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## Before You Go

by Renato Escudero

Ray hunched over his desk in the print shop, sorting today's invoices and fanned in the stack, he found a letter from his old roommate in Florida. There was another envelope inside and a note that said, "Hey, coño, why don't you keep in touch? Here's something I got in the mail for you. I wonder what she wants after all these years, right? Your pal, Efrán." Ray held the second envelope against the overhead light. News from Naples. What could it hurt? A confident thumb tore right through it. He was finally setting down roots in California, and not even Tiffany Foster could yank them out of fertile soil.

"Dear Ray," said the letter, "We've never met. I'm Elaine Foster, and there's something you should know about my daughter Tiffany." Seeing the name in ink startled him. He folded the letter and put it in his shirt pocket. It felt hot against his chest –too hot– and he had better let it cool down before opening it again. It would be best now to go check on the certificates of "outstanding citizenship" for the American Civil Liberties Union. Or to finish his own speech for tomorrow night's meeting.

Ray went home after work to his little house in San Jose, took off his shoes and called Marisa. He hadn't done anything wrong, so why did he feel unfaithful? "How are you, honey?" he said, a gargled H on honey.

Although his English was almost perfect now, the small words like honey still gave him difficulty. He'd always felt his accent was distinguished, though Tiffany had insisted on giving him elocution lessons when they had started dating fifteen years before.

"My New Mr. Racial Relations Coordinator," Marisa said on the phone. "Are you excited? Just don't let your speech interfere with more important duties."

Marisa, unlike Ray, was a second generation Latina and a U.S. citizen. Fundamentally, she was just as American as Tiffany. Still, Marisa wouldn't dream of forcing elocution lessons on Ray or expect him not to mobilize immigrants. She attended most of the Union events, even participated sometimes with her high school students. But this morning's unread letter had stirred up old feelings in Ray about the white girl who had broken his heart. Tiffany was so white that when she'd sweat, a pink hue would gloss over her skin, and when she was mad –or particularly animated– her face would redden, a red almost as bright as her big hair. Marisa's skin was a creamy gold, and when she tanned she put on a smooth coat of milk chocolate. Ray liked chocolate, but not as much as strawberries.

"Are you on your way? I have a special merienda for you," he said to Marisa.

"Ay Raymundo, I just spoke with Mamá. We've so much to do for next week, but tonight's just for us."

As the strawberry cheesecake was baking, Ray changed into his comfortable khakis, put on his favorite old sweater, a brown one with suede breast pockets. He looked like a man who wasn't exactly fat but was trying to lose weight. Tall, droopy shoulders, hair trimmed too short. He went out on the porch to wait for Marisa. Over a cigarette, he read Mrs. Foster's letter. The cigarette fell right out of his mouth. He had to read the letter again, round cheeks flushing. Wedding or no wedding, he needed to go to Florida immediately.

Marisa showed up. A dainty woman –beyond her first youth– with copious lips and elegant lashes. Black hair, smartly pulled back. She wore large silver hoops that hung down from her ears and brushed her collarbone. As she leaped onto the porch, a wave of lavender perfume and Walgreens hairspray landed on Ray.

"Marisa," he said. She was wearing a white halter-top and tight Polo jeans. Tiffany, whom he'd called the Denim Princess of Florida, would wear her jeans and Bermudas baggy.

"I love the way you say my name," said Marisa, referring to his pronunciation: "Mah-ree-za." She kissed him. "Can I bum a smoke?" She sat on his lap, and they shared a cigarette. Ray lit it, gave it to her, and they passed it back and forth while Marisa told him about her day. Ray got up, carrying Marisa to her feet.

"You're very quiet," she said, blinking anxious lashes, tilting her neck upward to see his face.

Tiffany Foster was as tall as Ray; they could see each other eye-to-eye. He'd often told her there were plenty of tall Mexicans, and many who were light-skinned, too, like himself. "But aren't Mexicans people of color?" She'd ask. "That's just Hollywood, Teef," was reply in his heavy accent back then. Educating Americans about the different kinds of Mexicans – colors, sizes and social classes– normally aggravated him. But Tiffany was his girl. And to prove his love, he learned Shakespeare sonnets –in English– hoping to delight the actress in her.

*...Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom...*

"That's sweet, Ray," said Tiffany, "but what's with this 'doom' business?"

Marisa, on the other hand, really appreciated Shakespeare. On occasion she'd feature Romeo and Juliet in her curriculum for freshmen. "He's all about language," she had said once.

"Exactly," Ray chirped. "Language and emotion and logic and issues."

But now on the porch, Ray knew that Shakespeare couldn't help him tell Marisa about Mrs. Foster's letter. He tried, but she interrupted.

"Tiffany? Tiffany Foster, your ex-fiancée, wants to see you all of a sudden?"

A strong, sweet scent came from the kitchen, like Pop Tarts in a toaster. "Cheesecake," Ray exclaimed, dashing into the house.

Marisa followed. "And why is her mother writing you letters?"

Ray put the cheesecake on the counter. "It's burnt," he said fretfully.

"Don't change the subject." She tasted the meatballs as Ray drained the pasta. "Albóndigas! Now I know you're up to something. This dinner is not going to shut me up."

He took her by shoulders, pulled her gently toward him. After three years, he still couldn't get used to moving Marisa's body so easily. He'd never been able to do that with Tiffany, who was bigger than him. Ray would say she had a "large skeleton." But she'd correct him, "You mean I have a 'large frame.' Nope, let's face it, I'm a chunky girl."

Marisa stood motionless in Ray's embrace, resting fistful hands on his chest. She looked up at him, her long eyelashes very still. "Well?"

"This is important, Mari."

"And our wedding isn't? You're not actually thinking of going? Raymundo, she's 3,000 miles away. She can give you a call."

Ray started quoting Shakespeare, and Marisa walked out onto the porch.

"Tiffany's dying," he called out, though he still didn't believe it himself, and Marisa crept back into kitchen. "She's been sick a long time, she's not responding to the chemo."

Marisa held his face. "Dios mio, I had no idea. Let me come with you."

"That wouldn't be such a good plan."

She blinked at him. "Okay," she said cautiously, "but remember that Tia Evita is bringing a carload of primos up from Jalisco, and we need to show them around before Saturday."

Ray scooped the meatballs into a serving bowl and carried them out to the table.

\* \* \* \*

During the spring semester of 1991, Ray was a slender young man, recently shipped from México, who didn't know the meaning of fast food. The day he met Tiffany, he spilled tea on her fancy journal.

"I'm sorry, Miss," said Ray, wiping the page with two fingers, which smeared some of her text.

"Stop. Next time you spill tea on a girl's diary, just go like this, okay?" She took a napkin and gently dabbed it on the stain. She went back to her writing.

"Sorry, Miss."

They were sitting at Kool Beans Café in Miami, at the corner of an L-shaped counter.

Pretending to read a textbook, he studied the girl as she wrote. Had he seen her on campus? She had a thick bush of hair clasped to the top of her head, a few

strands sprouting out, some coiling down her neck, some lingering at her cheeks; it was red –no– an incandescent orange, like the setting sun. Her round face held a serious nose and big amber eyes splashed with blue flecks. Ray wondered if they changed color depending on her mood. Months later, he was convinced that they did. She wrote furiously, now stopping for a breath, now starting again with renewed purpose. There was a splotch of ink on the back of her hand. Ray found it especially sexy.

"Excuse me," he started again.

She looked up at him a bit puzzled, still writing. There was a presence about her, commanded by her speckled eyes.

"Are you a writer?" he asked, his voice faltering.

She laughed. There were spaces between her upper front teeth. "Funny. If you must know, I'm an actor." She slapped her journal shut. A powder blue sky with clouds was printed on the front cover. "I appreciate the attention, but you better not be trying to pick me up."

Ray was confused. Why would he lift her? Could he negotiate her weight? "No, of course not, that would be impractical." He felt her eyes pin him down. He finished his tea. "So, you write every day?"

She opened her book again. Ray couldn't figure her out. It seemed like she wanted to talk and didn't want to talk at the same time. Was she writing about a handsome stranger, trying to engage her in conversation? Or About an idiota who wouldn't leave her alone? "The last thing. You're busy, so maybe you don't notice, but there's one ink stain on your hand."

"One ink stain?" she said mockingly. "You mean 'an' ink stain, not 'one' ink stain. Anyway, it's a birthmark."

"Sure, Miss. What does it mean, 'birthmark'?"

"Don't call me Miss. If you don't mind, I'm kind of busy."

"I didn't want to trouble you," he said, getting up. As he walked out of the place, he slapped himself on the forehead and, while the glass door was closing behind him, he heard a giggle echoing inside.

The next day she appeared at his bus stop. "You're that guy from the coffee shop. Look, I get possessed when I write."

"Long time no see you," he chuckled.

"The expression is 'long time no see'. Are you Argentinean?"

"No, I'm Mexican...from México City," he said proudly.

"As opposed to a Mexican from Beijing?" She slapped him on the arm. They both laughed a little dizzily. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. You don't look Mexican."

She asked him out on a date, the first of many. Eye contact was a must with Tiffany. She could interrogate him with a simple look, and she kissed with her

eyes wide open. It took him some time to get used to it, but when he did, they shared long, open-eyed kisses, and Ray felt that his entire being could fit comfortably inside her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Ray booked a ticket to Miami online, while Marisa was in the shower. He'd already informed his assistant manager at the print shop, but Marisa would have to ask a colleague at the ACLU to give a speech in his place. And worry about wedding emergencies with her Mamá. When she got out of the bathroom, Ray was bent over his suitcase on the bed, reorganizing socks and T-shirts.

"How long are you staying?" she asked, combing her wet hair while walking toward him. Ray could hear a trail of sprinkles falling on the hardwood floor, but he didn't expect to see her naked when he looked up. He took a step back and went around the bed. As she got closer, he stubbed his toe on the bed frame.

"What's wrong?" she asked with a wobbly smile. Her hand reached around the back of his neck, drew him in. She kissed him. When he didn't kiss her back, she sighed and rushed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. She came right back, wrapped tightly in a white robe. "I hope she isn't suffering too much."

"That's very thoughtful."

Marisa sat on the bed, propping herself against the wall. She put her knees to her chest, curled her arms around them.

Ray tossed his suitcase on the floor, sat next to Marisa, tried to hold her, but he couldn't stop thinking about Tiffany. Would she make it till he got there? "Mari, I didn't mean to be rude to you."

Marisa pulled back; her body was stiff. "I can only imagine how you're feeling."

He cupped a hand on her bony knee, but she brushed it off. He rolled over and tried to fall asleep.

The next day, they walked out into the spring morning. It was a little nippy. They sat on the porch. Didn't talk, didn't hold hands. Smoked separate cigarettes. Drove in silence to the airport. When they got to his terminal Marisa said, "Don't forget about me. About us."

\* \* \* \*

Ray and Tiffany celebrated their first anniversary in Key West in the spring of 1992. They had all the drinking, beach parties, nightclub dancing, and tipsy lovemaking that two young people could want; the joy of bright neon lights, the freedom of walking around in bathing suits and sandals. He quoted Shakespeare. Poetry recitals in the streets, with tourists and fishermen wondering how drunk he was. She pretended to swoon. The pretending was just as exciting as the sweaty after-Shakespeare moments. And what about his famous love letters written in purple? After a while Tiffany would say, "This is getting silly." But she kept on buying him stationery paper and magic markers, even got him a used guitar.

"But I don't know how to play."

"Looks good on you."

She taught him the three chords she knew, and by the end of the week he'd written a song for her, "When a Mexicano Loves a Gringa," which he sang off key, but that was just fine.

On the last day of their vacation, they played volleyball on the beach. He loved to see her sweat, the way she exuded pheromones. They swam and laughed and made out in the ocean. "Don't you like floating like this?" she said, pushing herself back, extending her arms out. "I could stay here forever."

Afterwards on the beach, she asked him to tell her stories about México City. Ray went over his usual repertoire: poverty, corruption, traffic, smog, noise, street vendors, pickpockets.

"Oh Ray, aren't you lucky to live here now."

"But, Teef, everything blooms in the Valley of México because of much summer rain. My old Volkswagen worked with rubber bands and the imagination. There's mysticism in the parks, and so many balloons. Is where I come from, and my aunt makes parties of three days." He rolled on top of her, straddled his legs around her waist. She turned over, he fell off, and they laughed, throwing sand at each other. "Mexican hospitality has no rivals, eh."

"Hey, hey," she said, this time getting on top of him, "if you want hospitality, just wait till I take you home to Naples." She tickled him, and he pulled her close for a kiss. "They won't let you do this, but they'll give you the shirt off their back."

"I already have a shirt."

"But you're not wearing it right now, are you?"

"You make a point."

Hand in hand they walked to their room. They slept a while and made love in the early hours of the morning. Then sat right outside, legs stretched out, toes sparring with sand. As the sun rose, Tiffany said, "I think we should get married."

Ray jumped up and howled with bulging eyes, "What?!" He stared at her; she was glistening in the new sun, one hand on a hip, hair hugging her shoulders.

Tiffany got on one knee, took his hand. "Marry me, Raymundo José-Maria Quintana."

He got on all fours, kissed her, saying, "Yes, yes, Teef!" And they rolled in the sand.

\* \* \* \*

A few months later, Ray and Tiffany were lying on his bed in Efrán's house, discussing their future. He was rubbing the birthmark on her hand, but she pulled away, averting her eyes—an unusual reaction. She stared out the window, as they made plans for their honeymoon in México. Something was bothering her.

Maybe she wasn't overjoyed that he'd signed up to be a canvasser with the ACLU. He had told her they were "desesperated" for volunteers to hand out workers' rights pamphlets to Cuban-American businesses.

"Desperate," she said.

He explained his excitement to be working with immigrants, that he could relate to them even though they weren't Mexican. But Tiffany didn't feel like talking.

They went to Clarisol's Tortería, a small Cuban restaurant with no air-conditioning, and sat under the only ceiling fan, which moved slowly. Efrán and Clarisol were an unlikely couple, but to Ray they made sense together. Efrán was a Cuban refugee in his forties, always dreaming of returning to the country he'd been forced to leave. He was a short and dark man with a messy mustache that attracted sauces and sour cream. He had a big belly and thin legs.

Clarisol was a Hialeah native, young and spunky, who wore more makeup than she needed and already had four children of her own. She'd come up with a different number every time Tiffany asked her age.

Efrán led the conversation in his deep voice, which sounded like the mufflers on the cars he sold. Ray thought he had a funny accent and could never figure out when he was joking around. "You marry Red," said Efrán pointing at Tiffany, "and get your citizenship, then you'll really be able to mobilize us Latinos to take over government. And remove Fidel from Cuba once and for all." He laughed. "Yeah, Flaquito, you'd get my vote if I had one."

"Ya basta, Gordo," said Clarisol, "Ray's not a politician. He's an activist." Her accent was just like Tiffany's, only whinier, and she had the habit of making her vowels linger in the air, especially around her diphthongs. "Why don't you let us enjoy our meal in peace?"

"You're a political activist?" Tiffany asked.

"Not exactly," said Ray. "I tried to tell you about it." He touched her; she didn't want to be touched. "But, Gordo," he said to Efrán, "Why do you think I want to be a citizen here?"

"You don't want to be an American?" Tiffany blurted out.

"Coño," said Efrán, "it wouldn't hurt to be able to vote and have the representation you deserve. If this one agrees to marry me, I'll apply for citizenship on my wedding day." He chuckled.

"Ay, qué romantic!" Clarisol said, laughing. "I'll marry you the day you adopt my kids."

"Ay, Negra," Efrán roared, "you're killing me." Their lips touched over their sandwiches, even with the sauce on his mustache. More than a kiss, it was two big smiles coming together.

"Why don't you want to become a citizen, Ray?" Tiffany spoke with a look of consternation. She wasn't eating much.

Before Ray could answer Efrán's loud voice came rumbling through, "Flaquito,

Red's right. It's just a piece of paper that can come in handy."

"It's symbolical," said Ray. "If I get it, I feel guilty that I'm forsaking México. Like you, I want to go back to my country some day."

"Coño, our circumstances are totally different. Don't be such a nationalist. Why did you come to this country anyway? Your patriotism and allegiances are in your blood and in your heart. You can be a citizen here and still go back to México any time you want."

Ray simply retorted by saying it wasn't that "simplistic."

Tiffany excused herself and went to the bathroom. Clarisol asked Ray what was wrong with Tiffany tonight, and Ray didn't know what to say. Tiffany came back to the table looking pale or, rather, her skin had a yellow tint. "I think I should go home," she said.

Later in the car Ray said, "Are you okay? You don't look very good."

She gave him a frown and lowered the passenger mirror. She studied her face awhile. "Larry at The Playhouse wouldn't agree with you."

"Who's Larry?"

"Look Ray, don't smother me, all right?"

\* \* \* \*

They spotted each other outside of baggage claim in a hot blur of moist air. Efrán was coming through the walkway from the parking lot. He looked exactly the same; the only difference was that he had a few gray hairs on his mustache, and his sideburns were completely white. "Gordo!" exclaimed Ray, as they shared a big manly hug. "Qué pasó, Gordo?"

"Hijo de puta!" said Efrán, patting Ray on the back with gusto. "What the hell? Look who's talking. You are getting fat."

"Not as fat as you yet, still have some room to grow."

"Shit, me lleva la mierda, it's good to see you. You getting married? When were you gonna send me my invitation? Not trying to guilt trip you, or anything. That little Mexican señorita of yours is feeding you too well. She already called, and we talked for an hour."

"Actually, Gordo, I do the cooking."

Efrán offered a loud chuckle. "You're a fucking riot, man, you do the cooking! Always getting involved with women that like to call the shots. I bet Maritza wears the pants in the relationship. You're still finding ways to defy the natural order of things. Me lleva el coño!"

"It just dawned on me," said Ray, putting his arm around his friend, "you actually have no idea of what you're talking about."

"Ay, listen to you. You don't sound like a proper Mexican anymore. Where's that



beautiful accent of yours?"

They walked to Efrán's '85 Mustang GT, the same one he had let Ray drive around in the nineties – polarized windows now, a decent spoiler. On the ride to Hialeah, Efrán told Ray about his wedding –why hadn't he come to eat cake?– and how the kids were practically grownups, that they called him "Jefe." They drove by his brand new lot on Okeechobee Road under a glimmering billboard: Efrán in a Hawaiian shirt, a caption saying, "No credit? No hay problema!"

"By the way," he said, "Clarisol and the kids are at her mother's, so we have the house to ourselves, like the old days."

Ray told Efrán about managing the print shop and his promotions at the ACLU. When he started talking about the symbiotic relationship between language and culture, and the Language Rights Project in California, Efrán chortled in his deep voice, "Mierda! How many times I told you! You should run for office. You a citizen now?"

"Yes, I'm a Mexican Citizen," said Ray.

Efrán and Clarisol's new house was much bigger than the one Ray had boarded in. Great central air. Efrán got the tequila from the bar, and Ray started spinning theories about why Tiffany had left him.

"Because you wouldn't get citizenship?" Efrán coughed. "Don't serve me that horseshit! Let it go already, Flaquito –I feel funny calling you that– you've really put on some weight."

"I'm serious, Gordo!"

"Yeah, yeah. Mira, the girl's dying. Who knows if she'll make it another day. Your Maritza said you forgot the letter with the all information, so she gave it to me. Resourceful little muchachita. From what I can tell she's bien simpática, sounds as sweet as a candy bar – not that you need any more candy bars! Anyway, Maritza and I are buddies now."

"Marisa," Ray corrected him.

"Ay, don't get Tiffany Foster-like with me... Sorry, I didn't mean that. It's all set up. I called Elaine Foster myself. You're leaving tomorrow at 6:00 AM, but take care of my car.

Don't speed through the Everglades. And do me a favor, call Marisa! She wants to know if your cousin Memo would like chicken or beef."

"Tell me, Gordo, why do you think she left me, then?"

"Co-ño!!!"

"Please, humor me."

"When did you become so selfish? Did you come all the way from California because she asked you to, or to hound her for something that happened ages ago? Maybe she felt neglected. As I see it, in the end you were spending all your time at the Union. I remember one night she came over after some rehearsal to

wait for you, but you never showed up. Clarisol and I played dominoes with her till midnight.”

“When was that?”

“You think I remember the date?” Efrán served two more shots of tequila. “Here. May she go easy and rest evermore. And to us, the lucky ones who still have our health, and people to love.”

As they drank, Ray realized that he'd missed his best friend, his humor, his blunt Cuban compassion. Maybe Efrán was right and Ray really ought to be thinking a little more about Marisa.

The telephone rang. Efrán picked it up and gave it to Ray.

A faint voice came on, "Hello...Ray?"

Ray stumbled on his words, "Tiffany? How are you feeling?"

"Been better," she muttered and took a loud slurp of air. She sounded like an old lady.

"I'll be in Naples in the morning."

"That's good...just wanted to hear your voice...okay, I better...I'm really tired... Ray...there's so much..." and between short, pumping breaths "...to say." She let the phone drop. Someone on the other end hung it up.

Ray gulped down his tequila and threw himself on Efrán's couch. He screamed into a cushion, "Why?! Why?!"

Efrán pulled a chair close to Ray. "There, there, coño, you never got over Red, did you? Let it all out."

After giving the cushion a good beating, Ray sat up. His eyes were bloodshot, veins rippling in his forehead and temples. Efrán brought him some water and asked, "Done now?"

"Ay, Gordo, I'm putting on quite a show for you."

"It's perfectly fine."

Ray laughed a little. "You think it's okay for a man to cry like this?"

"Just ask Clarisol, every time the Dolphins don't make it to the playoffs I cry like a baby."

\* \* \* \*

Ray had never been to Naples before – a little beach town with more than a few golf courses, antique shops and palm trees of all sizes. The cloudless sky was clearer than Miami's, a powder blue, almost white, and the expansive gulf was pale green. College kids were playing volleyball on the sand. He parked in front of The Foster Dive, a convenience store between two motels not far from the ocean. A girl with a mess of curly red hair and very white skin was walking out of

the store. She said hi to Ray. He felt a pang, couldn't respond.

Mrs. Foster's house, attached to the back of the store, looked like a large cabaña. He wasn't ready to go in. The small front yard, a blotch of dirt with some yellow grass, gave way to a square with a stone fountain, a broken porpoise. Ray walked toward the beach on a wooden boardwalk lined with trees, some birds flying overhead, and a warm, gentle breeze swaying and flopping against the branches. It was bright and hot. He could feel his pores expanding. People were running on the beach, swimming in the ocean, a couple kissing in the water.

Ray walked back to Mrs. Foster's house. The place reminded him of their motel in Key West, so close to suntan lotion and the fragrances of life. He knocked. All the shutters were down. The door opened. He saw a stout woman in a sundress, an apron over it. "Mrs. Foster?"

She let out a loud whisper, "Oh, my God, Ray?" She shuffled out to the landing in slippers, grabbed him by the shoulders and inspected him up and down. "You don't look anything like your picture." She gave him a big hug. "Tiffany never stops talking about you." Mrs. Foster spoke softly and squeezed his hands, told him to be quiet because Tiffany was asleep. "The A/C bothers her. Sorry about that."

The house was dank and hotter than outside. It smelled of medicine and urine. Ray squinted in the small cave, and when his irises adjusted to the dimness, he saw clusters of plastic-covered furniture of no particular color. Mrs. Foster sat him down on a couch facing Tiffany, who was sprawled over an easy chair. His face softened, the sweat around his neck suddenly felt cold. She was all bones and saggy skin, sleeping with her mouth open, lips dry and purple, tubes coming out of her nose. An IV plugged into an atrophied arm. Even the birthmark on her hand looked withered away, almost erased. She wore shorts, and her legs were as thin as a child's, except the skin around the knees was wrinkled. Her face no longer held the roundness he remembered. It was gaunt and yellow, her upper teeth jutting outward. A scarf covered her head. There was no hair beneath the cloth. He squirmed. His teeth began to chatter, and he tried to swallow a lump that was growing in his throat. He didn't even notice the large nurse next to Tiffany until she tapped the girl on the shoulder, lisping, "Ray's here, baby doll."

Tiffany moaned a low, dry moan. She had a hard time opening her eyes, but at least Ray took comfort in the fact that they were still speckled. "Ray?" she sighed. It seemed like she was going to doze off again, but she managed to say, "You look good."

Ray felt that he was sinking into the couch, so he pushed his fists hard against the cushions to hold himself up. The muscles in his thighs and calves stiffened. "You've always been the looker, Tiffany," he said.

She wanted to laugh but couldn't. With great effort she said, "Mama...the journal."

Mrs. Foster went to her daughter, ran a hand over her forehead and said, "I'll get it, dear." Mrs. Foster and the nurse left the room. The visit seemed well rehearsed.

Ray approached Tiffany carefully, leaned on the armrest of her chair. He held her hand, tracing his thumb over what was left of the birthmark. She smiled with sleepy eyes. Ray wanted to believe that he could bring her back to health by

stroking that wrinkled hand. But what if he pressed too hard? He placed it back in her lap and readjusted some stray pillows.

“Sweet boy...so glad you came,” she spoke slowly, conserving strength. “When I first saw you...you thought you were so cool...but so did I.” She tried to pinch his cheek but her hand couldn’t make the journey. “Did you know I followed you to your bus stop? Something inside me said, ‘You’ll regret it if you don’t.’ What would’ve happened if I never let you go?”

“You didn’t have to,” said Ray. The lump in his throat began to taste like iodine. “We could have been together. Why didn’t you let me take care of you?” He put his hands in his pockets to stop them from trembling. “All these years I’ve tried to figure out what I did wrong.”

“It wasn’t you, Ray...I needed my Mama.”

Against his will, he jumped up and geared himself to argue. Why hadn’t she included him in the decision? But when he looked down at her consumed body, he knew he wasn’t here to fight or even to speak. He went back to the couch.

“I was scared, Ray.” Her voice started to fade. “I didn’t know what to do. Couldn’t stand the thought of you seeing me...weak, sick. When I went into remission, you’d already moved away...” A pervasive cough didn’t allow her to continue.

Ray rubbed the back of his aching neck with a clammy hand. “Should I get the nurse?”

When her coughing fit subsided, she pointed to a book on the coffee table and whispered, “Read me a sonnet before you go.”

Ray opened the book, leafed through it. “I thought you didn’t like Shakespeare.”

“Truth is you turned me on to him...could never admit it.”

He found something familiar:

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever fixèd mark...*

Before Ray could finish reading, Tiffany’s eyes had closed. While she slept, he went to the kitchen with Mrs. Foster. “I never imagined I’d see her like this,” he said.

“Oh Ray, it’s been a long time coming.” She gave him some Red Zinger iced tea. “Soon will be her release. The Lord will keep her safe. Excuse me a minute.” She went to check on Tiffany.

Ray’s body felt heavy. He was dizzy, nauseous. But as hot as it was in that musty kitchen, he suddenly craved a hearty cup of hot chocolate. A fancy notebook with a cover of clouds in a blue sky appeared on the kitchen table. He

tried to open it but a sun-spotted hand stopped him. "Not yet," said Mrs. Foster.

He smiled a sad smile. "Isn't this Tiffany's old journal?"

"One of dozens. This one has letters to you. She fought so hard for years..." Tears interrupted her. Ray's hand went to hers. She looked him straight in the eye, but just for a moment. "Thanks, dear, I'm okay," she said, patting his forearm. "She wants you to read it later."

A machine started beeping wildly in the living room, and the nurse rushed into the kitchen to take the cordless phone. "Gotta hurry this time, Mrs. Foster."

"Where's the hospital?" Ray asked. "I'll follow you there."

Mrs. Foster placed the journal in his hands. "Only one person can sit with her in the ICU, dear. It was very nice of you to come."

"But I want to be there."

"You already have. And she thanks you for it."

She guided him out of the house and into the brightness of Naples, the peaceful smell of salty water, the swaying branches in the trees. And a wailing siren approaching.

\* \* \* \*

Ray spent hours walking on the beach, carrying Tiffany's journal. It would have been futile to chase that ambulance, wouldn't it? Why had he come all this way? He inhaled the ocean, eyes lost in the waves. Sat on the sand, stretched out his legs. The early afternoon sun was burning blue, rays dipping and floating in the water, forming a blinding pathway from his feet to the horizon. With his eyes closed, he could see rings and circles swirling behind his eyelids. He pictured Marisa's hoop-earrings brushing against his cheek. Lavender and hairspray, the smells of home. Marisa? Not today. Today he was with Tiffany. The hearty girl of the red curls, the Denim Princess who kissed with her eyes open, the one who still loved him.

A warm drizzle ripened into a cloudless rain, bringing a smile to Ray's face. He breathed in the sun's rain, the mystery of the tropics, and opened the journal. "Dear Ray," it began, but impatient breaths forced him to close it. He got up and walked into the ocean, clothes and all, past the receding tide and through the shore break, until the current began to pull him away from land. And Tiffany was right there with him, floating on her back, vibrant and carefree, carried by the waves, open arms welcoming the sun. With a gentle thrust, he released the journal to the waters, watching as it bobbed into the distance.

**Renato Escudero**, born and raised in México City, finds his inspiration in his native Spanish and from the people -la raza- who share his roots. Ironically, however, he can express himself most fluidly in English. He holds MFA and MA degrees from San Francisco State University, where he has also taught creative writing. Winner of the 2008 John Steinbeck Award for the Short Story, he has written fiction that has appeared in *580 Split Online Exclusives*, *Blotter Magazine*, *Reed Magazine*, *Saranac Review*, *Slab*, and other publications. He is working on a collection of stories about the joys and pitfalls of life in a

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