

## Never Through Miami

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His first time in Miami International Airport, Palacio was dazzled. How do I know? Coño! Because that's how I felt when I arrived at eternity ago. I was eighteen and standing in this long terminal of waiting and cancelled flights and indecipherable announcements and food—oh God, food! —the whole corridor fragrant with frying oil, salt, so much grease I felt full just breathing. Back then, it was easy for me to break my visa and seek asylum. My parents were already dead—or at least those Castro sympathizers were dead to me. I arrived in 1993, the peak of the special period. For God's sake, the pretzels I'd been given on the plane were the most nutritious thing I'd eaten in three days.

Enough about me. Palacio! He was a different kind of Cuban all-together. Immigration officers in Havana's José Martí Airport must have been completely befuddled by him. Imagine being a fly on the wall in that interrogation room and seeing those officer's faces when Palacio answered, "Why are you travelling to the US?" with "Amor, man! Love. I'm going to visit mi jeva, hermano."

If I'd said something like that when I got here twenty-five years ago, the officers would have dragged me to a windowless room and beat the shit out of me. Even in 2018, during Palacio's journey, it was a miracle the officers let him leave the island. They must have recognizes something dumb or true in Palacio, but he must have perplexed them nonetheless. Because he could afford airfare. He was a black tour guide and liaison for American tourist companies—a steward for Obama-era policy. He was an anomaly: a Cuban under the Revolution, earning a living wage—an Afro-Cuban with mobility and access and with no desire whatsoever to leave his family or his beloved country for the capitalismo of the United States. I didn't know young people like Palacio existed, who'd opt to stay in Cuba, to build a life there shuttling the wealthy from site to site.

How he must have looked forward to that week in LA. What would he do? I don't know. Some people believed he was going to propose to his girl—sweep her off her feet and bring her back to the island. But Palacio was to suave for that. I thought he was going to spend the entirety of his vacation in his girl's bungalow, lie naked under the AC, feeling the cold upon their sweat. Afterward, they'd walk to McDonald's, share fries, eat a quarter pounder each—consume enough calories to ravage each other again. I could live a lifetime like that. Because when you love someone, you don't need much. You don't even need the person to love you back. Everything in the world is an extension of your lover: the ginormous and lush cosmetic ads affixed to the airport walls, the colorful vending machines, interfaces blinking, beckoning you to reach out and buy something. I know this feeling because that's how I still feel toward Madely today, even if we've long split up, even if she is a criminal, even if I am in some new relationship—some glorified prison cell.

Palacio—when he arrived, he must have been elated. On tape, he seemed a speck of glee fluttering about the arrivals, happy to be in circulation, his only thought: to make his connection. He was anyone, no one, flaunting his mobility and confidence. Then, what can I say? he approached our Delta help desk in Concourse A and met my ex, Madely, and this is where our worlds converged.

#

I met Madely at Delta. We went through customer service training together in '99. I remember that I instantly disliked her hair—cherry-red, frazzled, curly, and spilling onto her shoulders—it was too loud for me, too much for 8 a.m. in some moldy office building. She wore something o vanilla and musk, and she'd sit next to me so that I'd have to inhale her all day—an invasive scent that made me feel like someone had flayed me entirely and replaced my skin with polyester. We never really touched, except when she'd put her hand on my thigh to get my attention, and I'd put my hand on hers and peel her fingers off, and whisper, "Coño, Madely. ¿Que's eso? I'm trying to pay attention."

While our instructor led class, she'd lean into me and whisper nothings: how bored she was; if she could see my notes; and she'd criticize Delta's customer service approach—always in a Spanish that was reffier and more exaggerated than I felt comfortable with. There I was, studying like my life depended on it, and Madely didn't raise her pencil once. She sat back, acting like the job didn't matter, trying only to set up a date with me. Or she'd see me writing vigorously, and she'd pull the pencil out of my hand and say, "Easy there, compadre." Because that's another thing. This woman, who'd left Cuba and her parents at just seven years old, who hated Cuban and who spoke English very well, who was raised in the US by her late uncle, yes, this woman acted like she was the most Cuban fucking spokesperson on the planet. And you know what? I think she might have been.

When it came time to take our final exam—when we each had to sit up front with the instructor and take turns demonstrating our customer service skills to an actress, a mean old white lady intent on ruining our day—it was Madely who outshone us all. I'll never forget; the actress slapped the table, yelled, "I paid \$900! For this ticket! And you're telling me! My flight has been cancelled!" With each pause in her statement, she'd slap the table again. It was brutal to watch.

Madely didn't even attempt the script. She simply sat up and said, "¡Mira, chica! You think it's okay to yell at people? My uncle who raised me, God bless his soul, he never yelled at me, and what gives you the right? What'd I do to you, huh? Calmate, coño, y help me help you, gringa."

The actress was dumbfounded. Maybe it's because she didn't speak Spanish. Who knows? She'd probably seen Madely—that frazzled hair and those wild hoop earrings—and she'd made some kind of judgement, like it was okay to talk to her that way. Like she an animal or something. The actress sat down, smiled wide, almost embarrassed, and said, "You're right. I'm sorry. You're so damn convincing! Isn't she great everyone? Let's give her a round of applause. Madely, right? Madely, the natural persuader. This is going places. You all hear that. Learn from her while you can."

After training, I didn't really hang out with Madely again. That's how it is sometimes—it takes years for you to realize who the most important person in your life is. We worked different corners of that massive airport, so when we did run into one another, it was in passing. We were busy people. Life moved on. Then in 2011 I was promoted to manager and, just like that, I was thrust back into Madely's life. You see, I was assigned to Concourse A—her turf. It was I, in the end, who had climbed the corporate ladder. Madely was my subordinate, and I felt underqualified.

It's no secret. Despite her reputation, I didn't think much of her abilities or her work ethic. She'd bypass rules or pretend that certain policies didn't apply to her. Here was this woman who thought she was above protocol, a woman who I'd seen blow up on customers who, sure, deserved it—so many of them do. But I feared that she'd let me have it one day too, and the last thing I wanted was Madely, Category 5, barreling down on me. It was clear. I couldn't manage her.

This is all to say that I did the best I could to stay out of Madely's war path, to be distant, to put my hand on hers and peel her fingers off when she'd grab my thigh and apply pressure.

Then, about five years ago, I was helping my tia-abuela, Nana, pick up essentials at Publix, and who did we run into, strutting in her Delta uniform like she was the fucking Gestapo, out for an errand? Madely, thick, voluptuous, filled in ways that made it uncomfortable to be around her—hair just as cherry-red and crazy as the day I met her. I swear, we were right next to the produce section, so far removed from her location, and, even then, I thought I smelled that vanilla musk. It was unbearable how much Madely got under my skin—Madely, holding a can of frijoles and reading the nutritional label like she really care about the sodium levels or the sugar, nails long, pink.

Seeing her far off, I panicked and backed up. I turned the cart around, but poor Nana; she was so confused by my erratic movements. We were dancing, us and the cart, and when I'd finally directed us to an escape, just past the stacked melons, Nana, dazed by our twirling, tripped over.

The way she fell, it reminded me of the first time I went to IHOP, and I was trying to pour that thick pancake syrup out, but the liquid just wouldn't drop. I didn't act as fast as I should have. I just watched, incredulous and a little distracted. It was Madely who dropped her can of frijoles and ran over like some Super Mujer, some new Latina Marvel comics character, and caught her. What can I say? She's good at what she does—the protector, the fist. But that didn't mean Nana needed to invite her over for dinner, nudging me the whole time as if to say, "Mira, Xavier, she's tremendo mujer. Don't be a pendejo. Ask her out. Give me bisnietos." And I have to admit that when she came over for dinner, I despised her still, her vanilla musk especially, until some drinks later. Nana left us out on the lanai, and I started getting this feeling, this, I don't know, and Madely lifted her shirt, just beside her belly button, revealing her pudgy softness, her happy trail. She took my hand, my fingers, and led me to a scar, a little smile. It was beautiful, that cut. "What happened there?"

"Ectopic pregnancy," she said. "I was once a mother."

With those words, she kissed my neck and fondled my breast through my shirt like I was the chick. It was nice when she took control, made me feel like a thing she could put her nails into. Because I could go limp, relax. I could swirl that strange word around in my mouth, *ectopic*, and feel, for a moment, warm and lodged against her and forgetful of any resistance I'd ever harbored for her.

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On March 4th, 2019, Detective Laura Machado found me in Concourse A. It was one of those loud oppressive days at MIA. Storms along the East Coast had crippled the sky, causing delays and cancellations. But what really matters—and what you must understand at this point—is that Madely and I had broken up. To say we'd broken up is a little disingenuous. We'd never officially been together. Everything after that night at Nana's had been so casual, yet it still felt like I'd been dumped, badly, and there I was, back at work, expected to still function normally as her supervisor, expected not to take note or become jealous of her fleeting love interests. Let's just say, I didn't handle this new phase in our relationship well. Something had happened. A flashpoint. I might have yelled at her in front of everyone, or even called her a dirty slut in front of a customer. All week, I'd been expecting a call from corporate. I couldn't sleep because I thought I was going to lose my job.

This is why when I noticed a woman in a suit watching me, I was afraid that Madely had revealed the scope of our relationship to headquarters. I was convinced this woman was there to fire me. She was so casual-looking, leaning against a super-sized wall banner advertising the Florida Keys—a picture of a pristine beach and a lone bikini top soaking in the surf. She wore a tight black suit, dark panty hose, dark pumps. She was gorgeous, like an even more feminine Leonardo DiCaprio from his *Titanic* days, only less blond, less pale, with longer hair and pencil-thin lips. From my vantage point, across the concourse, it seemed as though she was studying me, notepad in hand.

I sidled up beside my subordinates, all deep in the throes of their customer service arguments, and whispered, "Have you seen that woman before? Is she corporate?" Nobody knew. I

was so concerned by this woman's presence that even customers began to take note—all those customers standing in line, without seats on planes, displaced and miles from home, all looking over their shoulder, trying to figure out who was making me so nervous. And when some lady in a wheelchair made a beeline for our desk, a small portable kennel in her hands—probably another dead pet or service animal, claimed by an overhead bin—I thought I'd lost my job for sure. But this woman didn't care about our daily operations. She hardly hesitated when the customer pulled a stiff kitten out from the kennel. I know because that was the moment she approached me, flashed her badge, and rescued me from my work. She introduced herself as a detective for Miami and asked if she could take a look at our surveillance footage, specifically, the tapes for the morning of September 11th, 2008. She's said something about a roster, though in my nervousness, I'd heard restroom, so I led her to the public bathroom—the one right by the Starbucks. She was confused, but went along anyway. I can only imagine what she expected to find as she turned the tiled corner.

"In here?" she asked.

"Yes. In there."

Well, it didn't take her long to realize there were no surveillance tapes in the women's restroom. When she came out, she was annoyed, through she'd clearly taken the opportunity to freshen up. She pulled out a warrant and everything. I apologized for the miscommunication and complied with her request, of course. Rather than manning the customer service desk, I, gladly, stepped away and spent the better part of a day watching those tapes with the detective. I was her little helper—an expert, praised for my ability to offer necessary background and context.

Madely was in the footage. When she'd look at the camera, I'd get this feeling—like she was the one watching us. At precisely 10:37 a.m. on the tapes, I observed some black dude take his place in the customer service line, roller-bag in tow. "There. That's him! Palacio!" the detective said, reaching for nothing on the table, her motion suggesting she might have expected a bowl of popcorn. She elbowed me in the gut, laughed. "Sorry. What can you tell me about this guy?"

Palacio looked like someone used to making a line, and I would know from my days collecting my parents' rations in Havana. God! Americans don't know it is, really, to make a line. There were other indications that he was Cubano. He wore dark blue jeans, a white polo, collar up, but all in a style that we hadn't seen in the US in over a decade. He sported an afro, taped-up, soup bowl style. He had excellent posture, and when he glanced back (at what, I don't know) I saw his face—un papi chulo, with full lips, supple. He had chiseled features, and he was scruffy in ways that all those young Miami Cuban Americans haven't learned to embrace. I was jealous. This young and attractive man was so engaged with Madely, so wound up in conversation, that I turned to the detective myself, and I thought to ask, "And how about you? What can you tell me?" But I didn't.

"Well?" the detective asked.

In the footage, he gestured to his ticket, and I knew he was asking about his gate. It had been changed, and he was certainly lost. Then it happened. He pulled out his Cuban passport and handed it to Madely. They leaned into one another, exchanged whispers. I wish we had the audio!

Madely had no reason to ask for a customer's passport. She wasn't an immigration officer or a boarding agent. "What is she doing?" I asked. Then, as if this were occurring in real time, and as if Madely knew that I was watching her, she slipped his passport into her bra, that blue Cuban booklet snuggled up against her breast in ways she'd never let me. Palacio looked like he might reach into her shirt to retrieve it, but he hesitated. Of course he did. And that's when Madely took his hand and walked him off the frame.

"Wait! What?" I shouted.

"Palacio Osha Hernan has been missing for about a month."

"Missing? How so?"

"This video makes the woman a prime suspect in his abduction."

"No," I said. "Madely? Yeah, right."

"What is Madely's last name?"

"Sanchez."

"Did she work the remainder of that shift?"

I checked my records. On the day in question, she'd clocked out early. I didn't remember approving that. I thought, *Slut! What a bitch! Cunt! Whore! Fucking a perfect stranger!* I was so angry, I wanted to call her right then and there and let her have it. "Xavier," said Machado. "Calm down. Can you give me her schedule this week? Her address? Her phone number?"

I wrote this all down on the back of my business card and handed it to the detective.

Machado thanked me, kissed my cheek. I know. I know. This seems odd, but it isn't entirely uncustomary in a place like Miami. I didn't think much of it. Or later, when before leaving, Machado turned and asked, "You're not going to tell her we're onto her, are you?" The way she said it, I felt like she knew that I had shared something deep and private with Madely. Detectives, I imagined, could sense such things. Somewhere, in our conversation, I had betrayed myself. I knew it.

"Why do you think I'd do that? Do I seek like that kind of person?"

"I don't know you," she said. "But don't." And she ran off, phone already in hand.

Are you surprised, then, that I texted Madely immediately? *Don't come into work!! Police!*

The least Madely could have done was respond with a mere *Thanks! :)*

No. Madely didn't even do that. Didn't even respond when I texted, *New boy toy, huh?*

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Why Madely seduced him? I've had to create my own theories. I think she must have detected something in his Spanish—a dialect picked apart by a life in Regla, a decade collaborating with the celebrated hip-hop trio Protagonismo (not that he contributed to the song writing). No. Palacio was all for show, the sexy one, shirtless, slick, obsidian, dancing in the background, the bulge in his shorts swaying, swelling to inhuman proportions. Of course Madely took an interest in him). His speech must have sounded familiar but not, Cuban but in a register embargoed by time and place, ajiacoed in a pressure cooker in the Afro-Cuban community overlooking Havana and its bay—the same community that Madely's own family hailed from. I think she wanted to save him because she'd lost so much: not just the promise of motherhood, but her parents, her uncle, and me.

People that don't live in Miami don't understand the Cuban fervor in the Metropolis by the sea—the way those Cubans can be so righteous, brimming with the desire and intensity to save every last marielito from Castrolandia. Madely must have seen Palacio's passport, and she must have assumed he needed asylum, required it even if he insisted otherwise. She must have thought herself a martyr, offering up the kingdom of her body for his salvation. And Palacio, how could he not be attracted to Madely? Who wouldn't wink (wink wink) and follow her out of the airport?

Mira. I know Madely, like, really good. I get it. We didn't really date, not in any traditional sense. We were something beyond a relationship, and always in her clean-smelling home near Kendall, and me, learning things about myself, things I wouldn't have admitted to anyone a few years ago. Like the submissive impulses I'd get when I was near her. There. I said it.

Put me and Madely in the same room, and it's like a switch goes off. I don't know. It's this hunger I get to be used, directed, draped over the side of the bed and, well, I'm probably oversharing. But I don't care. All my life, I didn't get it. Why people wanted things in there. It's a one-way tunnel, I thought, part of the digestive system, opposite the mouth for a reason.

But Madely taught me that I didn't really know myself, never really had. Just trust me when I say I know her really good now—Madely and all her patriotism, a woman who can be so gung ho and ravenous. Sure. But some nights, warm beneath the heavy comforter, she'd talk and talk, and though I couldn't stand the way she's speak Spanish, I'd listen and absorb every one of her secrets.

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Long before I'd become intimate with her, Madely managed to bring her mother and father to Miami. It had been quite an endeavor securing their visas, signing over assets in order to claim them. How distraught she became when her family didn't even last three months in Miami; they hated it. Miami had been too much—too much work, too much food, too many expenses. Apparently, her family preferred the Cuban devil to the American one, but Madely couldn't reconcile what as an obvious betrayal. To her, they were no better than the lazy, bad Cubans on the island. They were leeches who'd come and taken her for everything she had. They'd left and gone to hell, as far as she told me. She was so mad. Those nights when she'd get worked up about family, it was sad to hear her villanize them comparing them to Fidel; it was sad to hear it in her voice—tears—thoguh she never actually cried. I told her once, "Why not call them?" She bit my neck so hard, I thought she ripped a piece of me off. And you know what? It felt good to be bit, even if it really scared me too.

Sometimes I'd touch her, rub her, and climb atop as if to make love, and she'd push me off. She never explicitly told me why she'd act this way. I suspected it had to do with the trauma of her pregnancy. How losing the promise of her child must have devastated her. I tried to do everything that I could to help Madely cope with her grief, but the only thing that ever helped and the only thing she wanted was my bottom against her, so I let her feel her fingers into me, let her press her sadness into me until it spread and blossomed into something else. Her fervor, the way she'd dig her nails into my hips, tiger-like, I always wondered how she'd ever allowed her family to slip through her claws in the first place. I couldn't imagine Madely allowing anyone to escape her life. Her depth was a mystery to me. Her home was a mystery. She'd locked off certain rooms: her kid's nursery; the room her parents had stayed in during their short visit to the US. When we were seeing one another, she'd explicitly forbidden me from entering either of those rooms. I was off limits, and it was weird, but I dealt with the rule at first. If Madely needed those sealed rooms to cope, then I was okay respecting that. Even in our lovemaking, if she didn't like the idea of me penetrating her, then I was okay with that too. I say this because I want to be clear: this was the kind of lover Madely was, something that could hold onto you for all your life, even long after you'd parted with her. Someone who could enshrine you. And maybe if I hadn't peeked into those rooms of hers, we'd still be together now. Maybe I'd have my own little room that people wouldn't be allowed into.

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Just hours after I met Detective Machado, when I was rinsing out my Tupperware in the break room, the news broke that Palacio had been found. I couldn't believe it. A newly minted free man, and Palacio was already sitting across from Channel 7's Belkys Nerey, nothing at all sparkly like the man I'd seen earlier in the footage. It was strange for time to collapse that way for me. I'd only just learned of the man—had seen him young in the tapes—only to see him hours later, aged, worn, as though he'd been lost at sea for months. Actually, he looked worse than even the freshest balseros.

The news report cut to footage from Palacio's hospital stay, and who was at his side? Detective Machado, glamorous as ever, hair down, blouse semi-unbuttoned. "Our prime suspect," she said, "is still on the loose. Her name is Madely Sanchez. If you know..."

There I was at MIA, watching all this news unfold, watching the detective speak when I get a text from Machado herself: *Call me. It's urgent. I have to talk to you :)*. It seemed like an act of sorcery in the moment, seeing the detective in two places, until I realized the footage was previously recorded. I wondered, what did the detective want with me now? So I didn't call right away. I wanted to think things through, to make sure she hadn't figured out that I'd texted Madely when I shouldn't have.

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I did call Machado, of course, and the following night we met for dinner at The Rusty Pelican. We sat outdoors overlooking downtown. I was in my Delta uniform (because I always have to work), nervous. I felt like a criminal—I was a criminal—wholly underdressed for the occasion, especially sitting across from the detective, who wore a stunning gold-sequin dress and matching earrings.

"You can relax, sidekick," she said, and winked. "Please. Let's enjoy ourselves."

"You don't look like a detective tonight," I said.

She smiled, licked her lips. "Tonight," she said, "we celebrate."

"You said it was urgent?"

"All celebrations are," she said, raising her hand for our server, who brought us a bottle of champagne.

"On me," the detective said, and we toasted to Palacio's safety.

"With all due respect," I said, "what is this really?"

"I don't know."

The detective ordered the strip. I ordered fish and chips.

We ate in silence, listening to the breeze in the palm fronds. Because we didn't talk about the case, we stared at one another, then at the city, and then at one another again, awkwardly, until all at once, we finished the bottle, closed out the tab, and ambled over to the parking lot. At this point, I think we were both a little wobbly from the champagne. She pinched my butt and laughed.

I said, "Detective!"

"Yes?"

It was unsaid, really, but I knew our attraction was mutual. When she put her hand on my waist, I put mine on hers, peeled back her fingers, said, "No."

She laughed at me and said, "I need an upgrade, please."

And I made some unfortunate joke about reward points.

Weaving in and out of parked luxury cars, the detective pushed me up against a light post and kissed me. It rained moths; we were in a storm of them. She led me to her car—a white roadster—and she opened the passenger door, invited me inside. Then she entered the driver's side, revved up the car so that the AC was blowing in our faces. The whole moment was wonderfully gluttonous and excessive, especially with the entire city erect behind her. It reminded me of the first time I'd come to the US—how everything seemed so shiny and so utterly real.

She kissed me again. Look. I'd known the detective was romantically interested in me. The moment she nudged me when we were watching the tapes, I felt it. And when you're a guy like me, approaching middle age, you don't question when these opportunities present themselves.

Can I say, any other moment in my life, kissing her all night would have been something to truly celebrate. But Madely changed me in some radical ways. Don't get me wrong, Detective Machado was a beautiful woman, but being with her felt wrong and scandalous, like I'd stepped over some line I'd never meant to cross. I'd been so open with Madely for so long. She'd peeled back parts of my sexuality I didn't even know were there.

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Palacio was moneyless, still "vacationing" in the US with an expiring visa, and at the mercy of other people's GoFuneMes. What made him stay? It's hard to say. He seemed so caught up in the hysteria, in being led from interview to interview, constantly pushed to revisit his abduction—to live as if the only real thing in his life was the time he spent abducted by Madely—that he became angry, quick to demonize all of the US. This was a bad look for him, and I didn't think he was being fair with his time in the US or about his time with Madely. I mean, it wasn't the United States that abducted him; government officials, to the contrary, had helped him. And as for Madely, sure, she'd done something reprehensible, and she would have to answer for her crimes, but she was a person too, and it angered me to see her (or anything, for that matter) reduced to two-second sound bites.

Worse was when the media caught up with Palacio's ex-girlfriend. I was at the detective's house, and it was late; she was already asleep, her head on my lap. I was dozing off myself when that dramatic news music came on—the one Channel 7 had made especially for stories about Palacio. It was an exclusive with Marcela Diaz—Palacio's ex—all done up on the screen like she was

auditioning for a role. She said, "If he really loved me, he wouldn't have walked off with that insane woman... he clearly was unfaithful... all Cubans are that way... I'm glad she made him suffer."

When asked if she'd communicated with him, she responded, "I'll never talk to that motherf—er again," yet as she said that, she teared up. She didn't say much after, but it was clear Palacio had broken her heart. But would you know, a few months later, it gets announced that Marcela would be the new *Bachelorette*. Palacio may be back in Cuba by now, but her career is still going strong, as strong as some D-list actress's could be.

It was all such a spectacle, especially the day Madely was last seen. Again, this was all broadcast live. Police officers stormed Tropical Park, surrounded Madely at the batting cages. She'd been practicing her swing. If you watch the clip carefully, as I have, you'll see that Machado was there too. In fact, when Madely swung at the arresting officer, then got tazed and dropped on her back, you'll see that it was Detective Machado who'd done the tazing—no hesitation.

If there's one thing I've learned about Madely, though, it's that things always get more complicated around her. You see, Madely escaped. How? I wish I knew. All we have is the footage. Somehow, Madely got out of the cuffs, climbed out of the police car, and bounded out back into Tropical Park. Detective Machado chased her over the large hill at the park's heart, but when she made it to the top, Madely had vanished, truly. No matter where the police looked, she didn't turn up, and, as you can imagine, this miraculous vanishing act intrigued the media even more. Everyone, from the lady at the cafeteria to the God-damned orange-haired false president of ours had an opinion. For some, Madely was a patriot, a warrior of capitalism, a scourge on Castro's legacy; to others, she was a lunatic, taking advantage of someone with little security in the US. Late night talk shows had segments on her: *Where in the World is Madely Sanchez?* and *The Madely Files*. Anchors on Fox News suggested that Madely had not acted alone; rather, many Latinas across the country would soon emulate her—more of a reason to build a wall and keep those lousy no-good criminals out.

The detective had to make a public announcement, assuring everyone that Madely would be found. By this point, there were all kinds of government agencies involved, but the detective remained on the case, nonetheless. She was determined, confident, trusted. In bed, it was another story. "Tell me! How did she do it? Are you going to tell me, you fucking liar?"

She was convinced that my reluctance to speculate indicated that I was hiding something from her too, and what was I to do? I most certainly was hiding something. The way the detective prodded me, it was as if she'd always known that me and Madely had been intimate at one part of my life, even if I'd neglected to mention it. I suspect that she knew that I fantasized about Madely when I was with her in bed. Fantasize is the wrong word. I longed for her; I grieved for Madely so much. She was over the top, sure; she'd always been, but I knew her. I really knew her, and it saddened me knowing what she'd come to—a criminal on the run. One night, we were in bed, restless. I leaned into the detective kissed her cheek and tasted her tears. This confused me. "Why are you crying?" I asked. The detective didn't answer. She shoved me and gave me her back.

#

When I started looking for Madely, I wasn't sure if I was doing it for myself or for the detective. How I did it? I studied those damn news reels. I tried to learn as much as I possibly could about Palacio. Through Belkys' interviews, I learned he'd been held captive in one of Madely's bedrooms, leather collar around his neck, chained like a dog to the iron bars on the window, wrists bound together. Coño, Palacio. How honest he was, unafraid of how people would see him or think of him. I envied that about him. Every little dirty detail, he shared; it was impressive. All of it.

For instance, each morning, Madely would unlock his bedroom door and enter, wrapped in an American flag. She'd recite the Pledge of Allegiance, sliding the flag off slowly, teasing him, violating him. It was all so juicy, and rather than shun him for his confessions, the world was fascinated. Nobody mocked him. Nobody made him feel lesser of a person. I didn't expect that.

They loved him when he made his suffering public; they hated him when he spoke with reason (like that time Belkys asked why he was still in the US if he was already free to go home, and he responded, "Because some can't go home," and he proceeded to discuss Central American asylum seekers, Haitians in detention centers). Who wanted to tune into something so didactic?

And let me just share this inconvenient truth: Madely is gorgeous when she's all dommed up. God! There's Palacio on screen describing these incidents, and all I see is Madely, red curly hair, shoulder length, bronzed skin, leather knee-high boots, leather studded bra, leather fittings for her strap on, life-like, and veins like tributaries, hardened, the taste of rubber and silicone. I'd get hard just thinking about it, the way she'd make me kneel before her, and how she'd hold my head with both hands and thrust or make me bite it, or how she'd push my chine up just so and slap my face with it, tell me to keep my mouth shut, slapping harder when I'd open to taste. It's exciting just to confess to this all—to say things aloud that I always thought would be forever buried inside me.

Of course, Palacio didn't mention his appetites, but I could see them in his eyes, the way he'd look away from Belkys when she was speaking, like he was elsewhere, back in Madely's home and learning to be submissive and learning to love America, the national anthem blaring, and Madely wearing our flag like a cape, thrusting freedom, jubilation, and all her inalienable rights into his body. And when Belkys asked this one shitty question—"But was she really violating you if you were aroused?" —Palacio cried right there on live television, unsure himself, and viewers loved it all.

I know! Six months of this. Can you imagine?

He admitted, toward the end, he would have swallowed anything—Orange face man, Islamophobia, White Supremacy. Everything Madely said tasted rich and salty, good on the way down, but empty, so empty that he was always hungry, always malnourished, and hearing him talk about her made me wonder whether I, too, had been starving myself during my time with Madely.

#

Palacio was destined to die an exile in Madely's home, but he got lucky, or he was persistent, or both. Per his own accounts, the first time he tried to escape, he had spent weeks leading her to believe he was content with his bondage and imprisonment. He wanted Madely to believe that he was a convert, that he'd become a Cuba-hating Cuban. This, according to Palacio, pleased her. It's likely the reason why, one day, Madely eased his restraints, removed the chain affixed to his leather collar, and said, "Don't make me regret this, you got it?" She left for work, and during that brief shift, Palacio dug through the ceiling with a hanger, which he'd folded over again and again until it could easily claw through drywall. When he'd made a large enough hole, he pulled his body into the attic crawlspace above his room, only to discover that the crawlspace was sectioned off by steel mesh grates. Coño. It still chills me to think of all the lengths Madely took to contain him. Surely, she hadn't fortified that room for him alone. What would inspire her, really, to do such a thing?

In any case, when she got home, Big Mac Meal in her hand, and saw all the mess he'd made, she tossed his food in the garbage and said, as an act of punishment, that he could eat the drywall like the ungrateful desgraciado that he was. She locked him up for three days. He didn't eat the drywall, not raw, not without boiling it. "What kind of Cuban did she think I was?" he told Belkys, smiling, though I could see past his smile. Of course he'd eaten it. He'd, at least, tasted it.

There was another instance. After "el sexo"—a phrase that Palacio used, but which made him cringe—she'd fallen asleep at his side, the loop of keys affixed to the clasp on her strap-on. Palacio carefully removed the keys, freed himself, and ran out of the house. But she must have heard the beeping from her home security system—the door ajar—because she ran out too, got in her car, and nearly ran him down. Actually, she did clip, just a touch. Then she coerced him into her home.

After that, Madely was always careful around him. Palacio lost hope for months. Then, one afternoon, as she was securing his restraints, Madely received a text message and departed frantically. Palacio didn't know what had spooked her, and he didn't know how long she'd be gone, but he took

the opportunity to try for another escape. This time, he tugged at his collar, and to his astonishment, it came undone. He slipped his head out and cautiously made his way to the front door, which was secured with an iron gate. So were all the windows in the house. That didn't stop him, though, from kicking the front gate again and again, breaking the lock open with sheer force. By the time he fled, he was so exhausted and frail and blood-covered. He had this to say, "I didn't even look back, Belkys. I just ran 'cause, tu sabe, I didn't think I'd get away. I ran into the traffic because one way or another, I was getting home. Either my home in Regla, or my home up in el cielo."

#

With my news sources exhausted, I turned to the detective for more information on Madely's whereabouts. She wasn't exactly eager to share her notes, and I was afraid that if I pushed the matter, she'd become suspicious of me, so I took matters into my own hands. Two weeks after the footage of Madely's disappearance aired, I left MIA after a long shitty day of angry customers and drove to Madely's home. It was late, and since nobody had lived in the house for some time, all the lights were off. To avoid suspicion, I parked down the street and walked, ducking under the farying police tape. The front door was open. "Madely!" I called out, as if she'd actually be there. Of course, she wasn't, but I still felt her there with me. How could I not? It was her home, afterall.

Of all the rooms in that house, I was most drawn to Palacio's—what had been, for much time, the unused nursery room. When I opened the door, the stench of the place hit me hard; it was ammonia, piss, unbearable. Still, I dealt with the stench and entered and marveled at Palacio's living conditions. The only comfort in the room was a twin-sized mattress in the center, stained and without linens. Coiled along the floor was the chain and the collar that Palacio had described on the news, likely resting where he'd last left them. The hole in the ceiling from where Palacio had tried to escape was somehow much smaller than I'd imagined it. It seemed impossible that anyone would fit through there. Plus, I hadn't even considered the insulation, a bright orange bulbous material bleeding from the gape. And on the windowsill was Madely's strap-on, beside a towel and oil.

I picked up the collar, put it around my neck, and tightened it. I did this because I wanted to feel what Palacio had felt. Truly, hearing Palacio gush on and on about his captor, I'd wondered: *What if that were me?* But I didn't expect the collar to lock, or for the mechanism to be so sensitive. When it did lock, and after I tried to yank it off myself, or to pull the chain off the bars, I realized that I'd truly made myself a prisoner of her, and I half-expected her to walk in, draped in the flag, singing. Each time I tugged at the collar, it tightened. Now, I felt intense pressure on my neck. I could feel my pulse, and the tightening of my skin around my eyes. I was being slowly strangled.

I settled on the dirty mattress and allowed my situation to come fully into picture, breathing in slowly, worried that with one dramatic movement, I'd lose my air passage all together. The only thing I could think to do was text the detective. I almost did, but I was embarrassed. I didn't want her to see this side of me. So I powered off my phone and sat there, trying not to make the tightening worse. As I sat there, as Palacio must have for so many nights, waiting for Madely.

#

Back before Madely ended things with me, I spent many days in her home. For a while, I thought I'd moved in, spending consecutive nights at a time. It was such a luminous time in our lives, getting to know one another. The loss of her child intrigued me—how an egg could become attached to the wall of the fallopian tube and develop like that. It was always strange for me, to hear Madely refer to herself as a mother. I didn't see it that way, but she did—a child born the day it was surgically extracted and discarded. There was such a sadness in her, one she hid well. You only needed to ask *Why are so many rooms locked off?* to realize that something wasn't quite right. Those rooms! Madely had forbidden me from entering them, and I betrayed her trust. I can own up to that. One morning, she was asleep and half-drunk beside me. I climbed out of bed in the ridiculous leather-studded get-up she'd asked me to wear, and swiped her keys from the nightstand. In the first room, I expected to

open that door and find a small crib, toys, maybe even some soothing wallpaper—storks carrying babies swaddled in cloth, and that kind of thing. But there was nothing. Just an empty room, the very room that, eventually, would come to serve as Palacio's prison cell.

But what I found in the next room chilled me. It was like being in one of those horror films when a mother loses a child and opts to keep the room as a living memorial, only this wasn't for a child. It was for her parents. And what frightened me was that it had been ten years since her family had fled back to Cuba—or that's what I had understood—and still the beds were unmade, the cabinets open. On a dresser, there was a note written in Spanish: *We are sorry this didn't work out for you. We love you. Mami y Papi.* That room, it was also like a prison cell: bars on the windows (not uncommon in Miami), multiple locks on the door (this was curious to me). And another thing. The closets were filled with her family's clothing, the dressers too. Even her family's shoes remained, tossed at the side of the bed. It was as if they'd taken nothing back with them to Cuba. It was as if, at any moment, they'd all come ambling back into her home, asking, *What's for dinner?* It got weirder. When Madely found me in the room, still in the studded outfit I'd woken up in, she looked over my shoulder, at those dressers cracked open and yelled, "Desgraciado! You have no right!"

She took off her chancleta and threatened me, as if I were her child, not her lover. She was a bull, that woman, driving me out until I was in her backyard, fenced and warm under the sun, pleading, "Madely, por favor" through the sliding glass door, as all of Miami's traffic circulated and buzzed around me, as chickens in her yard clucked at my ankles. She left me out there till noon, at which point she emerged naked herself—a molten volcano of a body—a gun in her hand, and seeing her point that gun at me made me piss my pants right there. I knelt. I begged for her forgiveness. I told her that I'd never betray her again, and this must have resonated with her because she put the gun down, smiled, and let me in. She bathed me, warm, and asked me to lie on my stomach. "I still have to punish you," she said. So I followed her instructions, and she took out a belt, and whipped my ass with, thank God, the leather end of the uniform belt.

Afterward, I promised her I wouldn't go into that room again. We didn't last much longer after that, and it was my fault. On Mother's Day, the whole day went by, and I didn't mention her pregnancy. Not once. She was the one who had to bring it up, the two of us wrapped in each other's arms in bed, Madely crying like a baby, and when I told her that maybe we could try for one, she broke my nose and asked me to leave, so I did, by foot, walking the whole damn way home, nose bleeding bad. It was a bad day. When I made it to Nana's, she hardly recognized me. I hardly recognized myself in the mirror, worn, tired-looking.

That must have been about how I looked when the detective found me trapped at Madely's home, the collar around my neck. She'd put a tracking device on my car, so she knew where I was. She'd suspected that I'd try something like that. When she found me, she didn't judge me. She helped me get out of the collar and led me out of that room. And we didn't talk about it.

I can love her for that—not making me feel ashamed.

Shortly after my little stint, investigators returned and uncovered something truly horrible: two bodies buried in her backyard. Cofño, Madely. The detective told me everything before news channels caught wind of it, and all I could think was *Where is she? Madely?* Sometimes, late at night, when I'm leaning into the detective, and we're binge-watching something on Netflix, I think of her. I imagine her in Cuba, seeking out Palacio, looking for a way to save him in spite of himself, and when I think of her this way, I remember what it was like to have that collar around my neck. Perfection. In some ways, I resent the detective for saving me, and I can't shake the feeling that the investigation is not over—like she knows I gave Madely the tip-off, and she's using me to get to her.

Every time I get that suspicion, I feel crazy.

But she knows about the text. She has to.