

# STUMBLING

OUT THE STABLE



SEAN  
PRAVICA

*Stumbling Out the Stable* by Sean Pravica

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Seamus knew that college did not matter. He knew that his degree would be a meaningless piece of paper that only served to justify his place among the rest of the graduates in the school of Establishment Values. He, like all the rest who bought into the empty promises of higher education, was being coded with the social binary of contemporary American culture. Class by class, all were tested and debugged until the big day came when they walked across a well-lit stage to the applause of friends and strangers alike, having proven that they could take it on the chin for four years. They had survived the first 13 years of indoctrination after all. And before they all knew what hit them, they would wake up in the middle of the night, sweating, unsure what had woken them on an insignificant Tuesday, the drapes open and the moon looking bizarrely foreign, and their partner beside them, sleeping soundly, looking suddenly like a person they had never met. This dark night of the soul, Seamus knew, would be the moment of clarity, passing and dying away with the restless submission to a troubled sleep, that one encounters when enrolled in the lifetime course. And once encountered, nothing outwardly would change. They would know something, but never be able to say what it was.

Seamus did not know what that meant for him when his time in school was through, but he knew he sure as hell did not want to move back in with his parents full time and work some damned job that would most likely be even more soul-sucking than the one his degree might help him land.

So to pass the time of his academic sentence, Seamus did what a significant number of college kids do and embarked on a consistent diet of drugs and poorly executed sexual activity while alternately pointing the finger at the all-pervasive system and its millions of brain-dead constituents. College life can be expensive for hedonists, however, so he begrudgingly took a summer job at Singing Pines Country Club where his high school classmate, Jamie Caballo, worked.

The two boys were never close but got high together when paths crossed at parties. Because their parents lived within a half mile of each other and Seamus did not drive, Jamie would pick him up for work often. Seamus had not logged a minute at his new job when Jamie's influence upon his work habits already began to percolate.

"Whoa, there went a glitch," Jamie said under his breath.

Seamus looked in the distance, though not sure where. "What's up, man?" he said.

"My man. What is happening?" Jamie looked nervous.

"You said something about a glitch?"

"Oh, yeah, never mind man," Jamie said and rubbed his mouth.

"Okay."

He looked at Jamie who looked only at the road ahead and was silent for the duration of their short commute. As they neared the main road to Singing Pines, Jamie swerved unexpectedly to the curb and parked.

"Get out of the car," he said.

"What?" Seamus laughed.

Jamie did not laugh with him. "Get out of the car." He repeated.

Seamus was uneasy but he obeyed Jamie and followed him off the main road into land not as heavily manicured by the local home owner's association.

"Sit down on that rock. Let's have a talk," Jamie said.

The houses in Singing Pines' neighborhood were surrounded by A-list flora and fauna. Jamie took his seat on a log and looked out over a pond. A pair of ducks floated serenely across its green-blue surface. Birds chirped wildly before he spoke, to which his eyes turned askance into the density of leaves overhead.

The whistling ruckus ceased. Then, "Now that that's over with, I have a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Watch your mouth." he hissed. Leaning in closer he whispered, "Did you see something strange happen when I picked you up today?"

"No. But I wasn't really looking."

Jamie pointed his index finger at Seamus and released a righteous growl.

"You weren't really looking. They don't want you to really look, otherwise you'd know," he said.

Whatever Jamie meant by that, Seamus knew that there was a wide-ranging network of intelligentsia that did not want anyone to be in on what was really going on behind the screen. Not only did the Emperor wear no clothes, there was no Emperor.

Most importantly, Seamus also knew that he had found a friend for life.

"Listen Jamie, I know damn well they don't want me to look, but that doesn't stop me and it sounds like it doesn't

stop you. They want to coddle you into some kind of neutered state that resembles sleepwalking much more than it does living. They want you to work their jobs and make just enough money, which you never have enough of because you always owe it right back and then some. I don't know what you saw back there but I'd guess that if it's anything like what you're hinting at, I've probably seen it too, one way or another."

Seamus stared pensively at a rock. His phone rang and broke his concentration, but did so only once and before he could answer it.

He looked at its screen. "Missed call from number unavailable. Strange."

Jamie nodded slowly. "Glitches often are strange."

Seamus considered. "A glitch? What, like from *The Matrix*?"

"No one can say for sure what the Matrix is."

Seamus understood. "Is that what you were looking at when you picked me up? A so-called glitch?"

"If by so-called you mean watching the exact same car drive past me for the second time within thirty seconds, then yes, it's an apparently shoddy day in the so-called mainframe."

"What if the person was just lost?"

Jamie shrugged. "I can only lead you to water."

Seamus smiled. "Okay dude, whatever you say. It's your trip."

"Yeah, it's a trip all right! And you haven't even met Barry yet." Jamie stood up, waved his thumb back in the air, and said, "C'mon Seamus. Let's get to work."

June had been largely good to the boys, but a creeping doubt did linger. Though Jamie and Seamus and now Cody were still afforded the leniency lately they had enjoyed for some time, Seamus' growing ponytail now tied back into itself as a knotted ball on the back of his head, a testament to the boys' tenure, none of them could help but watch their concern grow that the never-ending honeymoon might indeed have a shelf life.

The truth was that Angela was making her presence felt at Singing Pines again, and the boys feared that she was starting to overstep her bounds. After a delicious quiet spell that ended far too soon, she was strutting about the clubhouse with greater vitality and enthusiasm in all that she did. Her posture was no longer a dreary slouch as she held her head high and her back straight. She no longer looked down at her feet as she walked, which in its very movement had changed. Lighter on her feet, she nearly strolled through the building, her hips moving with softer and more feminine turns, a quality that was lacking ever since she got in the habit of burying her head and scurrying like a rat uncomfortable outside of the darkness.

If there was anything that anyone said outright about Angela it was that she looked happier, and it began in her eyes. The dark circles still hung beneath them, a little puffy, a little tired, but the dead vacancy had been filled. By what no one was sure, though it took little sleuthing to determine that she was getting laid again. Still, sex was not something anyone

felt comfortable imagining Angela having, and instead would clumsily mention to each other, “Angela’s in an awfully good mood these days.”

Her behavior was tolerable at first. She was beginning to leave later at night, yes, and sure, she was sticking her nose into the business of others by asking them questions like, “How are you?” and “How’s school going?” She was even taking time again to tray salads and dinners and tell people lamely, “Good work.” The boys allowed her these silly but harmless missteps, acknowledging that no sweat was accumulating on their backs as a result of her forced niceties and meager attempts at managerial responsibility. What troubled them was the attitude that such pitiful deeds were often coupled with, namely a preposterous sense of entitlement that after months of absence she could simply reappear in their lives and instruct them on what to do, and be a bit of a meanie about it in the process.

It was not long before she gave the boys little chores like telling Seamus and Jamie to pre-place overlay napkins on the serving trays or to wipe down the water pitchers. They attempted resistance by telling her such things made no difference, but even they had to admit to having no defense against the argument that “standing around doing nothing isn’t worth much, either.” Defeated, they settled grimly to their assigned chores.

Her real crime came when she began to dip deeper into her managerial hat and pull out a rabbit everyone long assumed dead: the schedule. Indeed, assigning mindless busy work was one thing. Defiling the group dynamic under which Barry’s crew flourished was quite another.

The first great thorn in their collective sides came when Angela insisted that the “downstairs crew,” as she called them, was short-staffed ever since Chris was moved to the restaurant. In turn, she gave Yasmine a promotion from the snack



bar. She even went so far as to wink at Barry and say, “Besides, all you boys could use another woman’s touch down there.”

Barry, biting his tongue hard against making a profoundly snarky comment regarding a “woman’s touch down there” replied lamely, “No we don’t.”

“Well fine, Barry. If you want to be all macho about it. You can at least use another pair of hands.”

“What I can’t use is a pair of butt cheeks that’s going to distract my crew. Yasmine treats this place like it’s a high school dance.”

“Barry! Careful with how you talk. We’re friends but if corporate heard you talk that way you’d be in trouble for sexual harassment.”

“Gee. Thanks Angela, old pal.”

“Oh Barry. Yasmine’s a hard worker. She’s just...vivacious.”

“Is that an STD?”

“Barry! No it means-”

“I know, I know what it means. Fine. But when Alfredo is caught literally with his pants down in the linen closet don’t cry to me. You know they’re dating, don’t you?”

“Of course I know that, Barry. And I think she’ll help keep him in line. I see how he horses around with Felipe. Alonzo’s impressionable, too, and he’s spending a lot of time with the two of them.”

“I’m telling you, Angela. You’re looking for trouble and making everything harder on everyone for no reason.”

“Barry, you’re the best captain we have. You can handle an eighteen year old girl.”

If only Angela, or anyone for that matter, knew just how

much trouble Yasmine's promotion would cause. Though no one knew it, she had eyes for more than one.

If that was not enough, Angela was beginning to think outside of her cubicle walled box and suggest bold new ideas, like special dinner nights for country club members. And before anyone knew it, the simply titled "Tequila Night" was on the Singing Pines banquet calendar. If there was one night to remember for Barry's boys, Tequila Night was impossible to forget.

The evening began pleasantly. Angela wowed the room with her date, namely because she had one. Gone were the assumptions that she had managed to bed a couple of losers at the Red Door Tavern. This was bona fide proof that she had a boyfriend already, and one that appeared happy to be with her. A veritable dummy, Bryce never stopped smiling and was immediately and obviously harmless, even sweet, to everyone who talked to him. While he made it clear repeatedly that he was a personal trainer, he was never pushy about his services as many in his field often are. He passed out no business cards, and would instead share simple accounts of the pride he felt when watching some of his clients overcome personal obstacles. By the end of the night, three people had his phone number and assured him they would "be in touch."

On all accounts, he was accepted as a lovable goofball, and probably poor as fuck. Certainly no one in the room ate dinner as quickly as he ate his.

Angela, often looking at him like he was her little brother whom she had to constantly correct and keep in line, was nonetheless as happy as she had ever been lately. She talked to coworkers and country club members alike with equal flare. She even shocked the banquet servers when she carried a tray of tequila shots to the service area.

“Salud!” she cheered.

Jamie, Seamus, and Cody took the first three shots, and later, the last three. They took other shots in between, namely from a bottle that Jamie regarded as his greatest lift of his career.

“They fucking paid for it, all these bums, just like the champagne!” he slurred.

“Fucking salud,” Cody laughed, swayed, fell back against the railing, and grabbed Seamus by the collar. “We’re made men.”

“Untouchable,” Seamus said. “And with all that drama going on, we’re invisible, too.” He nodded at Jamie.

Jamie pointed the bottle at him and became emotional. “You remember all that I taught you,” he said, his voice cracking.

Looking like a trio of initiates fresh from Frat row, they held themselves upright after nearly knocking each other down. The made men, drunk in the darkness with tables bussed and the crème brûlée served, were easily visible to Fernando as he stood by, smoking a rare cigarette, and wondering what was going to happen next.

It had been a rocky night for him, but it was not over yet. His brother was essentially drunk, or at least as much as anyone could be from four shots. His trouble began early in the evening, when Fernando politely refused to take a shot with the rest of the crew. Yasmine also passed on hers.

“That’s okay baby, I got something else you can drink,” Alfredo told her. He pawed at her face with a lecherous hand, looking into her eyes.

She broke eye contact swiftly, and told him, “Later, baby.”

Alfredo watched her walk merrily away, catching up behind Fernando, and when he looked behind him at the only other person in the room, Alonzo, smiling nervously and nodding his head.

“Something else you can drink, that’s funny dawg,” the young cousin said and offered a fist to pound.

“Nah, that girl thinks she’s in charge now. I tell you something, she didn’t think that the other afternoon. I had her begging me to get in her.”

“Oh yeah?” Alonzo asked, his eyes glittering.

“I had her tied to her bed posts, just teasing her little pussy, tick tock, I was going back and forth like that with my peepee,” he laughed. Then, picking up two shots, “Cheers cousin.”

“I already had one.”

“Have another.”

Alonzo eyed the plastic cup like it was hazardous material, rotating it in his fingers.

“It’s okay cousin, drink for your brother. He’s too busy wiping himself between his legs to have a toast with you.”

Alonzo lifted his eyes from the shot. “No, no, my brother’s a good man,” he said.

“He’s good, of course he is,” Alfredo said. “He’s good at being a fifi! Drink!”

Alonzo did but wearily, and said, “You know Yasmine is that way with everybody. My brother isn’t trying to take her.”

“He couldn’t take her if she drank that whole bottle of tequila. She only wants me. But I don’t think he thinks that.”

“C’mon man, he’s your own cousin! Show him some

respect!”

“Shhh. Have another drink, cousin. I’m kidding with you. Don’t be so uptight.”

And Alonzo drank again. His stomach felt warm. He felt happy, but guilty. He always looked up to Alfredo, loved him. Of course he loved his brother too, but his cousin possessed characteristics Fernando did not and never would. The trouble with Alfredo, as Alonzo knew however, was that no one could really know him. There was a wiliness there, a slipperiness that even those closest to him wrestled with, forgot about, and wrestled with again, his moods fluctuating, his motives appearing mixed, hidden, beguiling.

Alonzo only needed to hear the sudden brusqueness Alfredo’s tone adopted to be reminded of this slithering nature. But still, he always gave his older cousin a chance.

“Just keep your head up now, I haven’t seen you drink since Miguel’s birthday. And then I didn’t see you for a long time!”

“I’m fine, cousin.” Alonzo tottered across the room to grab a hand tray. “I’m just fine.”

“You’re fine like my culo after I eat Sancho’s habenero sauce. You’re shit faced and you’ve only had three shots!”

“Bull.”

“Bull?” Alfredo laughed meanly. “Bull! Tough man, oh shit. Who says ‘bull’ around you? It’s not your mommy or daddy. Maybe your brother thinks he sounds like a cowboy when he says ‘bull’ to you when you ask him about Yasmine.”

Alonzo frowned. “I don’t ask him anything about Yasmine. There’s nothing to ask.”

“Bull!” Alfredo mocked him.

“Bull,” Alonzo mocked back.

Yasmine fluttered into the room, smiling, bright-eyed, happy.

“Wanda and Angela are really drunk!” she said. “This is a funny night!”

“Girl, you think Alonzo is handsome? Like, you think you would be his hyna?”

“Alonzo is so handsome,” she said. “I would be his girlfriend.”

Alonzo looked shy but smiled.

“What about his brother? You think he’s handsome?”

Yasmine still smiled, but quietly. Alfredo smiled, but sinisterly. The three of them shared a tense triangle of broken glances and awkward postures.

“I think I work with the most handsome boys in the world,” she said. “I’d be lucky to be anyone’s girlfriend here.”

Alfredo rose darkly away from the wall he was leaning on and looked deeply into Yasmine’s eyes. “Well aren’t you lucky then? Have a shot with me, girl.”

“Baby I don’t drink.” Her voice was hushed. She resisted his arms around her and headed out the room.

Alfredo scoffed. “Two days ago cousin, and she’s my valentine in the summer time. You’d think she wanted to wake up next to me everyday.”

Alonzo shrugged. Here he was, in the nether regions again. What was his cousin after? He did not have long to cook up a response, though. They were interrupted.

“Jesus! Is it butt-picking hour at the Singing Pines Cantina already?” Barry said when he walked in on the two cousins doing nothing together.

Alfredo started, “Barry, I’m just giving my cousin a talking-to about tonight. He gets a little tequila in him and then he starts getting stupid, looking at chi-chis everywhere and dropping plates and -”

“No way dawg!”

“I see you out there, your eyes are as big as your hands when you touch yourself at night.”

“Stupid!”

“You’re both fucking stupid. No more tequila for either of you or you’ll have to escort Wanda home tonight. She needs two men tonight, maybe three. Her husband can’t handle all that woman on his own.”

Though Barry was joking, Wanda’s husband, known behind his back as Mr. Wanda, was not when he told her assistant’s uncomfortable boyfriend that he hoped his wife had something left for him when they got home. He said this calmly while Wanda hooked her toned, 53-year old leg around a speaker and pulled in close to feel the bass vibration from *Flesh for Fantasy*. Mr. Wanda nodded his head along, smiling his lazy but large smile, his teeth so white they nearly appeared to glow.

The boyfriend excused himself from Mr. Wanda and joined his girlfriend at the bar.

“That’s two caddys,” he said, catching the bartender in time.

“Sweetie, I was just getting one for you,” she said.

“Have one with me. I finally got away from that creep Wanda married.”

She looked delighted. “I remember when you said the Christmas party was enough Singing Pines for one year.”

“Don’t get excited over it or anything.”

“I’m just happy to have you step into my world.” She kissed him on the cheek and leaned her head onto his shoulder and secured her arm against the crook of his elbow.

Then Alonzo smacked into her sending her margarita all over her.

“Hot damn!” Mr. Wanda said, rushing over with a napkin. “Hey Bucko, that busboy made your girlfriend wet before you did.”

“Yeah,” he said, glaring at Alonzo, who stood still, speechless, and shaking.

“It’s alright, it’s alright,” she said, wincing as she dried herself with the napkins Mr. Wanda had brought over.

Alonzo began to back up, and stammered, “I didn’t see... my head was down...I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright Alonzo, you have a tough job.”

Her boyfriend was ignoring Alonzo now and covering his girlfriend with his jacket. “Well you didn’t want a margarita anyway.”

“No but I sure got one.”

“Yeah you did.”

Alonzo looked around him and saw Angela and Wanda looking at him. Their eyes were bleary but demeaning. He felt like he did when his mother caught him puking in the backyard after his cousin’s birthday, his throat burning and his knees shaking, hearing her voice rain on him with threats of punishment and rising exclamations regarding his disobedience.

He went back to the service area not knowing where else to



turn. When he got there, Cody and Jamie were laughing over the bus tubs, and then, Cody started, “Just the motherfucker I was looking for!”

“Guys, I made Wanda’s assistant spill her drink on herself.”

“But did you feel her tits?” Cody asked him.

“No...maybe,” he considered. Did he? Actually, yeah, he probably did. It was a quick but full contact collision and carrying a hand tray his hands had certainly been up. The irony! The only silver lining of such a folly and now it was a mere ghost of a memory relived in the minds of others.

“Ah, you guys don’t even know her,” Jamie said. “I’ve gotten the gazebo runner from her plenty of times. Her name’s Crystal and all I know is she’s chill as fuck and won’t even trip.”

“Yeah. And you touched her tits! Fuck, I wish I didn’t look where I was going when I walked around,” Cody laughed.

“Hey man, tough dance out there with the Wedding Planner’s Assistant,” Seamus said as he entered the room.

“It was a dance alright,” Alonzo said.

“Looked like you got a feel, though,” he said.

“Yeah, I think I did.”

“He’s the fucking man!” Cody yelled.

There were four shots left on the tray. Jamie handed one of them to Alonzo.

“To making all the other guys jealous,” Jamie toasted.

“No, no, no. That’s how all this started.”

“Your hands are shaking, man. You need to chill out. Have a shot,” Seamus said.

“Guys, no.”

“What if we take them with you?” Cody offered, as though that should be significant.

“Guys...”

“I got my shot ready,” Seamus said. He handed the last one to Cody. “So does Cody.”

Alonzo looked at the boys. They wore the friendliest faces he had seen all night. Shrugging, he said, “How much worse could it get, I guess?”

“Now you’re making sense,” Cody said.

“Cheers, fellas,” Alonzo said.

“Cheers killer,” Jamie said. They all drank.

“What a night,” Alonzo said.

“What a night is right, cousin,” Alfredo said, looking concerned.

“What’s wrong?” Seamus asked.

“I have to talk to my cousin,” Alfredo told him.

The boys looked at each other and nodded their heads. This was a family matter. They excused themselves to the dining room and got back to work walking around with dirty plates on their trays they took from the bus tubs.

“Barry’s looking for you. He’s pissed.”

“Man! But Crystal said it’s alright.”

Alfredo shook with nervous laughter. “She said that to *you*, cousin.”

“Oh no, oh no! Shit man, fuck me, oh no...”

“Shhh! You sound like a fifi! Now Listen to me. Go outside

and sit on the stairs. I'll cover for you. Hell, even your damn brother is taking care of your tables. Just make yourself hard to find. Barry will cool down and his peepee will go down again. Right now he's looking to fuck you."

"I don't want to get fucked! I need this job!"

"Shhh! I told you! Get outside. Your cousin and your brother have this."

Alonzo did as he was told. In the dining room, Fernando asked his cousin, "Where's my brother? I didn't see him in the back or upstairs. I checked outside too."

"How would I know? Fool is probably puking in the bathroom. He took shots like he begs for pussy. You can't stop him."

"Shut up. This is serious."

"Oh? Why so serious?" Alfredo tried to sound like Heath Ledger. It was butchered, but Fernando got the point.

"You are a real joker, funny guy all the time."

"Hey, watch out for your own brother. He's not my responsibility."

Fernando went to check the bathroom. He saw Isabelita in the lobby.

"Fernando, there you are! I'm looking for your brother."

"That makes two of us...at least."

"He's been talking to Alfredo all night but now Alfredo said he doesn't know where he is. Listen, you know I have younger brothers. I know how it is."

Fernando shook his head. "Thanks for telling me about Alfredo. Hey, I'm checking the men's bathroom upstairs. Can you check the women's bathrooms? You never know."

Isabelita rubbed his shoulder. “You’re a good brother. Yes, I’ll look for him.”

Meanwhile, Alonzo shivered outside. He was not cold but he was dizzy, and he struggled to determine when it was right to go back inside to work. He shook with the thought of it all, the purgatory he was in now, wondering when it would end, how it would end, and would his face ever be a welcomed sight inside again? The stair steps were a hard seat and he squirmed on them, looked at the dark course, a swallow of unseeable land that gave the deck a floating quality. He was alone, all right, washed up on the shore of a bad day at work. He never had one when he worked in a local store as a child in Mexico, and he did that for four years. It took hardly more than four months at Singing Pines before he erred, and in such a high profile fashion.

Finally Barry came outside to smoke a cigarette. He looked queerly at the shape on the stairs, and then approaching slowly, relaxed his shoulders when he got close and said, “I thought it was a drunk from the party.” He dragged on his cigarette. “I was right.”

“Barry, I’m so sorry.”

“Well I understand that but I don’t really think that hiding in the dark is a good way to show it.”

Alonzo swallowed. “Barry, please don’t fire me. I made a mistake. But I’ll be better!”

Barry smoked and said nothing for a while. Other people were used to this, but Alonzo had not felt this nervous in a long time.

At last, Barry asked him, “Alonzo, are there moles in Mexico?”

Puzzled, Alonzo said, “Yes.”

“Do they dig holes that make problems?”

“Yes.”

“And can those molehills seem like bigger problems than they are?”

Alonzo considered. “I don’t understand.”

“Can a molehill sometimes seem like a mountain?”

Alonzo laughed, and felt some relief. “Yes. Sometimes in my mind they are.”

“Yeah. Well sometimes in America we say things like ‘Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill.’”

Alonzo smiled. “C’mon Barry, I didn’t move here yesterday.”

Barry nodded. “Sometimes you’re a fish out of water, that’s all I’m saying. Have you heard that before?”

Alonzo nodded and smiled. “Yes, Barry.”

“Okay. Then get back inside. No one’s complimented the rose Yasmine is wearing in her hair in the last three minutes and she’s getting worried.”

Alonzo laughed again. “I told her she looked beautiful twice already!”

“Yep. Thank Angela.”

“What did Angela do?”

“Lots of things, Alonzo. Get inside. I just used up all the nice guy I had in me for the year.”

Alonzo said little more to anyone for the rest of the night. Except when he talked to his brother, and said, “You were right about our cousin.”

And so later in the night, standing outside and smoking a cigarette that an excited Cody gave him, Fernando watched his drunken coworkers revel. What world did they come from that they could act this way? Fernando was not old but he was older than them, and yet they were older than his brother. Somewhere in this whole mess of a night, probably a big success for the clubhouse but a disaster for the crew, the iceberg had lifted finally from the ocean. And watching one part of the crew sway outside carelessly, he thought about his brother swaying inside dangerously, and the evil look on their cousin's face, no doubt the chief instigator in this terrible ordeal. Perhaps Barry would tell him too that this was but a molehill, but Fernando never sat down, this simple break now so rare that had Barry opted to smoke just a bit later he and the captain might have their first honest talk. No, Fernando was a man of action even if the action was menial. And when it was not, when the action required had implications larger than workplace routines and simple customer service, his mind went turning along a dial that could not be stopped.

Above all else, because it was in the back of his mind and formed the spine of all his thoughts, he thought about Yasmine.

She had asked him for another ride home.

When Fernando walked back inside, the mood was as he feared it would be. Alfredo, taunting his brother, was saying, "Oh? You're growing hair on your nuts all of a sudden? Let me see, I can't believe it."

Alonzo was pushing his antagonist away. "I'm not playing with you. You got me in trouble out there, dawg. I didn't think you would ever do that to me."

Alfredo laughed. Fernando hated the sound!

"You got yourself in trouble - I've seen five year old girls

hold tequila better than you.”

“That’s enough!” Fernando barked, his shoulders raised and his back arched.

Alfredo did not flinch. He turned on his heels, smiled deviously, and said, “Oh? You’ve got hair on your nuts now, too?”

“Wise guy. Funny man, huh?”

“It’s a little late, cousin. I’d give you a shot to celebrate but your fifi brother beat you to them.”

“Listen. You say whatever you want about me.”

Alfredo clapped his hands hard. “What do you think I’m doing now?”

Fernando continued, his voice throbbing. “But you leave my brother out of this. You hear me?”

Alfredo took a step forward and developed his own air of firm authority. “Then next time you go near my girl, why don’t you tell her how big and strong you were for little Pan-chito over there. I’m sure she’ll be just so impressed. ‘Oh Fernando,’” he said, in a mocking voice. “‘Oh Fernando, how brave! How strong! Oh Fernando!’” His eyelids fluttered like butterfly wings.

Alonzo wanted to speak up, to say something that would not divide what was already a broken relationship. And he wanted to stick up for himself and not allow Alfredo the pervasive thought that only Fernando could save him. He knew he had picked sides already, more than once, and had a foot on each side of the line in the sand so what good was he? He needed a diversion, just something to end it.

“We need to mop up in here,” he said, feeling stupid, weak, and guilty.

“Then let’s go then,” Fernando said, still staring into Alfre-

do's eyes.

Alfredo put his hands out and took a sideways step. Fernando walked with Alonzo soberly upstairs, their thumping footsteps disappearing into the Mexican rock music blaring from the kitchen. Alfredo got to work wiping down the counters around the sink and coffee machines, the ice machine, and the cake cutting table. He rapped to himself. He nodded his head like a rooster. He was alone and felt like he burned with the peace of God. He was at peace, deeply so, with his own actions. That was enough for him.

When the evening was over he said to Yasmine, "C'mon girl. I'm taking you home."

"I thought you were going to the races?"

"Not tonight. The races are boring. I don't need them."

"Please! You live for the races."

"What if tonight I live for you?"

"Tonight...what about next Saturday night?"

"Then too," he kissed her and she weakly accepted. He laughed and put his arms around her. She rested in them, looking uneasy. "You getting shy? Like when I first met you."

"No. I think you should go to the races. You love going, I know you do."

"Nah, girl. I told you! C'mon. I'll take you dancing."

Alfredo started c-walking in place, rapping to himself, and Yasmine had to giggle. When she saw the side she loved, she loved him all over again.

Fernando walked in to the service area but backed out quickly. He was going to tell Yasmine it was time to clock out, to go home, but he knew better.



He knew his head would ache in the morning, but he asked Cody for another cigarette and smoked on the way home, all the windows down and the air rushing into the car loud and warm. He and his brother would have to shout to hear each other, but it was just as well. Neither said a word.



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