It was slow and stately and the story caught my ear. *In the marketplace I saw a woman stealing. She was an expert, and I noticed because I am also a thief. But she stole things of value only to women and poets. Later, she began to steal my soul, piece by piece.*

"Uncle Betto is dead, by the way," I said.

"We are going to make history very soon," Charlie said.

"Good for you. I'm not on your book anymore."

"You are for us or against us."

"Uncle Betto sends me on a pinche errand all the way to pinche Cuba, and what do I find? Mr. Charlie Lupino, sitting in an old Cadillac with no tires. Strange, but true. To my way of thinking, you aren't going anywhere."

"You are still only an LA street cholo, a professional nobody. Be part of something big for a change. Can't you understand the nobility and purity of sacrifice?"

"Only my own, ese vato."

"You depress me. Go back to your alley."

I left him there and walked out to the street. My driver was banging on something under the hood of the Plymouth. "I'm supposed to have a hotel room. Take me there, man, I'm beat," I said.

"The beautiful Hotel Nacional is here in Vedado. My cousin is jefecito of the elevators; his name is Nacho. He drives a Pontiac, 1948."

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The hotel was nice in the way they did things in days of old, but only in the lobby, you dig. My room was damp and moldy and the window was stuck, so I used my blade to chip away the old paint and got it to move a little, and then a little more, and the funky smell of the sea rushed in. On the floor below was a terrace where a guitar trio was working on a tired bolero while a slender, very dark Cuban girl with long shiny hair and a thin dress stumbled around with a gabacho in a pink sweater. The song finished and the cats bowed and packed up. The gabacho wanted more, like they always do, but the girl finally dragged him away—and then the only sound was the ocean as it slammed into the sea wall down by the main road.

I used the ancient telephone to call room service, and got no answer. Then the phone rang. Thinking it might be room service calling back, I picked it up and said hello.

A girl with a voice like Betty Boop answered. "Oh! Americano! We are curious to know what you are wanting? There are two of us?"

"I want something to eat."

"If you wish to see us, tell Nacho, the man of the elevators."

"Thanks, I may call on you for help later."

"Hasta muy pronto, señor Americano."

The phone rang again. "I am Nacho," said a man.

"I want a sandwich and a couple beers. Can you handle that, Nacho?"

"I can get you sandwich of jamón, sandwich of queso, and sandwich of jamón y queso."

"One of each. Two beers. Okay?"

"¿Quiere mujeres? ¿Una, o dos?"

"No quiero mujeres right now, gracias."

I must have dozed off. There was a knock and it startled me. I checked the peephole and saw a person holding a tray covered with a bathroom towel. He or she was extraordinary-looking, even as Cubans go.

"Señor Dolor? Ees eet Señor *Pain*—or Señor *Dollar*, I prefer to theenk?" This was a character that would have been eagerly received in the fashionable cities of the world. Height, five two; weight, one-ten? Slender and lithe as a cat, with big brown eyes like a doe deer, a flat nose, and marcelled platinum-blond hair cut close like a bathing cap. A man, I felt sure, despite the red lipstick. He glided in and set the tray down on the table like it was a magic act. "You decline the ladies, then of course Nacho sends *me*." He gave me the look: *Hey, big boy, I dig you, it's not just business.* Havana or El Lay, makes no difference.

"Sit down; let's talk while I eat," I said. He arranged himself in a chair and made a big deal out of crossing his legs and adjusting himself here and there. He was missing his front teeth, which would not have gone over big in the great cities, but he'd be a real upsetter on Olvera Street. His dancing shoes had holes in them.

"What's your name?"

"I am called Kiko."

"I was an entertainer myself; I can dig all the cute names. Sit still; you won't go back empty-handed. I'm just passing through, but something has happened, and I don't understand the setup. Are you from around here?"

"Nacio in Cayo Hueso."

"Is that in Vedado?"

"En Vedado, son los ricos. En Cayo Hueso, son los pobrecitos y músicos."

"What is the Society of Sincere Men?" That was the wrong thing to say. Kiko sat up straight and got serious in a hurry.

"I know my life is worth nothing," he said with some pride.

"Relax, I'm not a cop or a spy. I did some work for them, and I just want to know where I stand. What's their thing with old cars?"

"Ugh, they are soch beeg smoky theengs. The Sincere Men want to go back to the other time, tú sabes. They hate the Beard." Kiko pulled at his chin.

"Meaning what?"

"Theese walls have eyes and ears. I have many friends in jail."

"I been in jail."

"You would not prefer *our* jail, *Señor Pain*. Eet ees not polite to ask theese questions. Would you like to play a game?"

"This sandwich is terrible," I said.

Kiko got excited again. "I love tuna feesh! Een my house, I place the tuna feesh on the cracker, then I add salt and pepper." He demonstrated with his hands and then ate one with his eyes closed. "Eet ees so delicioso, so sabrosito, so—"

"I'm tired now. Here's five bucks and one more for Nacho. Don't blow it all on tuna fish. Buena noche." Kiko padded softly down the hall towards the service elevators. Quiet returned, except for the rumble of the ocean, which never stopped.

I lay back down and tried to think. Beny Moré wasn't the only guy with a Cadillac. I'd had a Cadillac once, a '41 coupe, in copper mist and cream. One night it burned up on the street while I was asleep. They accused me of torching it for the insurance. Torch a '41 Cad? What insurance? Ridiculous, I told them. We're watching you, Dolor, they said. Step out of line and see how ridiculous it is. The sergeant spit on my floor for emphasis. Funny how you remember the little things.

Maybe I slept. In the grey light of dawn, the ocean looked like dishwater. I changed clothes and went downstairs to look for breakfast. There was a heavy smell of sewage and frying lard, and I followed the smell to the dining room, one floor below street level. Café con leche and waffles, I told the waiter. The Chinese omelette is berry good today, señor, the waiter said. Waffles, I said. I must recommend the Omelette Chinois, he said again. Better bring me one Chinese omelette, whatever it is, I said.

A young woman turned around in her chair and smiled a big smile. "You're smart to order; the buffet isn't so nice. *Kooba* is still in the harsh grip of the *Special Period*." She was obviously American in her fancy peasant outfit, gold bracelets, and long straight hair.

"This is my second day in Havana," she said, gesturing with her hands. "I've met the most fascinating people. There's so much passion here, and so much suffering. Passion and suffering are close together, wouldn't you say?" She was smoking; I saw the pack. A Mexican brand, Olvidados.

"Havana is interesting, but I'm going to catch the first thing smoking," I said. The waiter brought my omelette swimming in grease. I wasn't sure what made it Chinese until I cut into it and found a note that said "Vamos." That is something Mexicans have always taken seriously, so I folded the eggs back together, put down my fork, and got up. The woman looked at me funny.

My overnight bag was upstairs, but I had my passport and plane ticket in my jacket. Sometimes musicians have to move in a hurry. "Leave it all behind you," as Louis Armstrong says.

The lobby was noisy and hectic with many tourists and their handlers. The handlers sweated and waved their arms like they were herding chickens: "Señores y señoritas—please, the boose must leave!"

The tobacco stand was right there, so I asked the girl at the counter for a pack of Mexican Marlburros. Four bad guys in tight formation came walking through the lobby in my direction. "This is it, you sorry-ass bean brain," I said, but they passed behind me and took the stairs down to the dining room at a clip.

"¿Perdón, señor?" the girl said.

"I was just thinking out loud, a bad habit," I said. "Who were those four men right there?"

"Those are special police. You seem to be Mexican, but I think you are American? We understand Mexicans are tormented in America?"

You'd think the island would sink under the weight of

ROBIN WINFIELD

San Francisco Fire Escape, 2011
Fujiflex crystal archival print and acrylic, 28 x 24

COUTESY: THE ARTIST

all the pretty girls alone. "Yes, chica, you may say we are low down on the totem pole," I replied.

"The totem pole?"

"In America, you are rated as a human being by your teeth as well as your bank account. Look at mine, then look at yours, chica. In America, you would be a queen, if only for a day."

The four men reappeared with the American woman from breakfast. She was under guard, I realized, and she flashed me a look of terror as they passed behind me. One of the men caught her look and checked me out, but as a second-rate Mexican, I didn't register.

"Well," said the girl, "there goes an enemy of the state, I think. They never bother the tourist; the tourist is king."

"I met a man last night who seemed to be in fear of the police." I described Kiko.

"It was a maricón you saw."

"What's a maricón?"

"A homosexual prostitute. They are forbidden in the hotel."

"This one works for Nacho."

"I hate Nacho; he is always trying to recruit me."

"Can't you complain?"

"Nacho is a kind of spy."

"He's a pimp, honey."

"He reports to the manager."

"Who does the manager report to?"

"The ministry of tourism."

"I see."

"I would like to go to America, even though it is a corrupt society."

"Where did you learn English?"

"My father had a collection of American paperback murder books. These are forbidden now, but I learned the language from the books. Do I speak good enough for America?"

She reached across the counter and grabbed my hand and pressed it against her abdomen, turning slightly to hide what she was doing. "Please take me with you," she whispered. "I'm single and free. I can work hard." She let go of my hand quickly.

I saw my driver Pupi standing around casually in a corner of the lobby. The American woman and the four plainclothes passed by him on their way out, and one cop said something to him. You might have missed it, but I saw and the girl saw.

"There is my uncle," she said.

"In the little hat? That's my driver."

"Oh." She lowered her eyes and got quiet.

"What about him, chica?"

"I will ask you please not to repeat to my uncle what I said."

"What's the matter with Uncle?"

"He is a kind of policeman."

"Say, honey, how do I get a taxi to the airport without Uncle knowing about it?"

"Take the stairs to the swimming pool. There is a path leading to the Malecon. You can find a cab in a few minutes. They must not pick up tourists, but you are Mexican."

"Thanks."

"Vaya con Dios."

"Igualmente."

It was too early for much traffic. A row of apartment houses along the sea road that would have been nice a hundred years ago faced north like toothless old men dreaming of Miami. The sea kept bubbling up over the crumbling wall, but it was not picturesque. People tended fishing lines, and kids floated in the oily water on inner tubes and pieces of wood. Olvera Street looks pretty good from here, I thought—a nice little business with money coming in and good will going out, enchiladas, rice and beans any time of the day or night, and a cherry Bel Air for church on Sundays? What if I don't make it back; what if this is the end of the line? A feeling came upon me like I used to get behind the walls—like the world was backing up and pulling out and there was not one damn thing I could do. I thought, if I could just see Louie once more and be a little nicer to him—and my eyes filled with tears. "Step it up and go, you sorry-ass pendejo," I said out loud.

I asked a fisherman about taxis. "There is one," he said, pointing to an ugly little sedan limping along slowly. He flagged the car down and spoke to the driver. He called me over. "Chino will take you; he is my friend." I gave the fisherman a dollar.

"Now he doesn't have to stay there all day," Chino said as we pulled out.

"You know him?"

"He is my neighbor. What are you wanting; do you require a daiquirí, or a mojito? Are you interested in architecture? Old Havana contains much architecture: La Inglaterra Hotel, for instance, which contains many beautiful women—"

"The airport, and step on it."

"I am forbidden at the airport, señor; this cab is only for Cubans. You must take a tourist taxi."

"I'll give you ten dollars. Drop me off on the highway and I'll walk in."

"You have no suitcase; you will be observed."

"Let's get one."

"There are no American suitcases for sale in Havana. You are American, so you must have an American suitcase or you will be questioned. I believe you do not prefer to be questioned?"

"Claro. Now what do I do?"

"I can arrange something, but it is expensive."

"I'm not a rich tourist."

"I have a cousin who is a lady. She will ride with us to the airport. She will tell the airport police she is your girl, and they will allow my cab. She will accompany you inside to the shopping area. You will buy her something and she will leave. It is normal."

"What about the suitcase?"

"She owns an American suitcase; she will sell it to you."

"I had to leave my clothes behind. What if they look inside?"

"She also has men's clothes; she will sell them to you. May I ask your name?"

"Call me Johnny Dollar, the man with the action-packed expense account."

* * *

We headed into the old section. The streets were impossibly narrow and the ancient buildings seemed about to collapse onto each other. Some already had, and I saw people picking up bits of wood and other junk. We got stuck behind an ice truck, then a stalled car, then three guys on a bicycle who refused to move aside. It was slow going and it was taking too long. "Let's skip the pinche suitcase," I started to say, but right then a woman carrying one stepped off the sidewalk and jumped in the back seat next to me.

"May I present Toti," Chino said. You can't tell the age of Cubans. She was very thin, by our standards, and her clothes were faded and threadbare, but on her they looked saucy.

"We must avoid the highway; the police are checking cabs," she said.

"Checking for what?" I asked.

"There was trouble this morning; it was announced on the radio. If we encounter police, you must kiss me." She took cigars out of her purse and put them in my shirt pocket. She patted my chest and smiled. "Now you are a good tourist."

We left downtown and drove into a residential area of tiny cinder-block houses painted in bright colors. Banana plants grew wild and little kids played in the mud. It was hot in the car. By now, Pupi would have discovered I had left the hotel and I assumed we were hot. Toti was good cover unless things got rough at the airport, but on the other hand, she could be a cop and Chino could be a cop. Cuban police didn't look like the kind we get on Olvera Street, ese vato. Either way, things were out of my control, which was also normal.

We pulled up to a pink house with a red tile roof. "There is the house of my brother," Chino said. "This day is his Santo's day."

"Échale, Chinito, I need to get to the airport rápidamente, and you can see your brother later."

"If I pass his house, he will be hurt." Chino got out and made a beeline inside where salsa was blasting in the usual way.

Toti and I got out and she took my arm as we walked. "His interest is in the niece. Because of the fiesta today, he has realized she is here. I don't think he will take you to the airport now."

"Are you a cop, Toti? Is Chino a cop?"

"We will dance one song. Act as though we have known each other well."

Everyone there was polite and relaxed. The esposa brought out a plate of fried Spam and greasy yellow chunks of some banana-like thing. I realized I hadn't eaten since the sandwich of jamón y queso the night before, but Toti pulled me back and shook her head. A bolero came on, and we danced. "Como el estilo de los pachucos," a fat woman laughed.

Toti steered me onto the porch and asked for a cigarette. People kept arriving like it was the party of the century. "Tell me the problem," she said. "Cubans have trouble, but tourists don't have trouble."

"I'm not one. I'm from Los Angeles, but I'm poor by LA standards. My uncle tricked me into delivering some auto parts down here to a group called the Sincere Men, who dig old cars. The group is up to something, and an American is in on it: I know him. If this is about politics, include me out; I'm just trying to get back home."

"This morning an attempt was made to kill an important minister. An American has been identified as the leader."

"What's his name?"

"They referred to him as a lackey of an anti-Cuban cabalistic cartel managed by the United Fruit Company. He was killed trying to escape."

"Very convenient. An American woman was arrested in the hotel by secret police, and my driver turned out to be an undercover cop sent to watch me. I thought the Sincere Men were just dreamers, but they don't act like dreamers—not the kind we have at home."

"The Sincere Men hate the government. But they failed, as usual. They will be tried and found guilty and life will go on. It is normal."

"Not for me. I got to get to the airport, Toti."

"I will take you and you can give me the money. My mother is very old and sick."

"Let's went."

We walked to a paved road and caught a cab. I showed the driver ten dollars, and he offered to take us anywhere, including Miami. When we got to the airport, the plan worked like Toti said. She knew the head cop by name, and he even saluted me.

The gift shop was full of obvious European sugar daddies and young dark-skinned Cuban girls trying on thin dresses. Toti picked out a gold necklace that said "Hecho en Mexico." On her it looked good.

"I could get you buckets of these back home," I said.

"Now you must kiss me," she said. "It must look normal."

It wasn't. No Vaya con Dios and no candle lighting; just thanks, and goodbye.

* * *

I paid the five-dollar exit tax and boarded the same dirty airplane, and the same gorgeous stewardess was there. She remembered me, which was nice.

"Bienvenido, señor. Por favor, abróchese el cinturón de seguridad."

"It's broken again, chica."

"Ah. Please let me try." She bent over me and fiddled with the buckle, and it snapped shut. "Now it is good!" Her eyes were soft and her smile was tender. Sure loves her job, I thought.

"You speak the English?" I asked.

"We are well trained."

"Let me ask you something personal. Do you happen to own a pair of striped pants?"

"Of course." She laughed and touched my shoulder. "Perhaps you are a bad boy?"

"I'm a real dinger. Incidentally, is Papi flying with us today?" She seemed puzzled. "Your man Papi, with the hair and the sunglasses from my last trip?"

"I know no one of this type." Her eyes went blank; the fun was over.

"My error." Something was not kosher with Papi.

Later on, she came through checking seatbelts and tray tables. "Honey," I said, "I'm never going to leave Los Angeles again, so this is *Adiós, mi corazón*, as the mariachis say. Just one more thing. Does Papi drive an old American car? You can nod or shake your head."

She looked around fast and then nodded.

"*Vaya con Dios*, sweetie. In this crate, you'll need Him."

La Familia

We landed. My passport was stamped only for Mexico, you dig, so I was cool. The U.S. Customs man asked, "What was the purpose of your visit?" A final visit to an old friend, I replied. Never lie to the customs.

Outside the terminal, I knelt and kissed the sidewalk. A big Chinese family pushing luggage carts loaded with everything they had in the world stopped short and looked at me in fear. "Welcome to my city, ese," I said. I had had some drinks on the plane and was in a playful mood. I gave the old Chinese dad my shop card. "Mi casa es su casa; free huaraches if you can guess Louie's name."

I located the ranfla in the parking structure and got

The store featured the usual things older people like— herbs, potions, milagros, votive candles, and sex books for Catholics in Spanish.

behind the wheel and things were right. It was a nice ride north on the 405, then east on the 10, north again on the good old 110, and off at Broadway. Maggie was closing up and Louie was on his bed by the cash register. He curled his lip at me and growled. Maggie had been crying, but I had to pretend I didn't know the score. "What's wrong, Maggie? Is Louie sick again?"

"Johnny, where have you been! Daddy died in his car. We don't know what happened. The police called me in the middle of the night—they found him in the parking lot of the strip club on Alameda, and they acted like he was a dirty old man. Daddy would never go there. I'm so ashamed! If I thought you had anything to do with this, I would never speak to you again!"

"I been out of the pinche Estados Unidos, Maggie, because Tío told me to do something and I went and did it, no questions asked. Pinche Cuba is insane; I could have been killed."

"Pick up on this, Johnny. You are the head of the family now; you have to make a contribution for once."

I lost my temper. "No, *you* pick up on *this*. I went to prison for five of the best years of my life because of your father. After that, my gig, the one thing I know how to do, was gone forever. This last bullshit job almost landed me in a pinche Cuban jail full of queers and murderers. It's a Goddamn miracle I made it back to this Goddamn hole in the ground."

Maggie put her hands over Louie's ears. He barked and showed teeth. "That's right," she wailed, "shout at me, bully me. My mother killed my father, but you don't care about the suffering of other people in this world."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"She gave him fried food three times a day, every day, until it blocked his heart and killed him."

"You don't kill people with food."

"My mother is a killer but also a victim."

"I don't understand."

"When she was a baby, the babysitter stole her from her parents and kept her locked up until she was a teenager. One day, Daddy saw her in the plaza and followed her and the babysitter, who was an old woman by that time. He arranged to buy her from the woman for five hundred dollars. Then he married her and they had me and my sister. She never saw her parents again. My mother never stopped hating Daddy for what happened to her."

"I was never told any of this."

"You were never around to be told. 'Johnny gives us a bad name; Johnny's running with los negros on Central Avenue.' My own mother doesn't recognize me. I have no one."

"You have Louie."

"You are a terrible person, Johnny, you know that?" More tears flowed.

"Why don't you take a vacation? Go to Mazatlán and lie on the beach."

"If I go in the sun one day, I look like an Indian. Louie needs his medicine."

"I'll take care of him; I'll watch the place. Who cares about huaraches—nobody buys them anymore; nobody wants any of this shit."

"Please talk to Father O'Leary."

"What for?"

"Just go over there and talk, for God's sake. He's expecting you as head of the family."

"No confession; absolutely not."

"Don't ever tell the Father where Daddy was found. Take money; the Mass is expensive."

* * *

I booked a small Italian mortuary on Bunker Hill. They supplied the priest, a cut-rate Filipino, who lost his place in the guidebook and had to start the Mass over twice, but there was no way I was going to give the church every last cent in the store. There was me, Maggie, Tía Louisa, Louie, and Joey. Tía went through all the repetitions and took Communion later. She had no idea Betto was dead; it was just another Mass in a lifetime of Masses. Joey said the mortician was a regular down at XXX Girls. Lupe and Elizabeth wanted to come, but I told them Maggie might get the wrong idea and cop an attitude. "Ella se crée muy grande," Lupe said.

Ordinarily, I am not a man of action. Musicians prefer to play the set and go to the house. And yes, I have seen many things from the bandstand. One time, a man in the audience put his hand up the girl's dress next to him only to discover the hand of another man. He pulled his piece and shot the man under the table. The club owner ran to the stage and told us to play on. It is normal. But I had to do something to square things with the Ruelas Brothers before the word went out to the Mongol motorcycle gangsters, the contract killers in El Barrio: "You disrespected the brothers, cabrón. We are going to burn this little pinche chicken-shit store down with you in it. Which sombrero do you prefer?"

I closed the place and drove to *El Finito's* headquarters, a tiny neighborhood tienda on 1ST Street and Boyle Avenue. The store featured the usual things older people like—herbs, potions, milagros, votive candles, and sex books for Catholics in Spanish. I told the dark, hungry-looking woman behind the counter I needed to see the man.

"Venga," she said in her deep, froggy voice.

There was a storeroom in back with a chair and a small table. On the table was a reel-to-reel tape recorder. A reel of quarter-inch recording tape was set up. A small microphone sat on the table connected by wire to the machine.

"Siéntese," she said.

She turned the machine on and pressed the PLAY lever. The machine hummed, the tape moved, and a scratchy, faraway voice came on: "*Yo conozco los secretos de los hombres y mujeres que han pasado entre las sombras … Yo conozco los miedos sin nombres de quien no se anima a hablar … dígame, hijo mío.*" The woman handed me the microphone. She pressed another lever, and croaked, "Habla."

She sat there and chain-smoked Egyptian cigarettes while I told my story into the machine, starting with the theft of the ranfla parts, the death of Uncle Betto, the trip to Cuba, and that I believed Charlie Lupino had been shot dead trying to assassinate a Cuban government official.

"Please tell me what I must do," I said finally.

She turned off the machine. "Regresa in la mañana," she said.

The woman bothered me with her musty smell and dilated pupils. I beat it back to Olvera Street.

When I arrived the next day, she had gotten all dolled up in a peasant dress and gold jewelry, and she offered me a glass of some milky stuff from a bottle with foreign writing, which tasted like toothpaste.

"You're not from Los Angeles?" I said.

"I was born in Salonika."

"Where's that?"

"Greece."

"Can I ask your name?"

"Salomé."

"So what's the word?"

"*El Finito* made no reply."

"Why not? He and my uncle were tight."

"*El Finito* cannot assist you."

"I don't believe this whole setup—you, the moldy junk, the tape machine—what's going on here?"

She poured me another shot. "Do you like ouzo?" she said. Her pupils were solid black and never seemed to focus, and I wondered if she couldn't see very well.

"You don't understand—I been through hell recently," I said. "I have a bad problem and I'm not in a social mood."

"In Salonika, my father was an important man. He arranged marriages and business deals. He settled disputes, and occasionally ordered an assassination. Then the regime changed and we were forced to leave. We came to the United States in 1939. He died two years ago."

"You mean *El Finito* is your father? Uncle Betto never said anything about him dying; he acted like *El Finito* was running things now and forever."

"In Salonika, before the war, I sang Rembetika in the nightclubs. An Italian diplomat wanted to marry me; he was very rich. He had an Isotta Fraschini automobile; the roof was so tall we could make love standing up while the chauffeur drove in the front. Of course you can't imagine my life then. After my father died I started making up

stories for people, using the machine. I needed something to do; I hate this store."

"Uncle Betto implied *El Finito* ordered me to do this job. It was highly organized. They planned to assassinate a Cuban government minister, and Charlie Lupino was in on it. I think the Cuban secret police killed him."

"Charles Lupino abused my father in business. If he's dead, I'm glad."

"You don't expect me to believe this was a pinche vengeance scheme by a Greek woman in Boyle Heights?"

"I am not Greek; I am from Salonika. Greeks are déclassé, outré, filthy."

"A gang of people were involved from here to Havana, and they were all up to speed except a sorry-ass pachuco named Johnny Dolor."

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?"

"Hilarious. Remind me to laugh on my day off."

"Leave me alone now; I'm an old woman."

"Maybe you should have married the Italian?"

"One day we drove to the country for a picnic. Iron Guard Macedonians blocked the road and killed him and the driver with machine guns. I escaped into the trees; I was naked. You can't imagine such things." She poured another shot and drank it down. She might have been a singer once; the intensity was still there, but time and cigarettes had done a real job on her vocal cords. She caught her breath and went on. "He was nice; he gave me money sometimes, which I used to pay for our voyage to America—but my father lost everything. When we came here, he had to begin again."

"Why Boyle Heights?"

"It is easy to live among Mexicans; nobody pays attention."

"Basically true. What did you do during the riots?"

"My father took people off the streets and hid them in the cellar. That's why he picked this place—the cellar. He dug a tunnel to the little house in back, like we did in Salonika. In Salonika, it was essential."

"That's very interesting, Salome, but what am I going to do about the Ruelas Brothers? They are not exactly the Iron Guard, but they're nobody to mess with just the same. You been around; what would you do if you were in my shoes?"

"Go there, tell them the truth. They are your brothers; they're not your enemies. They're not Turks or Macedonians or Bulgarians—or Germans, God forbid."

"This ouzo isn't so bad once you get used to it," I said.

"Don't lie; it's filthy stuff. You can visit me again if you like; I never go out and I can't sleep."

* * *

I told Joey about Salome, but he wasn't interested. "She's a crazy old broad; todo el mundo lo saben," he said.

There was nothing else to do but admit I stole the parts and take what was coming. I closed up the store, took Louie, and drove down to 41st Place. A Cadillac hearse was parked outside the little house on the corner, and about fifty ranflas were in formation on the street, stretching around the corner of Long Beach Boulevard. "Swing into the line," a man said.

I made a U-turn and pulled up behind a lavender blue '39 Chevy. More cars arrived—beautiful cars, full of people dressed to the nines. Each and every car was proper and correct, down to the swamp coolers and fender skirts and sun visors.

The man walked over. He leaned his elbow on the windowsill, smiled, and said in a hoarse, raspy voice, "Good of you to make it, Johnny. My brother Julio always liked your car. He's in Heaven now, but he knows you're here and he digs it. We're going to Forest Lawn, in Glendale. We're going to keep it down around twenty-five miles an hour. I'll see you there."

He walked back along the line of cars, greeting and shaking hands. Except for Louie, I was alone, and it kind of hurts to be alone at a funeral; but the man had a strong "up" vibe, and I caught some of it—and it felt good, like I was home. The line began to move and the tailpipes rapped, making the spitting sound we all love.

We rolled north on Alameda, then east on Mission Road. People on the sidewalk stopped to watch. We passed Lincoln Park on the right, with the big old trees and the families eating lunch on the grass. I heard an accordion. If you didn't look in your rearview mirror at the tall shiny buildings going up south of the Plaza, you could tell yourself everything was still copastatic in Los Angeles.

The gravesite was on the Glendale side, where the land is steep. We parked on the road and made our way down the slope. It was a big crowd—a hundred or more—and I saw cats I hadn't seen in thirty years. Some had stayed in the 38, and some had moved as far away as Salinas and Turlock. The skinny girls I remembered from school days were now fat mamacitas in their tight dresses and high heels. The men were looking sharp and ready in full drapes and Stacy Adams shoes. At least I was not the only one in a plaid shirt.

When everyone got situated, a cat stepped to the coffin and picked up a microphone: "When Fernando asked me to speak today, I was troubled. I could not visualize a world without Julio Ruelas. Last night I prayed for guidance, and I received a message in dreams in the form of a love letter to each and every one of us, which I am going to read to you now." The man adjusted his glasses and the people got quiet:

How are you? I just had to send you this letter to tell you how much I love you and care about you. I saw you yesterday as you were talking with your friends. I waited all day, hoping you would walk and talk with me. As evening drew near, I gave you a sunset to close your day, and a cool breeze to rest you. I saw you fall asleep last night, and I longed to touch your brow, so I spilled moonlight on your pillow and your face. You awakened this morning and rushed off to meet the day. You looked so sad, so alone, and it makes my heart ache because I understand. My friends let me down and hurt me many times, but I still love you. We will spend eternity together in Heaven. I know how hard it is on earth, because I was there, and I want to help you. My Father wants to help you too. He's that way, you know. Just call me, ask me, talk to me. I have chosen you, and because of this, I will wait because I love you. Your Friend, Jesus.

A breeze made a rustling sound in the trees along the road above, and in the distance you could hear the 5 freeway hissing along. There was a small cassette machine sitting on the coffin lid, and the man pushed PLAY and "Duke of Earl" rang out, followed by "Nite Owl" by Tony Allen, a brother from La 38. Then blue and black balloons were released, and that was it.

The people turned to go, but a problem arose when the women couldn't get back up the slope in their high-heeled shoes. This caused some confusion until the short man with the raspy voice organized a chain of hands to help the women up. He and I happened to be together towards the top, and he spoke to me. "I checked it out yesterday, and I knew this would happen," he said.

This is it, you sorry-ass bean brain, I thought. "Fernando, I have a confession to make to you. It was me, Johnny Dolor, that took the parts from your shop. Joey Tube-Face didn't have nothing to do with it; it was between me and my uncle."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "No sweat, Johnny; I was paid. As a matter of fact, that money paid for this funeral."

"You're not sore?"

"I'm retired now; I needed the cash. Forest Lawn don't cut you no slack."

"Thanks, Fernando; that's a big load off my mind."

We hugged. "Welcome back," he said.

* * *

So that's how it is. In the end, Olvera Street is not real—but it is close enough, good enough. Frying lard, perfumed candle wax, sticky cactus candy. Big-hat mariachis, big-assed tourists, skinny little kids, and teenage girls in all colors (you can't tell who made them these days). Old mamacitas with their Chihuahua dogs, and old Chinese men with their long fingernails and baggy maroon sweaters. Some things never change, except Maggie is gone—she hooked up with a white chick in a pickup truck and took off for some pinche little town in Washington State. Come down to the Street and say hello to Louie; he's getting older, like me. You don't have to buy anything. I'll be out front—I have nothing better to do and no place else to go, and I'm happy to be that way. We can compare hand tattoos, if you like. Jappy Jaladays to you, esos.

Ry Cooder is a guitar player from Santa Monica, where he resides with his wife, Susan, and their cat, Pumpkin.