What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth

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My brother’s marriage to Guadalupe had its problems, but it continued to persevere. He continued his international commute across the border as a gas station manager, and although he was earning dollars, the pay was still low. The household became even more financially strapped after the birth of a second child, André, in 2009. I began to toy with the idea of moving back to the west coast, to be closer to my brother’s family, but I had become too attached to NYC and to my solitary lifestyle. I enjoyed the anonymity of the subway rides, the space to think and daydream even while navigating the city crowds. My tiny studio in Queens had become my haven, the only place I felt at peace and finally at home. At least, that’s how I explained it to Alex or to anybody who was curious about why I lived so far from my brother when there were only two of us. When I made my annual visit to El Rancho to meet my nephew, to reconnect with my niece, I resisted the tug of sentimentality—the seductive fantasy of family harmony, togetherness, and affection. I yearned for family, but I feared the emotional commitment. It was the same mental block that had kept me single all those years. Just when a romantic relationship began to flourish, I sabotaged it. I felt safer alone.

“And the boyfriend?” Guadalupe would ask each time.

“You mean boyfriends,” I replied, and we would start a
naughty banter that kept me from examining the reality of my singlehood.

My brother never asked me about my love life, and I rarely shared any details of it with him, so in effect I didn’t have one—I became as asexual as the rest of my family had made me when they finally stopped asking about my plans to get married, and when their questions became exclusively about my line of work and my travels.

I was on the cusp of turning forty when my health began to fail me. I couldn’t shake off the dizziness, the fatigue, and the strange feeling that my flesh was weighing me down like an extra coat over my body. I must have lost my balance half a dozen times in public or in the privacy of my apartment before I decided to go to the doctor. Because Parkinson’s was the family affliction (besides my father, I knew of one other González male who suffered from it), I was terrified that it too was my fate.

Diagnosis wasn’t as conclusive as I had expected. The only treatment I received at first was the use of a cane to keep me from falling, especially because I had stumbled twice on the NYC subway stairs.

“You don’t want to break your neck,” the doctor said.

The loneliest place in the world is a compromised body. I started using the cane, and immediately my surroundings changed. As did the people around me. Those who pretended not to look at me, out of politeness or otherwise, annoyed me. Those who became overly courteous, offering me assistance, annoyed me even more. My privileges of NYC anonymity had been revoked. Meanwhile, the doctors kept scratching possibilities off their lists: it wasn’t fluid in the ear; it wasn’t a brain tumor; it wasn’t Lyme disease . . . I kept tucked in the back of my mind the recent bout of premature deaths in the family. My two youngest cousins, Daniel and Verónica, had died in their early thirties: one of kidney failure; the other from an aneurysm. It was difficult to get a clear
picture of a family medical history because the Gonzálezes didn’t
go to the doctor and petty family feuds kept them from commu-
nicating with each other. When I told this to my own doctors, I
felt like I was talking about an ancient warring tribe from another
century.

At home, I explained away my use of a cane as a leg injury.
Only a few people got the rundown on the medical uncertainty,
and most tried to be helpful by referring me to good neurologists.
When I wasn’t going to work, I stayed home, exhausted of holding
my body up with a crutch. But mostly I was tired of the attention
and the concern. It was easier to hide out in my apartment. Since
I wasn’t exercising much anymore, I began to gain weight, which
added additional stress to my mobility. If I was somewhat of a
recluse before, I was now becoming a shut-in, severing ties with
most of the people in my NYC social circle.

When I arrived at El Rancho on the cane, Guadalupe quipped,
“Now all you need is a hat to complete the look.”
“What look?” I said.
“To look exactly like your father.”
“What’s up with the cane—you a Rockefeller?” my brother
said.
“My leg,” I said. And we left it at that.

We left it at that because there were other pressing matters.
We had agreed to baptize my nephew, and the ceremony was
coming up, so there was a christening outfit to buy, appointments
with the priest to contend with, a photographer to book, and a
reception to organize. Tío Rafael had been ill for some time and
Mari came around more often. And when she did, we understood
it was her only means of distraction. She couldn’t count on Abuela
anymore because Abuela had isolated herself from everyone, and
Alex was afraid she wasn’t medicating herself correctly.

“She sometimes calls to me and her words don’t make sense,”
Alex said.
It wasn’t long before my aunt, my father’s only sister, came around to drag Abuela back to California. The dogs were euthanized, the house was gutted, and no one from El Rancho ever saw or heard from Abuela again, until news came around later that summer that she had died.

“When?” I asked my brother when he told me.
“I think about a month ago.”
“And you’re just now telling me!”
“I’m just now getting the news myself.”

I shook my head in disbelief. This was typical González behavior: keep it quiet, withhold as a punitive act. I remembered when Tío Rafael’s ex-wife called to tell me that Verónica had died, and the second thing she told me was not to tell Tío Rafael. It seemed like such a cruel request, especially because Verónica was his first-born. So I didn’t tell him. I told a cousin who told everyone else. My aunt didn’t forgive me for that breach of trust, and so she stopped talking to me as well. I never received the promised invitation to the funeral. But the joke was on her because the silent treatment, the closed door, had always been the González family way.

The following month, Tío Rafael passed away.

“We’re dying off,” Alex said, and I swallowed hard, hoping that my face would not betray the fear of what for me had now become a possibility.

Despite my body slowing down, my creativity hadn’t. I was more productive than I had ever been, publishing up to three books in a single year. I was seized by the notion that I didn’t have long to live, that I was the next to go in this string of González family deaths. So I decided to help my brother fulfill one of his dreams—to own a business.

Alex was never shy about admitting how much he hated working at a gas station. It wasn’t the labor or the long hours. It
was the unpredictable clientele—cranky commuters, nasty tourists, entitled white people, snooty Mexicans. Not to mention the mischief of teenagers making beer runs and stealing off with the merchandise amid fits of laughter, or the more threatening robbers who walked in dog-faced with a loaded weapon. And there were the usual crazies.

“Once this guy walked in and put a sack on the counter and said to me, ‘Check this out?’” Alex said. He pantomimed the gesture.

“I thought it was a sack of oranges or something. I thought he was offering me one, so I stuck my hand in, expecting to pull one out.” He took a swig of beer to effect a dramatic pause. He had learned this from our father.

“Turns out it was a huge-ass fucking snake, Turrútut. I didn’t know if it was alive or dead. All I know is I was expecting to be touching an orange, not no slimy oversized reptile.”

“So what did you do?”

“I shit my pants, that’s what I did. Right there in the middle of shift. I just wish I had my own little business in El Rancho. Stay close to home. Close to my kids.”

Indeed, El Rancho was beginning to thrive with its growing population and paved roads. Long gone were the days of the outhouse and the frequent blackouts. Other enterprising people had set up small food stands along the strip in front of the house, which had once been the irrigation canal. Now it was a busy boulevard. Alex let it slip repeatedly that if he could set up a taco stand, he could see himself eventually leaving the gas station racket with its nutcases and customers who wiped their asses against the bathroom walls.

I too wanted this change for my brother. He didn’t ask for money directly, but he convinced me to trust in his dream by showing me the things he could do. He built an outdoor pizza oven and a grill that was the envy of his Facebook buddies with whom he exchanged marinating recipes. When he talked about
When the Hard Times Become Lonely Times

his vision for promotion and management, he expressed such excitement that it was difficult not to sign on as an investor.

“I’m calling it El Toro Bravo,” he said.

Since he had connections with the guys who delivered the beer and sodas to the gas station, he was able to secure patio tables and chairs with the beer logo printed on them. He also commissioned a sign-maker to build a colorful business sign that could be seen from blocks away. El Toro Bravo’s pièce de résistance was the illustration of the charging bull with smoke shooting out of its flared nostrils. He bought the taco cart from a man who had become too old to push the contraption around, and Alex turned it into a stationary outdoor kitchen. And as soon as Guadalupe gathered the ingredients for the sauces and prepared the meats, El Toro Bravo was open for business.

“The plan is for Guadalupe to be the cook until I take over eventually,” my brother explained. “I’ll help out on my nights off.”

Guadalupe seemed happy about it. She enjoyed the social atmosphere. And with the kids running around, it was made quite clear that this was a family-friendly establishment.

El Toro Bravo was thriving by 2010 and had quickly become a neighborhood hotspot. It was affordable, the food was tasty, and customers appreciated the humor of its cooks—a young couple whose banter was as spicy as the sauce. I had a chance to see their performance one time, and I was moved by their display of public affection. Whether it was part of the act, it was a convincing show of marital bliss, which set the tone for the rest of the evening.

How could I not become sentimental later that night in bed as I considered how hard-won this moment of happiness had been for Alex, for me? I couldn’t help feeling sorry about the absence of both our parents, but here we were, decades later, making do with each other. There were only two of us, and that was fine for now.

When I got back to NYC, I underwent further tests and was presented with the possibility that I might be suffering from multiple sclerosis. I recalled those fundraising telethons from my
childhood—muscular dystrophy, Lou Gehrig’s disease, cerebral palsy—and I knew I wasn’t capable of the strength and dignity of those people who came on stage to bear witness to the challenges and triumphs of living with neurological afflictions. Giving a name to my condition made me spiral into defeat. The more I researched MS, the more I was convinced I suffered from its symptoms, even though I wasn’t the typical MS sufferer. That would be young white women, not middle-aged Mexican men. I moved less, drank more, gained the weight that wounded my vanity, and soon I found myself sympathizing with my father, who had drowned his sorrows in the bottle, who escaped into his head in order to avoid facing the reality of the new normal of his Parkinson’s disease. And for the first time since my troubled adolescence, I considered suicide.

I didn’t want my death to be showy or dramatic. The subway jumper thing was not my style. I went as far as buying a switchblade online, and I imagined myself bleeding out in my bed, surrounded by the many pieces of Mexican art I had accumulated over the years. This haven full of objects from my homeland would make a dazzling tomb. It suddenly struck me that that might be the reason I was attracted to masks and skeletons—their hollow eyeholes upon me no matter where I sat or stood in that tiny apartment. I would die alone, but I would not die without witnesses, and that somehow made my demise less pitiful.

The single detail I couldn’t pin down was when. When would I make this graceful exit? At the end of the school year? Between semesters? On some symbolic date, like on the anniversary of my mother’s death or of my father’s? When I tried to schedule my final day of life, the ridiculousness of the idea made me snap out of it each time. But that was the problem: that there was always a next time.

I withdrew from my social circles more and more. At first, I offered explanations—pressing deadlines, doctor appointments, paper grading—then eventually I didn’t bother to respond. I began
to drift apart from most of my long-term friendships, ignoring phone calls and text messages until the perfect excuse presented itself to cut ties completely with each and every one of them. When I wasn’t teaching class, I would lock myself up in my apartment for days, writing obsessively into the early hours because I was so convinced I had come to the end—whatever I could squeeze out of my creativity would be the last items of my legacy.

When summer arrived and classes were no longer in session, I hid out for even longer stretches of time. I would resurface and see the world marching on as if I didn’t matter. Who would miss me anyway? Alex’s small business and his marriage were thriving. I had a tangential relationship with his children. When I had my author photo taken, I sent them a framed print. I was satisfied that this was the image they would set on the altar when they remembered me on the Day of the Dead. It was a photograph of my younger, thinner self, before my receding hairline gave me a pronounced forehead, before whatever had seized my body had cursed it to a life of slow suffering. In the evenings, a pain set my back and legs on fire. I would twist into the sheets, smoldering and groaning until I became too tired to remain awake. I woke up a pile of ashes, a remnant of the man I used to be.

Ever the consummate professional, I didn’t want to leave any loose ends. I had agreed earlier in the year to attend a summer writers’ conference in Montpelier, Vermont, and I refused to cancel. I thought it would be nice to take in the beautiful New England scenery one last time since I was a few weeks away from turning forty. I had decided that dying after my birthday would be most poetic, and I liked the roundness of the figures that would appear thereafter next to my name: 1970–2010.

But a few days into my stay in Vermont, the destructive thoughts that had been swirling in my head subsided. It must have been the sharp green of the leaves or the sky with its blue so pure that it felt like sacrilege to hold on to any negative energy.
The chaos of the city became a distant memory, and I sat on a wooden bench beneath a tree, listening to my own chewing as I ate an apple—the only noise I had to contend with. I still had to use a cane to prop myself up, but even that didn’t bother me, not then and there. At that moment, I was happy to be alive. And as I took an afternoon stroll, congratulating myself for reconnecting with life, I received the unexpected call from Guadalupe. My brother had been kidnapped.

“I don’t understand,” I said. My body was already trembling.

“I’m sure he got kidnapped, I’m sure of it,” she said, and the distress in her voice was unsettling. “He was selling his truck and so this man came over to test-drive it with Alex in the passenger seat and they haven’t returned.”

“How long ago was that?”

“It’s been over two hours already,” she said. “No one test-drives a truck for that long. And he didn’t take his phone because it was supposed to be a quick drive around the block!”

The idea that Alex had been kidnapped was too outlandish to be believed. So I proposed other theories, none of them comforting to either of us. What if there had been an accident? Had she tried calling the hospital?

“I already did and nothing. So I called the police,” she said. “And they told me they couldn’t do anything until I was certain this was a kidnapping.”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” I said.

This narrative did not belong to someone like Alex. It belonged to politicians and bankers, not to a man who ran a hole-in-the-wall taco stand from his front porch. But I knew that wasn’t true. These were desperate times in México. The kidnapping had become the last resort for those who had nothing else to lose. And anyone who did have something to lose—no matter how small—was at risk of losing it. What was the price on my brother’s life? I resented all of those clients who sat in his porch assessing his profits,
eyeing the truck—not exactly new but not the kind of junket that squealed like a pig as it shifted gears down the boulevard. Any one of these people who savored the food at El Toro Bravo was suspect. As were any of the neighbors. Or passersby. I despised the lot of them.

“Maybe they took the truck and dumped him somewhere,” I said and immediately regretted saying that out loud. But picturing him walking back from some strange neighborhood was preferable to imagining him locked in a trunk, or in a windowless cell, or in a tiny ditch with a steel lid—I had no idea where I was getting these ideas, but I couldn’t stop them from coming.

“I don’t know; I just don’t know.”

“Well, hang up and stand by the phone,” I said after we had exhausted every other possibility. “When they ask for a ransom, tell me. I will pay it. I’ll pay anything.”

Guadalupe burst into tears, but I couldn’t. I had no right, standing so far away, dallying under sunshine and bird song in a place that looked as if the only threat that ever made it here were rain clouds.

I stood paralyzed and lost track of time and began to entertain the idea that this was my punishment for devaluing my own life—the arrogance of my death wish had brought this terrible retribution on me. I made one jittery phone call to a close friend, but just as I was about to explain the anxiety in my voice, my sister-in-law called back. I quickly switched calls.

“What happened?” I said.

“Well, I don’t know how to tell you this,” she said.

“What? What?”

“He’s right here.”

After all that emotional turmoil, I wasn’t able to grasp any meaning, but neither could Guadalupe communicate, so she put my brother on the line.

“What happened?” I demanded.
“Hey, Turrútut. I’m okay. I’m safe.”
“What happened?” I said again.

Everything transpired in a matter of minutes. A man posing as a buyer came to test-drive my brother’s truck, but as soon as they made it to the first traffic light, Alex began to suspect something wasn’t right. The man was jumpy and refused to acknowledge my brother, who began to make small talk in order to reassure himself that hadn’t just let a nutcase get behind the wheel of his truck. Alarmed, Alex asked him to pull over, and that’s when the man began to pummel him.

“We started fighting like caged cats. I could see people looking in from the sidewalk, but no one did anything. It was too crazy to be real,” Alex said.

“Why didn’t you just jump out of the truck?” I said.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking. All I had in my mind was the idea that this motherfucker was taking something away from my kids. I wasn’t going to let him have anything. Not me and not even the truck.”

That rage was enough to finally scare the man into stopping the truck and fleeing, leaving Alex hyperventilating and confused. They couldn’t have been driving for more than a few minutes, but the surroundings looked unfamiliar, as if he had been sucked through a wormhole and got spat out in a strange land.

“My chest was in pain, and I couldn’t breathe. So I drove and drove as far away from that street as I could. And the next thing I knew, I was lost. I didn’t have my phone and I didn’t even remember my house number, so I kept driving.”

Eventually, hours after the ordeal, he began to recognize his whereabouts and headed home.

As soon as he finished the story of his great escape, I yelled out, “You stupid idiot! You got kidnapped in front of your house and you escaped? They know where you live! And about your kids! Why the fuck did you do that?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking. I just wanted to be back with my kids, that’s all.”

New, horrific scenarios began to unfold before me. My brother had seen his kidnapper’s face; he wasn’t safe. But neither could the police offer any help. This wasn’t American detective TV, where precincts kept databases of registered offenders. This was México, where hardship could turn a God-fearing man into fiend. The only way to secure my brother’s safety was to relocate his entire household somewhere safe.

Over the years, Guadalupe had talked about wanting to return to her hometown at the tip of the Baja California peninsula. They would have to abandon their taco stand, their house, and most of their belongings, but that was preferable to the dire consequences they could face if they stayed. Their security had been completely compromised in El Rancho. I pulled out everything I had in my bank account and sent it to Alex. A short time later, they loaded whatever could fit in that truck and fled Mexicali. There was no turning back.

“Everything’s going to be alright, Turrútut,” I said. “It’s a new beginning. A new chance at life.”

I leaned back in bed at home and breathed, determined to pull myself out of this vortex of depression and self-pity. I had to think about my baby brother. He still needed me.

If I had climbed out of the well of despair, it was only to make room for its next inhabitant. The next two years were rough on Alex. In Guadalupe’s hometown, he was the outsider, and making friends outside of his in-laws became a challenge. He had to confront the reality that he would be making Mexican wages at low-level jobs since he had quit his management position at the gas station across the border. That was a shitty job too, but at least it paid in dollars. One of Guadalupe’s relatives rented them a small house in the outskirts of town, and what had started out being a
cozy three-bedroom rental was quickly turning into a crowded, suffocating space now that the kids were growing up and taking up more room.

The only saving grace for Alex was the town’s proximity to the water. It was a fishing village and one of Jacques Cousteau’s favorite ecological hotspots along the Sea of Cortez. Tourist season brought him seasonal opportunities because he was fluently bilingual, and he also got to join the excursions on fishing boats.

“That’s heaven for me, Turrútut,” he said. “You just can’t get that kind of fishing on the shore. You have to go far into the sea, away from all the problems on land.”

Those tourist guide gigs were easy and enjoyable, but they didn’t pay well, and that began to affect the harmony of his marriage. To help him out, I began to send him money whenever he requested it, but the requests were coming so often that I negotiated an allowance in order to keep from draining my bank account.

Whenever we spoke on the phone, I kept hearing such sadness in his voice. He felt like a failure, unable to provide for his own children. His in-laws began to question his effectiveness as head of a household. He spoke longingly about his grill, his spacious house in El Rancho, his little taco stand—a dream that had been dashed only a few short months after it had become a reality. All of this must have contributed to the health issues he began to endure: high blood pressure, hypertension, sleep disorders, fatigue—the list was long and alarming. The doctor’s recommendation that he rest seemed like the most ridiculous treatment at a time when he needed the money, when he needed to prove to his in-laws, to his family, and to himself that he was a man.

“But you are a man, Alex, you’re a good man,” I said to him. I was still working out my own health issues, so I didn’t even bother to bring them up.

“I wish we had never left Mexicali,” he said.

That made me feel complicit in his misery, maybe even
responsible for it. But I had to remind us both that if he had stayed, he might have ended up dead.

“Maybe it would be better that way,” he said.

My mouth went dry. The gravity of those words, even if impulsively stated, brought back the uncomfortable legacy of self-destruction that I was beginning to suspect was also the González way. We were a family of silent suffering, of hiding in the shadows in shame. Where had we learned this behavior? Or was it simply woven into our genes? I wanted to reprimand my brother, or at the very least offer words of consolation and encouragement, but that would have been the most hypocritical of acts from the person who pushed his circle of confidantes away because words were as brittle as leaves breaking apart in the wind when confronting something as overpowering as depression.

I didn’t say anything. I pretended I hadn’t heard him say such a painful thing. It made hanging up the phone after our conversation much easier. It made it possible to lie down a country away and then rise the next morning without having to succumb to the guilt.

My response to my brother’s cry for help was to send more money. That is all I could spare from so far away, and I began to wonder if this had been my strategy all along—to distance myself from my family in order to stay clear of their crises, in order to pull out this handy excuse for my absence from their hospitalizations, their funerals, their terrible days.

The money paid bills, purchased clothes and nourishment, but it did little to temper the tension between my brother and his wife. It also paid for the medications, but it didn’t cure Alex’s health problems, which seemed more like symptoms of his emotional distress.

“The only thing the doctor tells me is to rest,” Alex complained. “Who the fuck has time to rest?”

“Does he mean rest your body or rest your mind?” I said.
“What? What are you talking about?”

I hesitated to elaborate. I recalled the many times close friends suggested therapy and I scoffed at the idea. I knew what to expect from my brother—we were of the same blood.

“You know, maybe talk to someone.”

“Like counseling? With a shrink?” He sounded incredulous.

“Yes,” I said softly.

“Turrútut, that’s white people ideas. White people do therapy.”

That’s right, I thought. And the Gonzálezes turn to the bottle. They drain their will to live in the tiny quiet corners of the house.

“You wouldn’t consider it?” I said.

“No,” he said. Then he added, “I don’t know. Maybe.”

But he didn’t. And neither did I. Instead, we continued on our journeys, bearing the pangs of stress, isolation, and sadness.