

Los Necios

The call comes late. Too late to leave the house. You always warned us not to go out after dark if we could avoid it. "If you can't make money any other way, then stay on the busy streets and tell someone when you leave with a customer, but be careful. And watch for police."

Otherwise, you'd tell us to stay where it was safe. "The rape, the beating, and the murders wait in the dark. So we wait for the light," you'd say.

But they tell me you were gunned down at noon, so I don't know how much safer it can be.

I spend a long night alone, waiting for the sun to come up. A few hours in bed, laying my arm over my eyes, changing position. A few more sitting in the kitchen, staring at the tile floor. I keep seeing it happen even though I wasn't there. The blood coming from your eye socket. The smell of gunpowder in the air. The sound of the engine revving as the bastards run off with your tongue.

I want to cry. Collapse and let my face crumple into tears. "Like a real woman would," my tía would say. Instead, I sit silent, making shapes in the tile pattern with my eyes, and as soon as it's light out, I get dressed and start walking. This is my first time going without you, but I know the way by now.

It would be nice if someone went with me, but I'm sure they're all asleep. It's strange to think that they don't know. That perhaps you are in their dreams right now, and they will wake in an hour and think, "How odd."

The dust from the street covers my ankles, and I watch the people through their windows as they wake up. A man kisses his wife before he walks out toward the bus stop. The little girls cry as their mothers tie back their hair, and throw them in uniforms. Perhaps they're all lying like we were; scared the way we used to be, before we'd had enough of hiding. Scared the way we used to be, not scared the way

we are now. I think sometimes that maybe they're right, the ones who go on lying forever. Maybe it's easier to just marry: forty years of disinterested sex, and more kids than I can feed. And going to the ground a liar. Maybe we're just being young and stupid and we'll wake up any day now.

A little girl stares at me in her school uniform, and I wonder whether she'll be fearless like us. I try to be happy for the life she'll lead, but I don't know because I'm not quite happy for myself yet. Maybe it's easier to lie.

The people stare at me from their porches and fruit stands as I turn and make my way up another dusty hill. I imagine malice behind their blank faces, that they think "tortillera" as I walk by. But, I was never a good butch; I doubt they know. Sometimes when we made these trips together, people thought we must be lovers, and you'd laugh, and then you'd just tell them, "Ella es pata y yo soy maricón," and that was it. They'd look shocked from behind, but you never turned around to see it.

The walk's not long. I'm there in a half an hour and the thin man with the mustache welcomes me in again. "I had wondered if it'd be you," he says, "I think I half expected him to come in and identify himself."

We're old friends at this point, so before we get to the formalities he sits me down and gives me some coffee, the way I like it. I guess he doesn't know what to say. I guess I don't either. We talk about the heat and about politics and about soccer and about everything except what we're both thinking, until he sees that my cup is empty. "Well, I guess you didn't come all this way just to keep me company."

He's been good to us, unlike everyone else in this city. But he's seen what we've seen. When you've looked into so many bloody faces, it's harder to entertain old prejudices.

Then he sits me down and asks me the same questions he always asks: the ones that don't matter. Names and aliases? Next-of-kin? Place of residence?

Even though he already knows most of the answers:

Viki Hernández, Born Viktor. Her parents, but they didn't want to hear about it. Wherever she could find someone to stay with.

Hector Maradiaga. None. One room in La Peña that he shared with his lover of two years.

Fabio Zamora. His old mother that he lived with but never talked to in Flor del Campo.

Martina Jackson. None. None.

We'd talk to him staring blankly ahead, and keep the things that matter for ourselves.

The days she'd show up by surprise at her father's church so everyone could see that she wasn't dead and she hadn't run away. The blue in his eyes, from his Spanish mother, that we couldn't help but stare at, even though we all knew he hated it.

The way his stomach arched when he danced down the street in the evenings coming back from his big manly painting job.

The brown dyke boots that she stomped around in even during the dry season when her feet must have been drowning in their own sweat.

The way they all looked, red-faced, straight-backed, shouting, as they marched down Las Fuerzas Armadas.

Alive.

And then he takes us back and he pulls off the sheet and we don't let ourselves react until he's out of the room.

Sometimes it takes a while. You can rarely tell by the face after what they've been through. We have to look for tattoos. Moles. Scars. The color of her fingernail polish. We try to place the parts of their bodies. Her legs squeezed into those red pantyhose. Her thick yellow toenails that she doesn't cut quite often enough. His nose broken, knuckles bruised from a run-in with some cabrón while working the streets.

When we've stood and stared long enough, we reach down to touch

them. To try to comfort what's left there. To show that we still care enough not to back away when their eyes are swollen or they've got an inch-long gash in their stomach.

When we've had enough time the man with the mustache walks in and asks us and we say Yeah, that's them.

They haven't been wrong yet.

And we leave and get breakfast, and we talk about them. The stupid little stories about the first time his mother caught him with a can of spray paint or when she went home with that culito and he ran from his own house when she took off her panties. The way their eyes would get when we hit that one struggle they cared for, and how you could feel the flames coming off of their tongues when they talked about it. The absence we'll feel as we stand there shouting and don't hear their voices echoing ours.

I don't say the things that matter. How sick I am of the whole fucking thing. How this morning I just want to forget it all and marry a man I'll never love. How every time I look at another person's face all bruised and bloodied it makes me want to give up. How much I just want to lay my head on your chest and cry, though I never quite can.

And you never ask how I'm feeling, but I'm sure you always knew, because you said just the right thing. You told me, nearly every time, "We don't fear death. Because we remember what it's like to die each day. To live a short, honest life is braver than to die constantly, crushed beneath the weight of one's own secrecy. Our friends died well, because their one death saved themselves and many others from dying countless times." And you put your hand on my shoulder and your courage flowed into me.

I don't tell him any of this about you. I don't tell him how you spoke and we could each feel the words move through us. I don't tell him how the second you got involved, everyone knew you'd be leading us someday.

I tell him what he wants to hear. Name. Next-of-kin. Residence. Then he takes me to the back room and pulls back the sheet and

there you are. And I don't need to say yes because he knows it as well as I do. And even though he's got his answers he leaves us alone. I don't have to look for scars or tattoos or remember when I last paid attention to your ears. So I reach down and touch the place where they shot you in the eye, and your blood dries into my fingertips. And I look at where they cut out your tongue. Not without good reason, because even dead you wouldn't have stopped shouting at the cowards until they ran off.

I check to see if he's back yet, and when he's not I lay my head on your chest and I cry. Just a bit. And I hope there's enough of you left to see it.

Then I get breakfast and you're not there to tell me just the right thing, but it doesn't matter because I know there's no turning back now.

That night a couple of us drive up to one of the mountain tops overlooking the city and drink to remember you. We tell your stories, like the time the cop beat you to the ground and you got right back up and leapt onto him like you wanted a piggyback ride. Or when you'd had a few beers and stood on the table to denounce the bar owner's close-mindedness in letting us run out of peanuts. Or when you stood in front of the house of the President with a bullhorn and told us to it was time to raise hell if we wanted to survive.

We raise our glasses, but we can't drink to your health, so we raise a toast to death, because by now we have more friends there than here. And as we stare down at the lights of the city each looking for the block where it happened, I wonder which of those streets I'll die on and who will look down at my body.