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A World That Contained Men Like Him

Some men speak of angels and devils.

Some talk about their emotions or unbidden urges.

Aragón Urrea knew it as a battle between two parts of himself in the dead center of his soul.

Standing now at the edge of the spit-polished dance floor watching his daughter pinball between clusters of friends in her burnt-orange *quinceañera* dress, he understood that he could not be as bad as his reputation suggested because she came from him. Anjelina's hair fell across one eye. Her skin, smooth as satin. Tejano cheeks like her mother's, broad and defined. The impossible sweetness of her gaze.

A pair of rhinestone-studded high heels swung at her side, looped around her index finger, her head swaying to the band's cover of the Stones. *Wild, wild horses couldn't drag me awaaay*. He'd offered Mick Jagger ten million dollars to fly down here to no-fuck-where South Texas and sing it himself, but Mick Jagger didn't need ten million dollars or the reputational damage.

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Aragón watched his girl glide across the maple hardwood, her hips and shoulders moving separately and yet in sync, an orbit of muscle and grace. As if music was a language that spoke through her body when she danced.

He turned his gaze to the boys and men watching her. As they sensed his stare, they quickly moved their focus elsewhere.

Anjelina's purity—her inner light—brought a familiar ache to his chest. That the world did not deserve her. That it would hurt her as it was designed to hurt all beautiful young women. And that even if he summoned the whole of the power and menace at his disposal to preserve her innocence, he would eventually fail, because innocence was destined for spoiling.

The one perfect thing he'd ever had a hand in creating, and now he was haunted by her very existence—her vulnerability in a world that contained men like him. The curse of every father who loved beyond logic, beyond reason.

Tonight was her eighteenth birthday. And yet she'd recut and altered her *quinceañera* dress, not wanting to waste money on something new, on something that would put her even more fully in the spotlight. She didn't want to appear garish in front of the other girls from Eden, this expanse of unincorporated land upstream from Brownsville on the north bank of the yellow-brown sludge of the Rio Grande.

Aragón had refrigerator-size blocks of shrink-wrapped cash stacked in various structures around his compound, so many that he had to pay teams of men to rotate them so they wouldn't rot or wind up chewed to a pulp by rats. And yet Anjelina preferred to alter a three-year-old gown so as not to show anyone up, even wearing a shawl draped over her shoulders and hanging down her front side to dress down further. He'd offered her Mexico City, New York, or Paris for the venue, and she'd chosen the community center right here at home. Tissue-paper decorations and a buffet served up by Arnulfo and Hortensia, the rickety couple who owned the local taquería and needed the business.

Aragón sat at the most prominent table with his aunt, who'd been both mother and father to him since poverty had killed his parents

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shortly after his birth in a Hidalgo County regional hospital—*Mamá* from an undiagnosed bladder infection, *Papá* from a knife in the kidney when he'd tried to stop a fight behind a Whataburger in Corpus Christi.

The band was in inadvertent uniform—alligator-belly boots, sapphire cowboy shirts, bedazzled vests, true-blue jeans, and of course giant oval belt buckles featuring buckin' broncos or Indian-chief heads or bullshit family crests cranked out at the mall gift shop in McAllen.

With the faintest flare of a hand, Aragón conveyed his wishes across the dance floor. At the tiny movement, the lead singer stopped in mid-chorus, the music severed with guillotine finality. The singer mopped his forehead with a hanky, nodded to his compatriots, and the band struck up a Norteño number. The notes of the wheezing accordion nourished Aragón's very genes.

At the musical detour, Anjelina stopped dancing with her friends to set her arms akimbo and frown at her father with mock frustration. Then she broke into that life-affirming smile, impossibly symmetrical, impossibly wide, the smile of her mother, Belicia, who should be here at Aragón's side rather than languishing in her bedroom.

Anjelina flipped her high heels aside, and the men clapped and cheered and the women trilled and she was twirling and gliding, her lush brown curls washing across her eyes, gold locket bouncing just beneath her sparkle-dusted collarbones. A number of boys surrounded her and clapped, but none dared ask her to dance, not with Aragón under the same roof overseeing the festivities with stern paternalism and an aquiline profile worthy of a coin. And certainly not with his men stationed around the perimeter, hands crossed at their belt buckles, jackets bulging at the hips. The young men held their ground respectfully, waiting in hope for her to choose her partner for the waltz.

Slumped bonelessly in a chair at the periphery, the Esposito boy watched from beneath his mother's wing. Twelve years old with ankle-foot orthotics bowing out his sneakers on either side. His arms, wrapped in elbow-prophylactic braces, were splayed wide as

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if anticipating a hug. Last year Aragón had had him flown to the Cerebral Palsy Clinic at Cook Children's in Fort Worth so he could be neuroimaged and fitted with carbon-fiber prosthetics.

Anjelina slowed, calves fluttering in place, hips swaying, her movements tasteful if not chaste. Her focus swiveled to take in her options. The young men encircling her were peacocking, showing off their best moves, their best faces, their eyes shiny and eager.

But she looked right through them all to Nico Esposito. Then she drifted to the boy's table, the crowd parting. When she crouched in front of him, his distorted face lit up with joy. She took his hands and helped him to his feet.

Walking backward gingerly, she encouraged him onto the dance floor. He waddled nervously on his orthotics. She was six years older and a head taller, and yet Nico found a solidity to his ruined spine, rising to the moment because her attention demanded it. The braces held his arms aloft, a natural strong frame for the box step, the Velcro straps rasping against Anjelina's dress until she adjusted for even that.

She held him firmly to aid his balance, creating the illusion that he was leading, and all of a sudden he was moving in her arms and she in his and he was beaming, freed for the moment from the prison of his body. The other young men overcame their envy and clapped along, whooping and patting Nico on the back as Anjelina swept him within the throng of bodies. He was sweating, a sheen across his face, and yet his sloppy grin was unencumbered. They moved faster, faster, courting disaster right through the crescendo, and yet impossibly they finished the waltz, eliciting a hailstorm of cheers.

Leading Nico back to his mother, Anjelina eased him down into his chair and crouched before him. Even across the dance floor, Aragón could read her lips: *Thank you for the dance, guapo.*

Nico's dark eyes glowed, his face flushed from the miracle he'd just played a part in.

Aragón realized that his own cheeks were wet. And yet he was unashamed. Like them all, he was blessed to breathe the same air as his daughter, to admire her and know that some part of her was his and some part of him hers.

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La Tía reached across the table and took Aragón's hand. Her palm was dry, the skin papery. Arthritis gnarled her knuckles, but still she wore big turquoise rings on all her fingers. Over prominent wrinkles she'd applied foundation, blush, eye shadow, lipstick. Neither age nor ailment could dampen the spirit of a Mexican matriarch.

"My boy," she said. "Now you give your toast. Speak to your daughter."

Aragón stepped forward, and the hundred-plus bodies in the community center took note. The boys in their cheap church clothes and the men in their polyester two-tone suits and the women flashing shawls of primary colors. All that beautiful brown skin and the scent of cologne in the air and everyone hanging on his next movement.

Facing his daughter across the dance floor, Aragón held out a hand, and his body man, Eduardo Gómez, materialized out of thin air to place a flute of Cristal in his palm.

Aragón began his toast. "Today you turn eighteen." He paused, caught off guard by the emotion graveling his deep voice. "You become an adult in the eyes of the law. For me and your *mamá*—who wishes with all her heart that she could be here—this is wondrous. And yet also bittersweet."

"I'm sorry, Papá." Anjelina's eyes were moist, her slender fingers at her gold locket.

"You apologize too much," he said. "You must unlearn this now to be a woman." He turned to the crowd, catching a glimpse of himself in the big window's reflection. Broad shoulders, undiminished by age. Big, bold features. Ugly-handsome and virile, like Carlos Fuentes or Charles Bronson. "Our children grow up and our hearts hurt for it, but they must grow up." He swung the flute back toward his daughter, the perfumed liquid catching the light, fizzing and straw-colored. "They tell us it goes by so swiftly. Blink and they're grown. But the thing is . . ."

He felt the gravel gathering in his voice and paused once more to compose himself.

"It didn't go by fast for me. I didn't miss a single moment. Not when you were one breath old and I held you to my chest. Those first steps on the front lawn of the church, how you wobbled and

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fell and got back up again. Three years old in panties and sandals and not a stitch more, clanging pots and pans on the floor of the kitchen. Your first tooth falling out. I remember listening at the door of your piano lesson while you tortured over the fingering for 'Here Comes the Sun.' Picking you up from cross-country practice when you were all braces and a messy ponytail and that awful music you'd sing into your deodorant stick on the drive— Who was it?"

Anjelina was hugging herself around her stomach, crying and smiling. "Ed Sheeran."

"Yes. Yes. Sheeran. And that bad haircut you got before your confirmation. Your first dance. That time you crashed your car—" He crossed himself. "Our trip to Zihuatanejo during Semana Santa and the fight we had over that string bikini—"

"It wasn't a *string* bikini, Papá!"

"You're right. More like dental floss."

Laughter washed through the room.

"Feeding you ice chips when your wisdom teeth came out. How you cried yourself to sleep the night we had to put Lulu down. And now your eighteenth—" He stopped, his eyes moistening. Cleared his throat. And again. The room waited for him. He lifted his gaze to her once more. "I didn't miss a second of you."

Heat in his chest. His throat. There was a heartbreak in every rite of passage, in every living moment if careful attention were paid. Not a shattering or crumbling of the heart but a cracking open to accommodate *more*. More feeling, more understanding, more room for the cruelty of time without which there could be no beauty, no meaning. It was so much greater than anything he could convey here amid the cheap birthday decorations and fake wood paneling and the scent of cilantro and table wine. She had saved him. She had breathed life into him. She had civilized him, turned him into a human.

The community center was silent. The squeak of a shoe on the dance floor. Someone coughed. La Tía held a crumpled tissue at the ready. Could the emotion of this moment squeeze a tear from even her?

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Aragón cleared his throat. Hoisted the flute. "*Hija de mi alma*. To you. The best person I know."

The hall thundered with applause, as much from relief as anything else. He sipped, set his glass down, and the band struck up a lively western number. Anjelina wiped at her face and held her arms wide for him to cross the dance floor and meet her in an embrace. He paused to admire her. There was an impossible hugeness to her dark eyes that brought him back to when she was two, seven, thirteen. Maybe that's all aging was, an ability to see the past in the present, to comprehend the totality of a living soul all at once. Maybe that's what love was, too.

As he started for her, Eduardo grasped his biceps gently. As Aragón's right-hand man, he was permitted a casual proximity that Aragón's other men wouldn't dare attempt. "The business we discussed, *Patrón*," he said quietly. "It requires you. We have him waiting in the next room."

Aragón hesitated and regarded his daughter once more through the press of bodies. One of her girlfriends—Teresa, the chesty one—tugged at her hand, reeling her toward the dance floor.

Eduardo released Aragón's arm and tilted his head to the door behind them.

Aragón gestured to his daughter. *Be right back*.

Before she could respond, she was swept into the dance-floor mix.

He followed Eduardo out, his other men coalescing at his back. He had not nearly as many enemies as he once had, but that left plenty still.

Even at ten at night, the South Texas humidity hit him in the face like a tar mop. They'd taken Chucho Ochoa to the administrative office building next door. This was helpful. For what was to come, adjoining walls were not preferable.

As they pushed into the lobby, Eduardo hummed to himself off-key, another of the tics that had earned him the nickname "Special Ed." He wore cover-up to hide the acne scars pitting both cheeks, a particular the others noticed but didn't dare acknowledge. He had a tattoo of a gun at his appendix and upper groin, so when he let his guayabera flutter open, it looked like he had a weapon tucked

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into his belt. Right now the ink was redundant, a Glock 21 with a gleaming hard-chromed slide set in place over the tattoo like a saw filling out its outline on a workshop pegboard.

On one side of the lobby, Chucho slumped in a vinyl chair as if he'd been soft-served into it. Chipped nails from working the sorghum fields, jeans with dirt stains at the knees, sun damage ripening his middle-aged face into that of a septuagenarian. A homely man with a hawk nose, folds of skin gathered like fabric around the eyes. His face quivered, on the verge of crying, and his hand jogged back and forth in his lap in something just shy of a tremor.

On the opposite side of the lobby, as far from Chucho as the room allowed, sat Silvia Vélez and her nineteen-year-old daughter, Celine. A pretty girl, shiny dark straight hair, full in the face and chest and hips. She was curled into her mother's side, feet drawn beneath her, her face pressed to the ledge of her mother's bosom. Her shirt was pulled up to reveal a strip of smooth flesh at the waist. There was a bruise around her right eye. Silvia looked as weary as Aragón had ever seen her, eyes sunken as if trying to retreat into her skull. She'd been working hard in Eden for the past five years, sending money back to her husband in Reynosa.

Like the hundred or so bodies next door, they were Aragón's people. All the residents of Eden were his people. They flourished in the light of his grace and withered in its absence.

Aragón's number three, Enrique Pérez, stood at the back of the room, hidden in shadow, thumbs looped through the wide leather belt along with the holster of his overcompensatory *Dirty Harry* S&W .44 Magnum. To augment his height, he wore lifts in his cowboy boots that pushed him to five-seven. A distended beer belly stretched his polo shirt, dimpled by his belt buckle. A bristling mustache sought to add gravitas to his sweet, soft face. He went by "Kiki," which, on top of his partnership with Eduardo, had saddled him with the inevitable sobriquet "Special K."

Kiki held his head tilted back as always, either in an assumed air of righteousness or to smooth out the rolls of his chin. "Patrón," he said.

Aragón strode across the open floor between the parallel rows of hideous chairs. They were cheaply cushioned beneath cracked teal

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vinyl, connected armrest to armrest, suited to a hospital or a DMV. His men spread out through the room, positioning along the walls.

Chucho slid himself forward, elbows finding his knees, his eyes rising only far enough to take in the tips of Aragón's boots. Even at this small movement, Celina gave a little cry and burrowed further into her mother, her childish affect so at odds with her womanly body. Nineteen was such a confusing age for girls. Confusing for them and for men lacking restraint.

"I'm sorry, Don Urrea," Chucho said, his voice soft with humility. "I couldn't help myself."

"Couldn't help yourself." Aragón paced over, breathing down on Chucho's head until he lifted his gaze. "You want to give her that power? You want to let a nineteen-year-old girl reduce you? A husband? A father? A son? Reduce you to a savage?"

"I'm sorry, Don Urrea. I'd worked a long day. She was walking along the roadside wearing a tight dress. Very revealing."

"I am saving for new clothes for her," Silvia snarled, patting her daughter's head. "It was not a revealing dress. It was too small."

"Please, Doña Vélez," Aragón said. "Allow me."

Silvia silenced.

He turned back to Chucho. "Did Celina ask for your attention?"

"It was impossible not to give it."

"Impossible." Aragón tried the word on, found it not to his liking. "Did she resist you?"

Chucho folded his hands, stared down at them. "Sometimes girls like a man to be in charge."

Across the lobby Celina sniffled and covered her exposed ear with the flat of her palm.

"But she did not, and she told you," Aragón said. "Women should never be dominated. If you want a woman, you must earn her."

"You're right, Don Urrea. I am ashamed."

Aragón's chest filled with a cold-burning rage, a flame inside a block of ice.

"Shame," he said. "Men get to have this kind of shame. Do you know what a woman has? *Fear*. Fear that a man like you will come along, pry her open, and shove yourself inside her. That you'll blacken her eye, take from her what she doesn't want to give. That

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she'll have to remember the stink of you for the rest of her life. That she'll see you in the darkness of every room she enters before she turns on the light. That she'll need to fight you out of the memories of her muscles on her wedding night. That she'll go to her grave having learned that she can be reduced to a thing because some men"—and here he paused to give oxygen to his disdain—"cannot help themselves."

As Aragón spoke, Chucho deflated in his chair, shoulders bowing, arms curling inward.

"And," Aragón said, "she has shame, too. Not your shame. Your shame is a luxury. *Her* shame is a stain you put on her soul."

"I'm sorry." Chucho's words came warped from sobs. "I'm sorry, Don Urrea."

"Do you remember Juan Manuel Marín?"

Chucho broke now, his head drooping, the bumps of the vertebrae thrusting up at the base of his neck like knuckles. He shook and drooled a bit onto his knee. "Please, Don Urrea. Please, no."

"Do you remember him?"

Unable to muster words, Chucho nodded.

Everyone in Eden remembered. A few years ago, Marín had visited a similar violation upon a school friend of Anjelina's. By sunrise the next day, he'd found himself tied naked to a street sign in Matamoros, the south-of-the-border town from which the girl's family hailed. She had sixteen cousins still there, ten of them male and capable with hacksaws.

"You have two choices," Aragón told the top of Chucho's head. "You can greet the sun tomorrow morning in Reynosa. Or we will take all ten of your digits at the first knuckle."

A wail escaped Chucho. It did not sound human.

"You will be allowed stitches."

"Please," Chucho sobbed. He reached for Aragón's hand, but Aragón held it limp until he let go. "Please. How will I work? My family?"

"I will take care of Daniela and your sons. They will not want for basics."

"No," Chucho said. "*No no no.*"

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"Not answering evil is the greatest evil of all," Aragón said. "I will not let you ensnare me in your sin. Choose."

"Don Urrea, I beg of you—"

"Choose!"

Chucho jerked back, hair spilled across his eyes, chest heaving. He stared at Aragón, but Aragón gave nothing up. He was a wall of stone.

Chucho shook his head like a child, stifled a sob.

And then—slowly, slowly—held out his hands, proffering his trembling fingers.

Kiki reached in his back pocket, removed a pair of pruning shears, and handed them to Special Ed.

Urrea turned to Silvia and Celina. "*Señoritas*," he said. "You may remain or not, as you desire."

Celina pried herself from her mother and rushed out, hand clamped over her mouth. Silvia straightened in her chair. "I will watch every last second."

"Then I will leave you in the care of my men, Doña Vélez."

Chucho slid out of his chair, puddled on the tile, and curled into a loose fetal position. Advancing on him, Eduardo flicked the catch on the shears, and the spring-loaded blades scissored open with a sound like a plucked wire.

Aragón exited, closing the door firmly behind him.

The wind scraped between the buildings, drowning out the sound of Chucho's wail. An actual tumbleweed jounced along the corridor like an escapee from a Gary Cooper movie. Aragón paused to watch it journey out beyond the lights into the eternal dirt. He could taste grit in the humid air. This blessed godforsaken land.

He swung open the door to the dance hall and halted at the threshold. His breath froze in his chest. It was immediately apparent that something horrible had happened. The guests stood immobile on the dance floor, the band silent, instruments lowered. A napkin swirled above the dais, caught on a current from . . . what? There: The big window shattered, the rear door shuddering in its frame as if it had been slammed open. A trio of overturned chairs and the buffet table knocked askew.