Broken Boy

Two caramel colored boys race through the dappled sunlight beneath the old sycamore. One hops the chain link fence with startling efficiency, pauses to steady the other. They are off again, but not for long.

They are polite boys, almost shy. The war between their timidity and curiosity plays out across the field in a ballet of eager sprinting and tentative pauses. They reach the dogs, exchange quiet words with the owner. One boy offers a hand to the collie's nose, and suddenly both boys and dogs are jumping and running and wrestling. If the boys had tails, they would be wagging, he thinks.

They are late, but he can't stand to call them. He thinks: Nine-year-old boys! He thinks: My boy, look at my beautiful little boy! He thinks: Can I remember this moment always? In fact, he will. This will turn out to be one of the last good days.

The boys reach him, jostling still. Their lithe bodies are an improbable mix of effortless dexterity and gangly awkwardness.

"It was a lab and a retriever," Gabriel says.

"Yeah, the golden retriever was named Hunter," Mateo adds.

He turns to walk so they will follow. "Are you sure? I think that was a collie and lab."

"Papi, Gabe knows dogs," Mateo corrects him.

"I read a book," Gabe says.

His wife is already at the restaurant with their daughter Camila when they arrive. A cold beer waits for him on the patio table, two Shirley Temples for the boys.

"You're late," his daughter says. At twelve, she seems to bounce between bubbly and disaffected to a rhythm no one else can hear.

The boys spot another dog.

"It's a bulldog," Gabe says.

“But it’s so little,” Mateo says.

“Look at its snout, though,” Gabe says.

Gabe is obsessed with dogs, and it has infected his son. Gabe’s parents have forbidden one, but he knows they are waffling. He is not. He tells both Camila and Mateo as often as they need to hear it that they can choose between a father and a dog, they cannot have both. His daughter always makes a show of considering the question very carefully.

“Just go ask the owners what he is,” he says. “I’m sure they’ll let you pet him.”

A furious argument is conducted by whisper, neither boy willing to lead.

“Oh my God, guys,” his daughter says. “Follow me.”

He turns to his wife, gestures as the threesome walks away. “Look at what you made. Beautiful.”

“Gabe fits right in,” she answers. “Could be one of ours.”

There is a symmetry to Gabe and Mateo’s friendship they both find charming. Gabriel's father is Puerto Rican while his mother is white. His own wife is from El Salvador, while he is white.

Gabe is nicely bronzed from the summer sun, but otherwise favors his mother, much like their own daughter favors him. She emerged from the womb with a full head of swarthy curls, the only concession to the woman who birthed her. She was made so much in his image that his wife would often be mistaken for the nanny. She grew aggressive about publicly nursing. She denied any connection, but he could think of no clearer declaration than latching that fat pink baby to her large brown breast.

Mateo is more hers than his, dark curls, eyes of black coffee, a dusting of dark fuzz across his upper lip. He could walk around her village in El Salvador without anyone looking twice.

“She’s a Boston terrier,” Mateo says triumphantly when the boys return.

The food arrives, and Mateo grows quiet. His chicken fingers wilt, untouched. A single fry salutes the table from a puddle of ketchup on his plate, begging them to notice how little he has eaten.

But the evening is too perfect for Mateo’s father. The exhausted sun smears an impossible pallet of orange and pink above them. The ache of his contentment is almost physical.

His daughter follows his gaze. “You know it’s only the air pollution that makes it beautiful,” she says.

The warm breeze through the budding oaks is thick with pollen, watering his eyes. But it is easy to follow Mateo on the soccer field. An overgrown shrub of black curls, a dervish in a purple uniform crashing in and out of scrums. The score is tied when Mateo is pulled off the field. The coach, he knows, is saving Mateo and Gabriel for the final minutes.

Gabriel is gifted, the ball dancing from his feet with preternatural elegance. Mateo is the ideal foil. Talented but complimentary, pure frenetic pace, dogged effort. Their physical rapport is natural, gorgeous even.

They are down a goal when the coach signals the boys. Parents bellow encouragement in voices buckling with tension. Gabe trots onto the field. He watches in confusion as his own son’s bushy head makes a subtle but unmistakable motion: No. The coach tries again, his body language shrieking urgency. Mateo shakes his head again, sits down.

In the parking lot, Mateo’s father cannot find his keys. He is distracted, upset. Mateo silently draws a sad face in the scrim of yellow pollen coating the window.

“Are you sure you don’t have them?” he asks his wife.

In the car, he turns down the radio.

“So you weren’t hurt?” he asks, again.

“No,” Mateo answers quietly.

“So tell me again, then, why didn’t you want to go back in?”

“I just didn’t, okay,” Mateo says.

“I just don’t understand,” he says.

“I’m sorry, Papi,” his son says, his voice finally cracking. “I’m sorry.”

His wife reaches over, places a hand quietly over his knee.

“I just don’t understand,” he says quietly.

The tinny hysteria of YouTube gamers screeches from his tablet, but Mateo is not watching. Mateo is pacing. Coffee table to fireplace, then back again, where soggy Cheerios dissolve into warm milk.

“He couldn't touch his breakfast,” his wife says. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

He watches his son. “What’s wrong, bud?”

“I don’t feel good.”

After a moment, he says: “I know what this is.”

He grabs Mateo by the hand. It is limp and cold and moist, a wet dishrag draped over the faucet. He pulls Mateo into bed, wraps him into his body, runs his fingers through his hair, talks quietly.

“You’re okay, bud. You’ve got nothing to worry about. You’re safe at home with Mami and Papi. You’ve got nothing to do today. Your only responsibility is to relax, have fun, play outside, play your video games, watch some TV. Everything’s fine. You’re just fine. I’m right here.”

Mateo’s body jerks, his breathing deepens. Ten minutes later he is awake.

“I feel better,” he says.

Dawn leaks into the house through sagging bamboo blinds. Mateo marches from room to room, speed-walking in a way neither parent recognizes. He sits. Stands. Sits again. He is compulsively taking small sips of water. His father calls him into bed. He lays still for only moments, before he is up again. He tries to pee. Nothing, then furious shaking, a spackle of yellow spots across the seat.

“Buddy, it’s alright,” his father says.

“You think you could try and eat something?” his mother asks.

He has not eaten much since lunch yesterday.

“What’s wrong?” his father asks.

“I feel really bad. Really bad,” he says. “I have so much saliva in my mouth.”

“You’re okay, just breathe,” his mother says.

Then there is wet hiccups, puke splashing onto the hardwood, pooling in the cracks.

“It’s pure water,” his father says. “He hasn’t eaten anything.”

“Maybe he’s just sick,” his mother suggests.

The first psychiatrist prescribes a series of esoteric rituals. Squeeze an ice cube in the palm of your hand. Talk to yourself in the third person. Recite the alphabet backwards. She thinks they sound like her mother’s Salvadoran folk remedies. Wear red during a full moon. A bracelet to ward off the evil eye. A bottle of spiced moonshine buried in the yard for everything else.

“These are scientific,” the psychiatrist says.

Her husband finds them unhelpful, impossible, criminally impractical for a nine-year-old lost in a panic attack. But there is sometimes relief in cursing at the anxiety. It’s seems to work not because Mateo is acknowledging the anxiety as something separate from himself, but because of the thrill of the forbidden words.

They coax Mateo into a half-hearted accusation: “Fuck off, anxiety bitch.” Then louder: “FUCK OFF, ANXIETY BITCH!” Often, a weak smile, a gentle laugh, and he is outside his head, can be distracted with their assurances again.

The overhead fan thrums a vibrating shadow against his dresser. The door creaks open, then closes again. He thinks he is already dreaming when it opens again.

“What is it, buddy?” he whispers.

“I don’t feel good,” Mateo says.

He follows his son to bed. LED lights paint the bed in pallid shades of purple. There is almost no room for him. Pillows and plush explode across the covers, but Mateo scolds him when he tries to rearrange them.

“Leave them,” he says. “Please don’t move anything.”

Mateo is hot and sweaty, but perhaps not feverish. His son gets up, turns the lights off. Moments later he flips them on. Then their color is changing. Then they are off again.

“Am I dying?” he asks.

“What? No, of course not, you’re just fine.”

“Feel my heart,” he says. “I think I’m having a heart attack.”

“You’re not having a heart attack,” his father says. “You’re okay. I promise. Little boys cannot have heart attacks.”

He rests a hand on Mateo’s pounding chest. This steady thrum, such a comfort when he was baby, now terrifies him. It sounds fast, but how fast should a nine-year-old’s heartbeat? He begins counting, realizes he would also need to keep time, realizes that the numbers would be meaningless to him anyway.

He awakens in his own bed, recognizes the red glare and angry font of his alarm clock: 4:04 AM.

“Papi, I don’t feel good,” Mateo says, standing beside the bed.

Her husband is sprawled shirtless across the fresh sheets, staring vacantly into the ceiling, absently pawing a tiny patch of chest hair. She drops her towel, bends down to rub lotion into her tired calves.

There is nothing erotic in the moment. They are exhausted. Mateo’s anxiety bleeds into more of their lives, poisons every decision. She ends every day an emotional cripple.

“I feel like it’s my fault,” she says. “It’s my depression. I gave it to him.”

“I know what you mean,” he says. “I’m the one with the clinical anxiety.”

She often forgets his anxiety altogether. One small yellow pill every day to keep the doctor away. Such success eludes her. Her depression remains a constant presence in their lives, waxing and waning through the seasons, through the years. She pauses over the underwear drawer, its contents suddenly overwhelming. She closes her eyes and reaches for a random pair.

"We didn't even think about this stuff before we decided to have kids," she says.

"You only imagine passing on the best parts of yourself," he says. "We shouldn't have been allowed to breed."

He believes this not at all, she knows. But maybe she does, just a little.

Mateo grows craven about his habits, replicating the arbitrary circumstances of his rare good moments. He wears a single pair of socks for three days. They hear the same Liv and Maddie episode playing on a loop from his tablet.

Early one morning his father finds him upstairs nuzzled into his sister's side. Mateo has recalled how much better he felt the year before, when he and his sister still shared a room.

The children's damp faces are painfully cherubic. He sits down to watch them sleep, like when they were little. His daughter peels an eyelid, finds him in the corner.

"Yeah, not creepy at all, Papi," she whispers.

"How, long have you been awake?"

"The whole time. The stairs are loud, Papa."

She closes her eye and turns away from him, sheds a blanket onto the floor. "Seriously," she whispers. "I can't sleep with you watching me."

He stands to leave. Mateo shifts almost imperceptibly, pretends to sleep.

Muffled shrieks climb the stairwell. Her husband taps and taps and taps his phone, trying to keep an avatar ahead of an angry mob. She is failing to watch a home renovation show. By silent agreement,

the volume is reduced to a murmur. They want to hear the boys.

Gabriel is over. It is a tentative gambit. All day the boys have bounced from inside to outside, sports to video games, the banter a refreshing blend of playful animosity and conspiratorial laughter.

The boys are finally in bed. Since dinner, Mateo's personality has been disappearing, detritus evaporating into the night air. There is no giggling from the room next door, no sounds of horseplay.

Mateo pads silently to her bedside.

"I feel nervous," he says.

She runs a finger along his cheek, pulls him close. "Just relax, Papi," she says. "Just lie in bed and close your eyes. Everything will be fine."

He is back in minutes, this time pacing their room. "I can't sleep," he says.

"You can," she promises. "All you have to do is lie in bed."

"I keep feeling like I need to pee."

"You just peed, mi amor."

When he returns a third time, her husband takes his hand, leads him to the bathroom. She checks his room. A dark profile hunches forward from the top bunk, two eyes glowing out of the black.

"What's wrong with Mateo?" Gabriel asks.

"He's fine, honey, just fine," she answers. "Just go to sleep now."

She nudges the door closed.

"He's fine," she whispers.

The boys are up early, she hears them in the basement. Mateo rushes upstairs as her first creaking steps reach them.

"Mami, I don't feel good," he says.

Gabriel has followed him up.

"Why don't you go back down and play video games for a minute?" she tells him.

Mateo is pacing in out of the bathroom, sipping water. She sits on the side of the tub, watching, the cold porcelain leaching into her thighs. A droplet of water collects on the tip of the faucet, quivers, falls. The plunk is marking time, but too slowly. Then he is throwing up onto the floor, pure clear liquid. She turns to grab a towel, finds Gabriel standing in the living room, staring.

It is evening. Mateo is curled up with his sister watching a movie, his stomach for now holding onto a few bites of peanut butter sandwich, half a yogurt, thirteen goldfish. They have been reduced to literal bean counters, swapping cryptic sums. He ate seven raisins this morning, they'll say, three bites of a croissant yesterday, a six-ounce milk at midnight.

They huddle over their phones in the fading heat of the backyard, faces aglow in the shadow of dusk. The rise and fall of cicada-song masks their quiet conversation.

"I feel like we're totally on our own," she says.

"No one understands this kind of illness," he agrees.

He tries to follow a mosquito in the failing light, hand poised to slap. She scrolls compulsively through cat videos.

"I tried talking to my sister," she says. "She was almost worse than my mother."

"If he had cancer or something, everyone would be rallying around us, he'd be a hero," he says. "There'd be GoFundMe pages, a freezer full of lasagna, my mother would be flying into town."

"This isn't exactly cancer."

He sighs, not quite chastened. "Now you sound like everyone else. Is this not a debilitating disease? Are we not looking at a shadow of our son?"

The shrill cry of cicadas begins to sound like weeping to her ears. "You're right," she says. "There's still so much stigma. People look at this and only see weakness."

Their roles are well-rehearsed, their words as hollow as echoes. They have had this conversation many times, about her own depression. The conversation offers her no comfort, him only a little, but he

was always the one to savor righteous self-pity.

His daughter is stalking him. She holds his keys while he pumps a bike tire, hovers while he orders a book online. She is a shadow, unconsciously tugging her shirt to cover her belly button. She is not allowed crop tops.

"Is he going to be okay?" she asks. She seems frustrated by the endless accommodations made for her brother one minute, consumed by worry the next.

"Yeah, he'll be fine," he answers.

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"I'm worried," she says.

"Now you sound like him," he answers, coaxing a punch in the arm.

That night she begs to sleep with them. At first he is delighted, his daughter needing them in way he thought was gone forever.

She crawls over him wearing an oversize T-shirt from his drawer, pink polka-dot pajama bottoms. Her brown curls fan out across the pillow, smelling of mint and soap. He strokes the soft down of her cheek with one thumb until she pushes his hand away, turns, burrows into her mother.

The bed is quickly too hot, too crowded. He retreats to the living room, finds he still cannot sleep. He streams hours of *Friends*, a show he could barely tolerate when it aired. The canned laughter is jarring, the buoyant sarcasm cloying.

It is still auto-playing when he startles awake. He scrolls back through the episodes, trying to determine how long he slept. But he can remember watching none of them, he can remember watching all of them.

She wakes up with a dull throb in her temple. She has slept poorly, her daughter's limbs prodding

her from unlikely directions.

The living room is a disaster. Her husband's shoes and socks are strewn across the floor in a way that seems intentionally designed to infuriate her. A jar of peanuts is upended on the coffee table, an orange rind shrivels on a paper plate, her daughter's backpack is spilling crumpled paper onto the bureau.

"Goddamnit!" she yells. "This is bullshit!" Her voice finds another octave. "Can no one put away their own dishes? Camila, you know where your backpack goes! Why do I have to tell you all this over and over? I AM TIRED OF REPEATING MYSELF. WHY DO YOU TURN ME INTO THIS MONSTER?"

Mateo is hurrying from his room. "I'm sorry, Mami," he says too quickly. "We'll clean it, Mama, I promise. We'll clean it, okay? Sorry, Mami."

She knows what he is feeling, this crushing responsibility to manage her moods, to manage all of them. She is not immune to guilt, but it is too late. Once ignited, her anger is a fire that must burn itself out. Any emotion, all emotions, only add fuel to the furnace. She slams the door behind her.

Mateo's hiking boots clomp an uneven beat across the warped hardwood. An outrageously expensive sleeping bag and green canvas backpack taunt him from the corner. He looks out the front door again. The sky is heavy, close.

"I think it's going to thunderstorm," Mateo says. "Maybe we shouldn't go."

"You'll be fine," his mother answers. She checks her watch. Gabriel's father is minutes away.

"I don't want to go," he says.

"You've been looking forward to this for a year," his father says, and Mateo has.

He returned from last year's camping trip with Gabriel humming with excitement. For months he would talk of nothing else. The boys spent the winter trading draft agendas, swapping equipment lists like Himalayan Sherpas. Mateo exhausted every penny of his birthday money on an engraved

pocketknife. He holds it in his hand now, but away from his body, like someone has placed a dog turd in his open palm.

When Gabriel's minivan pulls into a driveway, all evidence of their son vanishes, replaced by a phantom of irrational terror.

"I can't go, don't make me go, please I don't want to go," he is blubbering, wailing, hyperventilating. "I can't go, don't make me go, please don't make me go."

They try to hold him still, try to look into his eyes, try to get him to take a few deep breaths.

"Slow down, Mateo, look at me," his father says. "Please look at me for second." But his eyes are vacant, nothing there but fear.

He considers himself a loving and caring father, mostly. He understands Mateo. He has struggled with anxiety himself. Yet still. This version of his son awakens a quiet fury that shames him. He cannot stand when Mateo loses himself so completely, when he is beyond all reason.

After a wordless negotiation with his wife, he goes to intercept Gabriel's family. She cradles her son into her arms, carries him into bed, whispers into his ear. "You don't have to go. It's okay, you're not going."

When they leave, Mateo calms. He can feel his father's disappointment and suppressed rage vibrating through the house.

"I feel better," Mateo says. "I think I can go. Can we call them?"

"Shhhh," she says kneading his forehead. "It's okay, mi amor."

He closes his eyes. "I'm sorry, Mami. Tell Papi I'm sorry."

The second psychiatrist prescribes Prozac.

They argue on and off for days, nearly always in violent agreement, switching sides repeatedly.

"We have to do something," she says, stirring a pot of noodles. "He can't live like this."

Her husband is cutting a cucumber for a salad the kids won't touch. He is using the wrong cutting

board again, probably scratching the stovetop underneath. His grip looks painfully crooked, the cucumber slices coming off in a haphazard mess. She swallows her words.

"It's such a big step," he says. "The side effects sound almost as bad as the anxiety."

"You've been on anti-depressants for anxiety for nearly 20 years."

"But he's nine," he pleads. "Do we need to drug a nine-year-old? His brain is still growing. Who knows how it will mess with all the chemistry?"

Bubbles crawl along the bottom of the pan, the noodles cling to each other. She has forgotten to add oil. She looks at him until he stops cutting, waits for those clear blue eyes to meet hers.

"He is suffering," she says. "My baby is suffering," she chokes.

He says he would do anything for his kids, believes it, knows it to be true. So why can't he finish reading *Anxious Parents, Worried Children*? His wife read it in two days. She is eager to put its lessons into practice, but needs him to learn its shared language.

He complains. The entire wisdom of the book could be distilled into a thousand words, he says. They have stretched it into more than 100 pages in the most frustrating ways, key points dribbled out in overlong explanations, clumsy and embarrassing anecdotes choking every chapter.

His arguments are not without merit, she acknowledges. But they must give you a reason to buy the book. Suffer through it for your son.

It becomes more impossible with each failure. He finishes a page, cannot remember anything he has just read. He tries re-reading passages twice, three times. The words swim, scramble, rearrange themselves into a cryptographic puzzle. He is looking at Sudoku, he is doing a word search. He tries reading aloud, but the syllables melt into gibberish. He recalls pulling thick clouds of burnt bud from a pipe in college, then repeating a word until it lost all meaning, until it was just random noise. Dreams haunt him at night: He cannot make a phone call, he cannot remember his wife's phone number, he

cannot make his fingers hit the right buttons in the right order.

They have not made a decision yet, but they agree to fill the prescription. So it will be ready just in case. Her husband surprises her by coming to the drug store. It is an errand he typically avoids.

The pharmacist takes their paper briskly, fishes reading glasses from the white pocket of his fraying cloak. The dose is clearly for a child. She searches his eyes for hints of judgement, but of course he is practiced. He glances at them blankly. Fifteen minutes, he says.

The store is vacant, the midafternoon lull palpable. She finds comfort in the familiar glare of overhead lights, the aggressive colors of consumerism. She shops the makeup aisle while they wait, picks up a box of hair dye.

Her husband is circling the merry-go-round of cheap sunglasses like a predator. He is there paying for the prescription before the pharmacist can even announce it is ready.

She drives. He fiddles with the radio, stuffs the bag into his pocket with a conspicuous crinkle. When they get home, he heads straight for the bedroom, and she hears a drawer open and close. She decides not to inquire. It is a concession she will make, to allow him this illusion of control.

One morning Mateo eats three slices of peanut butter and banana toast, laughs at videos of dogs slipping on ice, spends an hour doing clumsy acrobatics on the hammock in their living room. She hates when they do this. It is dangerous. Today she is silent, afraid, almost, to breathe.

“Mama,” he says. “Can we have Gabe over to play?”

Gabriel’s mother offers a cheery tone on the phone, but she can hear the strain underneath. They have three children, too many activities. Gabriel has soccer practice today, she says, but she is taking all the kids to park in an hour to play kickball. Mateo should come.

Mateo is excited. He can’t decide between the black shorts or red shorts. None of his shirts fit

right. They are almost late. As they near the park, he begins to fidget.

"Do you think Gabe wants to see me?" he asks.

"Of course, mi amor, he's your best friend."

The air is soup. The afternoon sun feels within reach, sizzling just over their shoulders. A gaggle of neighborhood kids are spread unevenly through the coarse grass and dirt infield. Two girls sit cross-legged in the outfield, trading fingers in a half-hearted game of Chopsticks. At third base, Gabriel's sister places a daffodil tenderly between her lips, spits it into her dirty palm, then crushes it beneath a torn flip-flop. Gabriel's mother is pitching.

"Pick a spot in the field, Mateo," she yells gamely.

Mateo finds Gabriel at second base circling Jimmy O. He is in their class at school, not to be confused with Jimmy S. Gabe and Jimmy are mimicking each other, their movements growing ever more exaggerated. Giggles come in explosive bursts. Mateo runs toward them, but falters as he approaches. They are collapsing to the dirt, snorting hysterically.

"Hey," Mateo says, finally, standing over them.

"Hey," Gabe replies, but he is distracted.

"Can you do this?" Jimmy asks, curling his tongue. Gabe does it back. Mateo cannot.

"What about this?" Jimmy says, going cross-eyed. Gabe chortles, then a belly laugh as Jimmy puckers his thin lips. "Oh my God, how do you do that?"

Mateo is doing it too, but no one looks. "I can raise one eyebrow," Mateo says, but too softly.

"Are you coming over after this?" Jimmy asks.

Gabe ignores him, shouts to his mother. "Is it my turn to kick yet?"

"Hey, are you coming to my house after this?" Jimmy tries again.

Gabe lowers his voice, turns his back to Mateo. "Not until after soccer," he says.

"Look, your sister's eating flowers!" Jimmy shouts.

"No way," Gabe replies. "Gross."

"That makes me want to. . .PUKE!" Jimmy says. Then both boys are contorting their bodies in a

pantomime of vomiting. Their guttural heaving freezes Mateo in place, watching.

Gabe glances at Mateo, stiffens, looks away. Jimmy's performance fades as he realizes Gabe has quieted. Mateo cannot decide where to look, cannot remember what do to with his hands.

"Look, a black lab!" Gabe shouts. "C'mon Jimmy!" And both boys are gone, their heels kicking up grass clippings. Mateo takes one tentative step after them, stops.

He kicks a pebble instead, shuffles into the gauzy haze of dust it leaves behind. He looks up, searching for his mother. Their gazes meet across the field, four black orbs shimmering with unshed tears, the sound of two hearts breaking.

Then he is off, sprinting down the hill and across the field away from everyone, his taut limbs glistening in the late summer sun, the movement a blur of unconscious grace. She watches him and thinks: My boy, look at my beautiful little boy.