

## All Along the Hills

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We can still see coach's headlights climbing into the hills. The way they pulse through all that brush reminds me of the old lighthouses back home off the Florida Straits, gyrating and gyrating. I don't know why we stand looking so long, especially since it smells like rain. We should be building the tent. Maybe it's 'cause we know that once those lights blink off, then we'll really be on our own.

Dark clouds and chimney smoke sail overhead. All this nebula offers only small and occasional windows to the stars. They're so bright out here. In this slick range surrounded by gringos or rednecks or backwoods white folk or whatever savages coach said would lynch our Cuban-American assessor, we can hardly see each other. We're in a valley that is no more Georgia than it is one of the Carolinas. Ulysses, our team captain, twists on a portable lantern, unzips the tent bag, and dumps all the poles and nylons into the weeds. Then he orders us to get building. "Come on, you fat fucks," he shouts, which is a strange thing to say 'cause if anybody is heavy, it's him. Not that he looks grotesque. He's actually quite handsome, just heavy. The heavy weight, in fact. During season, he smiles and makes a spectacle when he drops so much weight because he can look down and see his little wrinkled wiener jiggling as he shakes his hips. When he does this in the locker room, the team cheers him on; they do not feel any shame in seeing him undressed, or in chasing one another around the showers with towels. They do not see how easily things can go sideways.

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I bet that Ulysses isn't too excited about camping with a bunch of JV wrestlers. He's done this whole team-building thing before. He was like me once: a rising sophomore, new to the sport. Clearly, he knows the drill. He takes out a Milky Way, Midnight Dark, bites off the wrapper, breaks off a piece.

"You have a chocolate bar," I say. "Holy shit. You got to share, man."

"Pass it around. Everyone gets a bite," he says, and hands it over. So, I take a bite, let the malt-nougat and dark chocolate dissolve on my tongue. Then I hand it over, reluctantly. It's pathetic, really, the way all of us are crooning over this chocolate bar, even as we kneel in the grass and dick around with tent poles. I'm probing my mouth with my tongue, seeking out stray deliciousness when Ulysses says, "Hey! Johnny, que pasa homeboy? Don't tell me you're allergic to chocolate too."

Johnny's our 103 pounder. I don't see him. It's because he's walked off. Rafa, our 187 pounder—a rising junior who's already taken a state championship—pops up beside us like he's a lookout. He peers into the valley, his hand as a visor keeping the moon out of his eyes, and he points to the woods with a pole. "Look! Dude's over there," he says. "You believe this guy?"

Then he shouts to Johnny, "Hey! Huevon! You got to help too."

"Huevon," Ulysses shouts. "Get over here." Then, because our captain has set the example, we all proceed to yell toward him too. It's like we're a bunch of ducks, quacking, "huevon," caught in this vicious "huevon" sequence. But you know what? Johnny doesn't acknowledge us, so we stop. And what I think, in that moment, is that there's hope. Ignoring the bullies really can work out.

I see Johnny sitting the grass, his tablet lighting up his whole face. He's so awkward, a pale Cubanito who keeps his head shaved; it makes him look like he's from another planet. He kind of is. Three years fresh off the boat, and he's got a face full of acne—pimples atop pimples. It's hard not to stare at the ooze or the deep scars or the white puss that bursts out and smears onto the mat.

From where I'm kneeling, the glow of the tablet seems to cast a halo over his egg-shaped head. Rafa kneels beside me, flips on his hoodie and says, "Why's that ref even on the team? Right?"

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It's always the tablet with Johnny. During season when we drop so much weight that focusing on anything becomes almost impossible, he manages to read. In study hour when most of us are sleeping so we don't think about the hunger creeping into our bones, he stares into that tablet like he's not even with us. He'll walk around school spitting into an old empty Gatorade bottle, posturing the tablet with his free hand. And during lunch when we wrap our bellies in garbage bags or Ziplocs or cellophane and sit out on the basketball courts baking in our sweats, trembling and eating ice cubs under the sun like a bunch of schizophrenic maniacs, Johnny lies on the court, his head on his backpack, and he reads, leisurely, like he could be on a beach somewhere, not starving.

Once, coach asked us to write down our goals and then share them. Most of us said that we wanted to win states, go undefeated all season, get some scholarship or something. Rafa said he wanted to be on a cereal box. I was getting ready to joke about getting to second base with the cheerleaders—I thought it'd get a good laugh—but Johnny spoke up first. He said that he wanted to get a good score on the PSAT by the end of the season. And because his English was poor, it sounded, to most of us, like he'd said, "I want to score well on the *pussy eighty*." We laughed. Even coach said, "You know we're a wrestling team, right?" But this stuck with me. I thought, at the time, getting a good score would be quite an accomplishment for him—English being his second language. But nobody saw it that way. That exam had nothing to do with the honor and glory of the sport. Rafa nudged me and said, "He's such an asshole. Sometimes I want to punch him in the face."

I feel sorry for Johnny because the guys really don't like him a whole lot, despite how talented he is as a wrestler. I don't know what training he did in Cuba, but he arrived in Miami skilled and ready for the mat. Coach went to great lengths to ensure he'd wrestle on our team. If we wanted to make it to regionals, we'd need a strong 103 pounder, so, we were all excited to have him. But somewhere along the way, a queer resentment grew, and I don't really understand where it came from. I've seen, in those moments when coach isn't in the locker room, how some of the wrestlers, Rafa included, will hold Johnny, pull down his shorts, and threaten to ice pick him—threaten to jam their fingers into him. This is where it always stops, though. With threats. And Johnny standing alone, pulling his shorts and underwear up, then returning to his table like nothing has happened. It's terrible being in that locker room, knowing that the team can suddenly turn on you, on anyone.

So, when coach said that he wanted to take the JV team into the mountains to weed out the sissies from the girls, Johnny stepped off the mat. He might have made it out of the practice room, but coach noticed and asked Rafa to drag him back. And it wouldn't have mattered anyway. It's not like any of us had a say in the matter. It was our parents who loved coach; they wanted us to be involved in the wrestling programs—to stay away from drugs and guns and gangs. We would bond. Become men. That's what they must have thought. Not that coach would leave us in a field with nothing but a few bananas and bottles of water. Nothing but a fishing rod, some tackle, and a tent.

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Eventually, we figure out how to thread the poles into the nylon sleeves, and it all starts looking like a tent. Thunder rumbles across the valley. We're tired. We'd got on the road just after 10am, and now this; the wind is really testing the integrity of our work. Nobody wants to be the person to say, "Look, guys. We've got to pull the stakes out and make sure the lines are more taut." I suppose, we all know we've done a half-baked job, so, when a hurricane-like gust manifests up on the hills—born for the sole purpose, it seems, of complicating our tent situation, we watch with concern. We see the wind shaking the tree branches violently, cascading down the hill and toward us. It crosses my mind that, perhaps, we should act. We should jump in the tent and anchor it down with our weight, but I only think these thoughts. Nobody takes any action. We just watch the gust slice through the valley, and when it arrives, our tent pops from the ground, then hovers like a child's kite and tumbles away.

It looks like it's running from us, zigzagging. It comes to an abrupt stop, only to lift off the ground yet again and tumble in an entirely different direction. None of us can anticipate its moves, so we have no choice but to run wildly toward it, wherever it lands. This hardly works. When the cloud cover obliterates all moonlight and the tent is lost, we understand, even though nobody really admits it, that we too are lost, enclosed by the hills and the clouds and the darkness and the very earth. The wind is cooler. It sprinkles, then rains. Ulysses shines his flashlight around, unsure how to proceed, and what we find, at that moment of great anxiety, is not the tent, but Johnny, sitting on a tree stump, the damn tablet lighting up his face. It appears he hasn't even motioned to help us.

Rafa says, "I'm going to smash his fucking tablet," and he proceeds to march in Johnny's direction. Ulysses follows along with a flashlight, and I'm not sure if he's following to stop Rafa or to watch the pounding. It's then that we catch a glimpse of the tent's reflective surface, caught in some branches and brambles. Ulysses shouts, "Everybody. We need to get ahold of it. Run!" So we do, but I do with some caution. Because I'm afraid that at any moment, it will tear loose and then we'll be searching again. With the gusts, the nylon expands and constrict. It looks like it's breathing. One gust tears it away from the brush, knocking me down into the mud face first, and it would have tumbled away, but Ulysses grabs it with his free hand. And that's how we manage to salvage it.

I have to admit: staking the tent under such conditions is glorious. It almost makes all the trouble worth it. We celebrate with shouts and high-fives and bro hugs. Ulysses squeezes me so tight. "You got mud on your face," he says, and he wipes some off and says, "Good job blocking." This praise, coming from the captain, makes me feel like I'm really part of the team. This is to say, spirits are high, but, as you've probably guessed by now, Johnny is having none of it. Where is he anyway? It's Ulysses who first alerts me to his absence with a nudge. "What's up with homeboy?"

"He's like that sometimes," I say. "We shouldn't bust his balls."

"It's going to rain," Rafa says.

"I'm sure he'll be right over," I say.

"Yo. Yo, Johnny boy. You going to sleep in the tent tonight or what?" Rafa yells.

In response, the screen goes dark.

"What?" Rafa says. "He thinks he's invisible now. I see you, freak. I see you right there."

"Give him some space," Ulysses says, shoving Rafa. "Let's finish setting up."

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After we load the tent with our bags and bodies, we rest. We lie there, in a tent built for three people, crowded with four. When the rain gets heavy and Johnny does peek in, we all scoot to make room for him. Even Rafa. But all Johnny does is toss his bags against the tent wall, then step out.

"Where the fuck is he going?" Rafa asks, loud enough to be heard.

Nobody responds. We listen to the rain and the thunder, expecting him to return, but he doesn't. "When his battery dies," Ulysses says, undressing to his camo boxers, "and he comes in here bored as hell, tell him he can sleep in the mud. Tell him to find his own shelter." The way he says it, I'm not sure Ulysses means it. He's frustrated, for sure. He lies and curls against his bag for sleep.

I close my eyes and try to doze off myself. I'm still hungry. And the tent smells like sweat and mud and bananas, but I must fall asleep at some point because I'm awoken late in the evening by hail, soft at first, but then vicious. In an instance, the canopy collapses over us, then rises. A helicopter passes over the valley, momentarily lighting up the tent with the beam of a searchlight.

Nobody is awake; Johnny is still missing, evident by the gap on the tent floor.

All that unused space is tempting, but I don't inch towards it, even if I want to spread out and get more comfortable. I listen to the hail beating against the tent, much softer now. I watch rain seep in through the tears in the nylon, only little drops here and there. The way the wind is whishing about us, it really does feel like I'm back in the Florida Straits, listening to the sea, lost. Ulysses settles, turns toward me. Now he's resting his head on my bare chest. I can feel his beard brushing against my skin, the warmth of his breath. I close my eyes again and pretend that I'm asleep, and I think of Johnny wandering the hills, looking among the trees for a place to charge his tablet. It seems too easy: an outlet on a tree: male parts into female—the glow of a tablet in the dark woods.

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I remember, the first time I saw Ulysses; we were serving detention in one portable structure of the many littering the high school's field. It smelled of mold, and I had the sense that if I ripped off the wood paneling, that's exactly what I'd find, loads of it blossoming on the insulation. Already, a bit of mold was showing itself in the form of a water stain seeping through the discolored modular ceiling. I was in detention that day for something I'd rather not talk about. What's important is that he was there, and that I was immensely interested in him in the same way that a cat eyes a new piece of furniture. I remember he smelled—or I should say reeked—of Cool Water cologne. One of his shoe laces was untied, and I thought it was so juvenile, almost charming for such a large man. He'd kick his feet back and forth and let that lace drag on the floor, which really bothered Mr. Phillips.

I hadn't joined the team yet, so I didn't know him that well. Sure, I'd seen Ulysses around the halls. Who could miss him? My first day at the school, it was he who opened the door ahead of me. He'd smiled and nodded in a friendly, bored kind of way, but I doubt he'd remember the incident.

In detention, he had a notebook out, and he kept drawing little pirate ships. Or he'd draw islands and maps where "x" marked the spot. I was so interested—and who wouldn't be under such circumstances. But I *really* was. Someone like Ulysses—I wouldn't have imagined this bend toward fantasy. As the clock pronounced each second, each minute, he kept working on these elaborate sketches, and I envied that he had something to keep him occupied. He was drawing mermaids and sea dragons and sunsets and pirates standing on schooners, but he must have felt me looking over his shoulder because he glanced back, and when we made eye contact, he closed the notebook. I thought, *Great. Now what do I do?* I wanted to see that notebook. I joined the team the next week.

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In the morning, I sneak away to piss and eat a chunk of bagel I've smuggled from home. It's too small to share, and even then, it's soggy and has some lint on it. Do I feel guilty, hiding something from the team? Maybe a little. When I return, everyone is just waking up. I worry that they'll smell the bagel on my breath. That happens to me sometimes—I get paranoid. But nobody is paying attention to me. Nobody is paying attention to anything, including Johnny who was gone all night.

The valley's in such a state, it looks like it rained mud. I scan the hills and see only trees and brush. No sign of streets or electrical poles or anything that might suggest civilization, except for what looks like a small aluminum building at the crest of one of those hills. But it's too far to get to, hungry as we all are. Now and then, hand gliders launch from this structure. They're mesmerizing. They weave through the sky in brilliant yellows and oranges, which give life to the morning sky.

Ulysses acknowledges Johnny's absence. "Anybody seen the little guy?"

We scan the tree line. Nothing.

"Maybe the gringos caught him and barbequed him whole."

"Don't even joke," Ulysses says.

"Maybe the aliens came back for him," Rafa says.

"Come on," Ulysses says. "Don't be so hard on the guy."

"Sure. Sure. But imagine a whole planet of Johnnys. Fuck!"

"He'll show up when he does," Ulysses says. Then he suggests that we go to the bridge with the one fishing rod coach provided to wash and fish. We passed the bridge when coach drove in; he'd said, at the time, it'd likely be where'd we'd hang out all the time. "Some good fishing in my day. What do you say, Ulysses? Good spot, huh?" To which he'd responded, "That's right. The spot."

But I don't want to walk through all this mud. A nice day like today, my idea of roughing it is sitting back and watching the hand gliders soar. But I'm not about to stay all by myself in gringo land. I've heard what those white folks do to people like us. Sure, it's all smiles and *how you do theres* and all that hick shit, but then you're getting comfortable and before you know it, their chasing you across some un-mowed field in their rusted pickups, big old confederate flags waving around. No thank you. So, I join my teammates, even if our shoes are sinking deep into those muddy paths.

Ulysses is still in his boxer shorts. Shirtless, with the morning sun beaming over him, he looks firm and gelatinous all at the same time. I don't know how he's not cold. The rest of us are still in sweats, our towels hanging from our necks, a change of clothing in hand. We stink real bad—sweat crusted over sweat. It probably didn't help that coach led a short practice session before we hit the road. We carry the kind of smell that gym uniforms get when they're kept in a locker for weeks and weeks. Even the bugs stay away. That's how bad it is. Rafa's holding the fishing rod and tackle box. Now and then, as we walk, he'll slap the back of our legs with the rod 'cause he's an ass hole. Nobody says anything about it. We know he's egging us on, and giving him attention makes it worse.

Ulysses scratches his butt, then nearly slips in some mud. He steadies himself by taking down Pedro, our super quiet and religious 156 pounder. Pedro gets up, wipes the mud across his body; he doesn't act upset in the least. We push forward, and on the way to the bridge, who do we run into, tablet under his arm, big old sandwich in hand? None other than Johnny. It's more of a sub than a sandwich. Looks like it could have been a twelve-inch; it's got lettuce and everything spilling out. I thought I'd smelled some vinaigrette, some red peppers, cheese. I thought I'd imagined it all.

"Do you see this?" Rafa asks. "Is that homeboy with a feast in hand?"

"It seems so," Ulysses says.

"Where'd you get that?" Rafa asks, poking Johnny in the chest.

Johnny takes a bite, then he tries to speak up. With all that bread and those bits of cold cuts rolling around in his mouth, coupled with his lousy English, we can't understand squat. In truth, I'm not listening to his words. I'm just watching him roll that food around in his mouth—such a little man, 103 pounds. He's not even half of Ulysses' size. And I'm thinking: greed. Yes. He's greedy.

Rafa rips the sandwich away from him, and I find that I'm not protesting. I know Rafa's actions are wrong, but what is Johnny thinking? Bringing all that food anywhere near a bunch of wrestlers trying to keep weight. Before Rafa can take a bite, Ulysses takes the sandwich, even if his hands are covered in mud, and he breaks the sub into pieces to be distributed equally among us.

And God, it's a good sandwich; even if its dripping in mayo and mustard. We stand there, eating our share, watching Rafa and Johnny push each other around, yelling all kinds of insults. Rafa, of course, is a bigger guy. Eventually, he loses his cool and pushes Johnny hard into the mud. Johnny's tablet slides out from his grip, but he's able to save it before it gets all water damaged.

"You going to tell us where you got this food from?" Rafa asks.

"El piso, coño. I found it."

"You found it? No," Rafa said. "You're lying."

"I found it. Comemierda. Shit eater!"

"Bullshit."

"Your mother," Johnny says.

"Even if you did," Ulysses says, "You weren't going to share?"

"No," he says, all matter of act. "This is America, no? Not Cuba."

To this, Ulysses seemed confused. "What about this being America?"

"Capitalismo, man! My money. My sandwich."

"I thought you found it," Ulysses says.

Rafa punches Johnny's gut, hard, and none of us do anything about it. Well, we eat. Johnny's on the ground, wheezing, and we stand around enjoying our share of the sandwich. I'm not usually like this. I know I should get up and check on the kid, but the sub tastes so good. The bread's nicely toasted, warm and crunchy, so we eat even as Johnny's continues wheezing, even as Rafa goes on and on about how, *This is a team! We're all brothers! We need to stick together! How can we win if we don't!*

"All right," Ulysses says, licking his fingers. "Enough already." He checks on Johnny, helps him up. Then we continue down the path to find the stream, and Johnny follows along. The guy seems pretty down in the dumps, so I fall back beside him and say, "Thanks for the sandwich," but he doesn't acknowledge me. He just powers up his tablet, and then he's lost in it, utterly absorbed, and I recall what Rafa always says: "He wrestles with us, but remember. He's *not* on our team."

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I remember that when I joined, coach made me try out. I didn't know I'd have to, and I didn't know I'd have to strip down in the locker room to weigh in. My weight class—something else I hadn't considered—was 145, even if I was weighing in at 149. Coach said I'd have to drop pounds. In any case, after I weighed in, coach led me and a few other students to a windowless room, painted gold and blue after the school colors and covered in wrestling mats. It was there that I paired up with another 145 pounder, also new to wrestling. We were asked to line up, shake hands, then wrestle, even if we didn't really know what we were doing. It was a mess. What did I know? I kept giving my opponent my back because I had no technique at all. He pinned me in 45 seconds, and coach, clearly unimpressed, invited me to try out again the following year. How then did I make the team? Well, Jaime, who'd won, didn't have the grades, so you could say they were stuck with me. None of that matters. On that day, when I walked out, Ulysses slapped my ass and said, "Better luck next time." I smiled and thanked him and walked out, acting like this was the most ordinary of exchanges, and later that night, as I was drifting off to bed, I swore that I could still feel the sting of his hand.

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We arrive at the stream. The water's so cold that there's fog coming off it. I wonder whether bathing is a good idea, but then Rafa jumps in, and then it becomes a game: *whoever doesn't jump in is a fag*. So we undress and ease into the water. Between trying not to step on any sharp pebbles and navigating the cold current, I'm hardly paying attention to Rafa's stupid game, until I see that Johnny hasn't joined us. I'd say for good reason. He has no towel. He didn't bring a change of clothing. He had no idea we'd be going to the stream to bathe. He's fully dressed, wanting no part in getting wet.

Rafa begins tossing pebbles, pronouncing each sentence with one. "Don't be a girl, Johnny boy. Get in the water. You smell like my father's farts." But this elicits no reaction, until one of the pebbles lands right on the screen of Johnny's tablet. Expensive as those things are, the sound makes me cringe. Rafa, sensing he's perhaps gone a bit too far, stops with the pebble throwing. And Johnny, our little 103 pounder, inspects his tablet, then stands over the stream, glowering at Rafa like he could incinerate the mother fucker with his eyes. It's a difficult and awkward moment.

Ulysses breaks the tension. He ducks into the stream and then explodes out of the water. He puts his arms around me, lets his feet rise in the current. He's very warm. I like this warmth. I'm the only thing now keeping him from drifting away. He squeezes my neck and says, "Johnny's hiding something from us. Don't you get that feeling? Like he's got a serious secret. What's his secret?"

I nod.

"Like where did he go last night?"

"Oh. Yeah," I say.

"Johnny," Ulysses yells. "What's your deal? Where'd you go last night?"

He returns to his tablet, says, "Nowhere."

"He's a liar," Rafa says. "He's a fucking liar. Aren't you, Johnny?"

Johnny steps back. "Don't start with the pebbles again."

"I bet he's a fucking fag. Johnny's a fag. Look. He's not in the water. You a fag, Johnny?"

This is cruel. I feel it in my bones. Rafa doesn't even know what he's saying—the pain that such a word carries. Pedro laughs. So does Ulysses, and I find that I'm complicit in this too. Johnny looks to me like I'll defend him or something, but I shrug, as if to say, "What? They're the animals."

Rafa notices my gesture—the slightest shrug. He seems confused. I could see the seed of an idea forming in that hard head of his. In truth, I'm overtaken by fear. I don't want to be like Johnny, so I shout out, in this grand performance, "Yeah! Don't be gay, Johnny." This pleases Rafa and the others. But Johnny shakes his head like he's disappointed in me. He returns to his tablet, to whatever it is he reads. The thing is, seeing him sitting there reading from the device, we all realize that the battery should really be dead by now. On the drive up, the only reason it didn't die was 'cause coach let him plug it in to the adapter, which is major bullshit because he not only didn't let us charge our phones, but he confiscated them when he dropped us off. Gave us a quarter and a dime and a card with this number on it. Said we could find a phone three miles east if anything crazy came up. Said Johnny could keep his tablet 'cause he's a "student-athlete," whatever that's supposed to mean.

"He's probably going to take off again tonight," Rafa says. "I want to know where he went."

"Why? Maybe he just wants some space," I say.

"Dude has no money," Rafa says, bobbing up and down. "I think he's up to no good."

"I doubt it," I say. "Johnny's so academic."

"What do you think, Pedro?" Rafa asks.

Pedro smiles. "I don't know guys," he says and laughs. "Maybe we can train instead."

"Okay? Look. We're following him then," Rafa says. "He's got to juice up somewhere."

"Sure. I got no plans later," Ulysses says. Then he counts to three and sinks into the water, letting the current take him down stream. I lean against the bank, feeling the water cool me off.

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All day, we take turns fishing and digging for bait. There are plenty of worms but hardly any fish. The berries we find in the vicinity look edible, but Ulysses isn't certain, so we resist the temptation. We eat the bananas coach provided. Drink some of the water. Near dusk, when we've nearly given up, Ulysses catches one fish—a trout. He almost loses it when he pulls the hook from its mouth and raises it to celebrate. It slips from his hands and bounces around the rocks and mud. We chase it, trying to step on it, stop it before it plops back into the water. Rafa finally grabs it with my shirt and we all cheer, except for Johnny. And I envy that about Johnny because what I really want to do is walk over to Rafa and say, "Did you have to use my shirt, ass hole." But I don't. I'm afraid of him.

We return to camp. With some persistence, Ulysses gets a fire going. He guts and scales the fish, drives a stick through its eye and holds it over the fire, turning it now and then. Watching it blacken, we begin to realize that this won't be enough to satisfy us. Somehow it looked larger near the creek. "What's the point of all of this?" I ask. "Sending us out here? Leaving us like this?"

Rafa shoves me. "Pondering life? What's the point of anything?"

"It makes you tough," Ulysses says. "Coach knows what he's doing. Months from now, when we're on the mat, fighting a pin, you'll remember all of this. And you won't give up. And years from now. Long after you graduate. You'll be dealing with something tough, and you won't give up."

"I never thought of that," Rafa says.

"Coach is wise."

Now the smell of the fish is overwhelming. My stomach is rumbling. Ulysses breaks off pieces and distributes them. The meat is hot, but I'm excited to hold it. I savor it, separating spines with my tongue and spitting them out. We offer some to Johnny, who has not walked away for once. I give him credit. He's actually making an effort. He politely declines. "No. Gracias."

"What do you mean, 'No. Gracias'? Eat. You have to," Ulysses says.

Johnny shakes his head, smiles.

"What are you smiling about?" Rafa takes some of the meat from Ulysses and presses it to Johnny's mouth. He grinds the meat into his face. "Eat," he says. "Eat."

Johnny falls back into the mud. He stands, steps away from the fire and walks away.

"That was a bit much, don't you think?" I say.

"Much?" Ulysses asks. "That's the point of this. It's supposed to be too much. We're supposed to be so hungry, tired, anxious that when coach rolls around on Sunday morning, we're willing to do anything for a fucking carrot. Too many sensitive people in the world these days."

"But if he doesn't want to eat, then he doesn't want to eat," I say. "We have to respect that."

"No. You're wrong," Rafa says. "He's mocking us. Coming out with that sub, knowing how hungry we'd be. Doesn't even pretend to want to share how he got it. Now he won't eat our catch!"

"I don't know," I say.

"You don't know whether I'm right, or you don't know shit?"

"Whether you're right, I guess."

"I thought you were smarter than that," Rafa says.

It's dark now. The last of the sun is slipping behind the hills. Ulysses rekindles the fire, stirs up the fish bones in it. He puts on a shirt 'cause of the bugs. Then we scan the valley, unsure of Johnny's whereabouts. When we've just about given up, the screen to his tablet lights up in the distance. "Motherfucker," Rafa says. "He'd rather read all weekend then hang out with us." He swallows his portion of fish, stands, and marches off in Johnny's direction. "Come on, y'all."

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Ulysses asks. "Come on, guys."

I'm still sitting, sucking fish grease off my fingers, and they're all marching out towards the hills. Even Pedro. At first I don't plan on joining them. I look for bits of discarded fish around the fire. I thrust the fish head out of the tinder and drink the juices, even while the head burns my fingers. But then I hear a radio come on in the distance, blaring "Old Country Road," and I get this image of old white dudes sitting around a fire, cowboy hats and all, and I run off with the others.

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Johnny's crossing the bridge when we catch up, or so it appears to be him. The sun has set, and it's hard to see much of anything. but he stops and the tablet lights up, and then we're certain it's him.

"Guys," I whisper. "Don't you think this is getting a little out of control?"

At this, even Pedro laughs. "Come on, dude. The guy's asking for it."

"Asking for what, exactly?"

Rafa kneels by me, puts his hand on my shoulder, and says, "We're just following, okay."

"Okay."

"I mean, aren't you curious?" Rafa asks.

"Yes. Yes. I am."

"Then, let's go," Rafa says, proceeding. "He's on the move."

We follow Johnny over the bridge and onto a gravel road, and we walk for a long time, passing a few old mailboxes and garbage bins along the way. The whole time, Johnny's just walking straight, not like someone lost or exploring, but like someone certain of their destination. And the further we walk, the more out of sorts I feel. We encounter no cars; no people; no animals. The road might as well cut through some wasteland. The only life we see is the glow of some porch lights up ahead. It's a small cabin with a wide driveway and an exposed stone chimney. We can smell the



chimney smoke now, strong and fragrant. Light is spilling out towards us, casting the trees long and thin. I'm half-expecting to find the traditional confederate flag, the customary tree with the limb large enough to hold a man's weight, the trio of men in camo sitting on the porch, cleaning their guns. But I don't see any of that, and what I do encounter surprises me. Near the road, there's a small plaster grotto with a replica of the Virgin Mary holding her baby. Here, Johnny does pause. He kneels before the statue, sets his tablet down, and produces the sign of the cross. After a prayer, he proceeds further along. "Would you believe that?" Rafa asks. "The little fucker believes in Jesus."

"And?" Pedro says.

Once we're certain that Johnny has moved up ahead, we approach the altar. There are devotionals surrounding the effigy, a loaf of rotting bread, pennies submerged in flooded trays. It all smells of old, damp cigars. Etched into the plaster are names: Arturo, Jaime, Jessenia. The virgin, herself, is bleached white, though it's clear that she must have been painted at one point from some of the light blue cracks on her gown. I'm used to seeing the grotto adorned with starfish and lilies, not this way with ribbons and pins and dead flowers. "Look at this shit," Rafa says, kicking pebbles toward the altar. "I don't know how, but we walked through the woods and found Hialeah."

"Be respectful," Ulysses says, pausing for a moment. He kneels, bows his head, so I kneel too, only I don't pray. I can't. For one thing, I keep hearing Rafa pacing around behind me, and so I'm worried he's going to do something stupid, like shove my face into the statue. I've seen him do shit like that before. I've seen him, in the lunchroom, shove some kid's face into a slice of pizza. In addition to that there's feeling that I'm getting, like my stomach is digesting itself. I'm so fucking hungry. The fish helped, but if I don't eat something soon, I don't know what'll happen. Even now, looking down at the bread all rotten with green gunk—I want to bite it. I know better, but I want to.

#

When I joined the wrestling team, my father was so proud. I was too. He took me out to lunch one afternoon—just the two of us—and he told me stories from Cuba when he used to wrestle. I ordered a mahi mahi sandwich, and he ordered a sea food paste. Even though we were sitting out there at some sea food restaurant, waiting for our meals, he insisted on showing me some of the moves right. I'm sure the patrons must have gotten their money's worth, watching him pull half nelsons and arm bars and single leg takedown on me, right by the table. Still, it was nice to see him light up that way, and when the food arrived, he mellowed out a bit, and he said something that has stuck with me: "Now that you're on the team, you're really a man." I guess it was meant as a compliment, but it made me wonder: *did he think I was any less of a man before?* Look. I get it. My father grew up in Havana during a time when certain kinds of soft men were rounded up and put in prisons, deemed mentally unstable. He'd made his position known. Once, when I was quite young and playing with my sister's dolls, he'd ripped them away from my hands, and he'd said, "No boy of mine will play with dolls." It seemed extreme. As a child, I didn't understand it, but I felt the shame. For some time after, I thought of him as nothing more than another conservative, but now I wonder, was it his love that he was expressing, his fear of what could happen to me if I didn't grow up to become a strong man. I don't know, but what I do know is that at the fish restaurant, he seemed free of some anxiety; it was as if my relationship with him was, just now, really beginning. When my sandwich arrived, I didn't touch it. I wasn't hungry, or, rather, I wasn't hungry any longer.

#

In stopping to admire the altar, we lose Johnny, so we hurry up along on the road, and after some time we see an old gas station. I'm not sure it's functional. It seems, in my estimation, like it's been reclaimed by the woods. The pumps are busted. Some nozzles are wrapped in plastic. There's a small pine tree growing from one of them. And there's a sign on the ground that reads, "Future site of Texaco Gasoline," but the sign looks really dated. The convenience store's front doors are secured with chain and padlock, and the large glass pane surrounding the doors is partly shattered, freshly

shattered, it seems. I'm sure we would have kept walking along the path, but then we see the glow of the tablet inside the store. Rafa grabs my shoulder and says, "Look! The mother fucker's in there."

"I'm not going in there," I say.

"Oh, you're not," Rafa says, like he plans on making me.

"Why's he here?" Pedro asks. "This is weird, guys."

"Because," Rafa says. "He'd rather hang out in this shithole than with us?"

"So now what?" I ask. "Are we satisfied? Can we get out of here now?"

"Dang!" Ulysses says. "I feel like I'm in one of those zombie shows. We should check the store to see if there's any canned food or anything, really. Maybe we'll find some old beer."

Ulysses is the first to step through the glass threshold. Once he's in, he helps us get through. Inside, it smells like mold and oil. Ceiling tiles are swollen and dripping. The shelves, unfortunately, are cleared. It's all dark except for the glow in the back corner. And there's this beeping sound—beeps every few seconds. "Johnny," Rafa yells. "We know you're in here. Come out of hiding?"

The glow of the tablet goes dark. Ulysses gestures toward the shelves, and we split up, moving down each aisle slowly. It occurs to me, then, that each of us are wandering the store for very different reasons. Rafa first checks the cashier's box. I hear him messing with the register, but he must find nothing because all he does is take an old metal garbage bin and beam it at the partially shattered glass. Glass cascades on the floor. "Hey," Ulysses shouts. "We don't need to be making so much noise, or you want to get caught?" At this, Rafa says, "Don't be paranoid. Nobody's coming."

I check the bathroom, half-hoping I'll find a few rolls of toilet paper or some soap—all things I did not bring along on the trip. When I open the door, the light turns on automatically. There must be a sensor, but I'm surprised by the light. I didn't think such an old place would have electricity. But there's nothing in the bathroom, just tons of cobwebs and a broken toilet. "Guys," I say. "I think this place is connected to the grid. Look!" I prop the door open so we could see better.

Pedro and Ulysses search the freezer, but they find nothing but empty milk crates and a dozen or so bottle caps. And once we're certain there's nothing useful in the station, I suggest, "Maybe Johnny's not actually here. Maybe he went elsewhere." The truth is, though, I know he's there. Because while Rafa moves up and down the aisles, kicking at the displays and making a real raucous, I glimpse the cord of Johnny's charger. It's plugged into the wall, and following it, I could see where Johnny is hiding—behind a shelf that's been pressed up against one of the walls.

And maybe we would have moved along further that night, but then Pedro finds the cord. "Look guys," he says, lifting it up. Rafa comes running over, and he follows the cord to the shelf. Then Rafa and Pedro flip it over, violently, revealing Johnny. He's lying there on the floor, wrapped in a blanket he got from God knows where. He's covering his body, anticipating a beating. Rafa kneels by his face and says, "Are we really that bad? You have to hide here like a fucking rat?"

"Guys," I say. "I think he just comes here's to charge his tablet. It's not like that."

Johnny nods, shows us the cord.

"Bullshit," Rafa shouts.

"Guys," he says. "I got to study. It's nothing personal."

"Study, huh?" Rafa says and reaches for it. "Let me see that."

Johnny recoils, holds his tablet closer, so Rafa kicks him and then rips it out of his grip. He kicks him hard, and now Johnny is wheezing again, his cheek flat against the station's flooring. I want to kneel beside him and check to see if he's all right, but everyone's in the way, and Rafa making a real show of it all. He's looking through the tablet and laughing and laughing, and Ulysses and Pedro are piling up beside him, saying, "Let me see. Let me see it too," But Rafa doesn't let them. Not at first. He's laughing and acting cryptic, and he says, "You don't want to see. Trust me."

"Come on," Ulysses says.

"This ref said he was reading. Want to see what he was reading just now?" Rafa shows us the screen. There's a picture of a dark-haired woman, her lips plump, red, her breasts firm, leathery, her nipples dark irregular ovals, one pierced. She's pushing her chest out, leaning against a wall. In the background, there's a vast ocean, some palm trees. She's muscular. Her abs are chiseled. There are veins running down her forearms, and she's holding her flaccid junk in her meaty hands. "Damn," Ulysses says, "I think I'm going to start reading too." He says this before he's processed the whole photo. Then he notices it—the hood drooping over the penis, and he's really dramatic about it. He punches the shelving and everything. "Fuck! That's some sick shit. Why you set me up, Rafa?"

Rafa's having a good old time. "Something you haven't told us, Captain? You into this like Johnny here? You can look at the picture longer if you'd like," he says, handing over the tablet. "Look, I can even zoom in if you want a closer look." And Rafa does zoom in. He shoves the tablet in all our faces, and Ulysses just keeps saying, "Fuck. I was looking at the tits. Turn that shit off."

Now, in all the commotion, Johnny is sitting up. His sweater is caked in mud. He's tense. He seems so delicate under his blanket. The guys are all caught up with the tablet; they've left him with an opening. He kneels, then he darts toward the door, only Rafa trips him before he could get away. Johnny tumbles into more of the shelving. "We're in the middle of nowhere," Rafa says, standing over him. "Where does this guy think he can run off to? More importantly," he continues, "we have something we're going to have to deal with as a team. How do we kick the fag out of our 103?"

"Stop," Johnny says, standing up. "This is a misunderstanding."

"Of course," Rafa says. "Just like you found that sandwich this morning."

#

Rafa drags Johnny out onto the road, pulling him over the broken glass and the pavement. At first Johnny keeps trying to stand and run off, but between Rafa and Ulysses and Pedro, he can't get away; they keep pushing him toward the camp, and this continues until Johnny seems exhausted, at which point he just lets us shove him down the road. Sure, there are times when Johnny suddenly springs to life with newfound energy and tries to run away, but there's no escaping.

Occasionally, Rafa messes with the tablet, pulling up new tabs, new photos, showing off every penis he finds. But there's this one photo. Real fucked up. Rafa comes across it was we're passing the altar. It's in black and white. At first it looks like shoes and belts and shirts and all kinds of discolored clothing, but when I look closer, it's bodies. Human bodies. They're thin and frail, dead-looking, and piled atop each other. I don't know for certain, but I understand the photo to be of a death camp. "I don't find this even a little sexy," Rafa says. "What's this all about, Johnny?"

And with the question posed, Johnny throws himself before the altar of the virgin. He lands on his knees, displacing many of the devotionals. He puts his arms up and says, "Por Dios. Déjame."

Rafa and Pedro grab his legs and drag him back onto the street. Johnny's digging his fingers into the ground, and, in the process, the virgin tumbles onto the road and shatter. We're getting ready to lift him up and continue walking down the road when we notice a figure standing at one of the cabin's window. The lights on the porch flip on and off and on again. "We got to dip," Rafa says.

Ulysses tugs at him to come along, but it's here that Johnny makes his stand. He drives into Ulysses with all his might—junior varsity 103 pounder against our varsity heavy weight—and to our surprise, Ulysses tumbles to the ground. Then Johnny mounts him and proceeds to pummel his face. It takes a moment for Ulysses to gain his bearings, and when he does, he swats Johnny off.

"Give it me!" Johnny shouts, pointing toward the tablet.

"This?" Rafa asks. Then he smashes it on the floor.

"Cabron! Why'd you do that?"

"Guys," I say. "No more of this. It's out of control." Nobody hears me, so I say it louder, this time standing between Johnny and the others. It feels right, standing up for my teammate. I look over to Johnny as if to say, *I've got your back. I'll help you, okay?* But he's not responsive. He's just

angry, and he comes at me, and punches me right in the gut, and he shouts, "Fuck all of you." And with that, he walks away. He doesn't run. He just walks off into the dark, leaving his broken tablet behind. I like to think that he got away because everyone was laughing at me for getting punched.

#

When we arrive in the valley, short one teammate, the fire is burnt out. We sit around it anyway. Red and blue lights move through the hills; the absence of their siren is eerie. I keep thinking about what coach said and about our Cuban-American asses getting lynched. Even though Johnny hit me, I worry about him out there. I worry about us too: "You think the police are looking for us?" I ask.

"For what?" Rafa asks.

"For vandalism. For fighting."

"Nah. You think police really care about those things?"

Ulysses is pouring water over a cut on his knee. I take out some tissues from my bag and help him clean up the blood. He rubs his hand through his hair, exhales. "I don't know. As far as I'm concerned, if anybody asks, we didn't do anything. We're just wrestlers on a camping trip."

Rafa's going through the tablet, giggling to himself. Even though he smashed the screen, it still powers on. Now there are fragments of images, bodies shattered, a hybrid of parts. He seems fascinated by this. He's such a child. He mouths: "palm trees, boobs, words, hair, colors, numbers."

"Don't you think you should shut that off?" I say.

"True. Shut it down," Ulysses says. "They'll see it."

So Rafa does. He sits next to Pedro, puts his arm around him and says, "You gay too?"

"Don't touch me, man!"

"Who do you think is the cutest?" Rafa asks, clearly just egging him on.

Now, the police lights are at the base of the hill—high-powered lights that blast onto the valley. They must be looking for us. I've got my hand on Ulysses thigh, cleaning up all the blood that's dripping down. I rub deeper on his thigh, and he shudders, but then he relaxes a bit. He's looking at me, watching me clean the blood that's dripping now into his shorts. I want him to know what's going through my mind. The way he avoids my gaze while also looking at me, gives me this feeling that he knows. I'm not sure. Not at all. I want to feel him out so I say, "'X' marks the spot."

"What?"

"The maps. The treasure maps. I saw you drawing them in detention."

"Oh," he says. "I love that shit. Pirates and all that. You like pirates too?"

"Sure. But let me get this straight. Wrestling is not your life."

"It's my life," he says. "During season."

He smiles. I look at the Kleenex now. It's all red. He's hardly bleeding anymore. I pour some more water over his knee, pat his leg. I don't know what to say next. "Thanks," he says and smiles.

This means something. Or maybe it doesn't. I'm terrible at reading these situations. I touch his thigh again. Then the beam finds us, and we separate. It lingers there for a moment. Rafa waves, gives a thumbs up and smiles. We all wave. We can't see who's shining it, and we're not sure what kind of trouble we're in. A voice shouts, "You boys seen some Mexicans running around these parts?" We say that we haven't, and to our relief, the beam moves on, scanning the valley, gyrating.