

The 6 lives of Juanito Juarez

I.

Juanito hunched over his Gameboy at the kitchen table while the grownups spoke. Mother and Uncle Benny jabbered beside him with their empty plates scattered on the table like loose change. Uncle Benny was the oldest of the six brothers. There was bits of snow in his *south of the border* mustache as well as in his hair. His face was always red since he'd have a few *cervezas* before visiting his little sister. The Uncles would appear once each day of the week, but never at the same time, as if they'd had a meeting and agreed on set days beforehand. Mother always had an extra plate ready for them. They were talking about jobs; how hard they were to get, how hard they were to keep, and how stressful life tends to be when you had them. Some of the brothers weren't especially good at keeping their jobs, not like Mother. Even with the windows open sweat spilled between the folds of Juanito's body. The breeze from outside was dry. His lemonade was lukewarm and resembled urine so it stayed untouched. He wasn't mindful of their conversation, unless they said his name. It was a signal to pay attention, since when an uncle said his name it usually meant bad news.

Uncle Benny's friend had a friend who worked at Comiskey Park. He's just sitting on his ass playing games all day, time for him to get out and get a job, Uncle Benny said. Juanito's fat finger pressed pause on the game. Mother leaned against the chair letting the thought roll around her head. She was as big as a bean bag chair, had hair like the mane of a horse, and a watermelon-sized head. The moment the idea was lobbed by Benny, Juanito knew he was screwed.

It wasn't a bad first job for a sixteen year old. All he had to do was check tickets at the aisles, but he couldn't sit. He would meekly ask for their tickets and they would look at him and giggle. He had the tendency to look at their shoes as they brushed by. It was so hot on

most days his white button-down shirt would be stuck against his wet flab. The aisle would be unattended due to water breaks. The games were so long and boring, Juanito would duck behind a stand, take out his Gameboy and continue his quest when he thought no one was looking. His bosses would find him and yell at him, threatening to take away his Gameboy, but Juanito knew his rights. There were too many people at the stadium, it made Juanito claustrophobic. He hyperventilated and passed out on chairs. The old woman who sold hot dogs would fan Juanito when this happened and his boss would let him go home early. Before the summer was over Juanito just stopped going to the stadium and no one called to ask why. Mother never said anything either. At least he tried...she told Benny.

2.

It was Mother who got him his second job. She worked at a hospital as a nurse. She'd been in that hospital for twenty five years. She knew every corridor, every room, and every person who worked there. People gravitated to Mother due to her constant jovial state. She was hardly depressed, sad, or angry. She had the Catholic optimism, everything is meant to be, and nothing ever waivered that idea.

His job was to help transfer patients from the ambulances to the correct rooms. It was a hectic job since there was never a stop to the flow of injured bodies being flung out of the mouth of the ambulances. The gurneys raced through the halls with doctors and nurses shouting and flinging their hands at the injured body like a pit crew. Juanito didn't move like them, couldn't. He'd bumble along the corridors with the other runners trying to keep up. He lost his way more than once and a doctor had to go out and find him. The people clinging to life would whisper things to him, their stories, as if he were a preacher they needed to confess to. The guys he worked with weren't pleasant either, especially Scott who would constantly lob insults like I thought Mexican's were used to running. The rest of the kids his age working

went to the same school, smoked blunts in the parking lot, and sipped flasks of tequila when no one was looking. Juanito hated these boys and tried to avoid them whenever he could.

He'd see Mother at the reception each day, lounging back in the chair like Jabba the Hut, tired smile slathered on her face, and happily waving at Juanito as if it was the first time she'd seen him in years. She always ask him how it was going and he'd lie and tell her it was going great. She'd tell him some gossip, but then rush him back to work. She was happy at her counter, checking people in, sharing stories, and offering advice. She was good with people. He didn't understand why he was so bad.

The day Juanito quit happened like this: he was teamed up with Scott for the afternoon, Scott's face was red and he was constantly grasping at his stomach, he was short with Juanito each time they guided a gurney together, Juanito just stayed quit and did the job, a young boy had to be rushed to the emergency room, he was clutching his shoulder where blood was gushing out, gunshot, drive-by accident probably, the boy was extremely pale and kept saying a name, his mother was too shaken to get out of the ambulance, Scott and Juanito hurried along the halls, they made a sharp turn, the gurney tipped just a bit and the boy fell to the floor hard, Juanito was stunned and so was Scott, they just stood their silently looking at the poor boy crumbling on the floor, a doctor rushed over, snapped them out of it, helped pick the boy up, and raced him onward himself, the huge operation doors flapped, and it wasn't until the doors settled that they both walked away wordless.

Juanito never went back.

3.

The graduation was held at the big park near school. There were only seventy nine people from his graduating class. A good number of the kids dropped out, found jobs, were recruited by the army, or were on the wrong end of a gun. There wasn't much shade on stage so Juanito looked like a giant sweaty plume. Mother and all her brothers were there to cheer him on. They were all lined up in order of youngest to oldest and they all wore they're fanciest clothes: Uncle Tony had a cowboy hat and boots on. Even Mike, his dad, showed up. He had his shoulder on a tree farthest back from the rows of chairs. Juanito only recognized him because of the wet mullet and fat cheeks. They looked so much alike. Mother would have chased him out of the ceremony if she'd saw him. Juanito played his Gameboy most of the ceremony since he was hidden in the third row and no one could see his hands, but Mother knew what he was doing. When they called his name the entire family cheered. He stumbled to the podium to get his diploma, bowed, and then went back to his seat.

The family squashed him with praise. They kept asking him what was next, but Juanito didn't know himself. The uncles and Mother discussed the possibilities amongst themselves while Juanito orbited the grounds. There were so many people crunched together, snapping photos, singing praise, and exchanging hugs. A few of his classmates approached him to congratulate him, but mostly he navigated the grounds like a specter. He didn't care though since all he wanted to do was see his dad, but by the time he got to the tree he was slouching on it was empty. There was a little envelope on the floor. Inside was a card and one hundred bucks. All it said inside was *keep going kid, you're doing alright.*

Community college was where he found himself once autumn swept in. He was also able to find another job thanks to a schoolmate named Raul. Raul was a slinky, tall kid with a beard and his breathe always smelled of cigarettes. Juanito got the job at the grocery store pretty easily. They teamed him up with Raul, who had a deep bark to his voice and always ended his sentences with maaaaan. It was a pretty straight-forward job. All he had to do was push carts full of stock out to the aisles where they belonged and neatly place them on the

shelf. The head manager talked about time and how they had to do each cart at a certain speed, but Marco the assistant manager wasn't heavy-handed with checking if everyone was going at the right speed. He was too busy something joints in the back alley or reading conspiracy theory books. Juanito liked this job because there was a lot of time spent lost in his own head. It became mechanical, cutting the box open, placing the items on the shelf, discarding the cardboard into a cart, and then getting the next item. Only the lone customer who needed to find something in particular would snap him out of his fantasy.

A pale skinned, blue-eye woman named Edna teased Juanito, calling him a virgin. The other guys would question him in the break room and ask him if he was gay. Juanito started to take his breaks in the cooler where they kept the meat stored. It was cool for the summer and no one ever went in there. He'd sit on a stack of crates and play his Gameboy while chewing on a burger. Edna found him one time, poking her head in, and asked him what he was playing. She sat next to him on the crate. Her body felt warm next to his. She touched his fat thigh and said she wanted to see his dick. The nerves in his body shot like fireworks and he couldn't talk. The cold mist of the room sent shivers through his limbs. She unzipped his pants and brought it out, saying not bad. She bent down and put her mouth around it. The blood surged into it, despite the cold, as Juanito lashed his hands out desperately for any grip. Her sunlight hair swayed up and down, he felt her tongue, the warmth, and when he came she sucked it all in for him. He sat there in the cold meat locker with his dick out feeling embarrassed, he almost said sorry. Edna rose, wiping her lips, and veered out of the room.

They started to meet in that meat locker every break time when they worked together. They'd section off some crates in the back, putting a comfortable chair hidden in the corner, and would have ten minutes of cold sexual bliss. The cooler buzzed with mist, the chatter of the customers whispered in just beyond the steel walls, and the pattering of feet through the backroom never interrupted them. They even got used to the dry meat smell. Juanito started to look forward to work, not even bothering to bring his Gameboy anymore, and his mother seemed to notice. He wasn't doing badly in community college either. Edna was still scathing around the other boys, chiding Juanito, not giving him eye contact, but when they were in the meat locker she was his ice queen. Juanito didn't mind the mystery, didn't mind being a secret

lover like the books he'd read. It was during a particular break when Edna wasn't there when things went bad. The guys were talking about Edna, how she'd slept with most of them already, and how she hasn't given Juanito anything yet. What a little slut, they laughed, and not even Juanito could get it. He wanted to tell them, shout at them, but he bottled it up. He rushed out of the break room almost in tears and went back to stocking. Edna didn't show up to work all week. When she called him at home he was so happy, he couldn't contain it. Maybe they'll finally be boyfriend and girlfriend he thought. She told him her period was late. Juanito quit his job after that.

4.

You are a man now so you need a man's job, his Uncle Tony told him, still wearing that same cowboy hat from before. Mother wasn't angry with Juanito for being so reckless, but she wasn't happy either. It happened to all of her brothers. They were all in the prime of their youth, met one girl, made one mistake, and ended up stuck in a family and indifferent to life. It was a curse on all the males and she was hoping her son would be different. Tony took off his cowboy hat and laid it on the kitchen table, discussing the options for Juanito. Tony was the most successful of the brothers. He started off as a truck driver for a company, getting the job right after his first son was born, and ended up working his way all the way up to director of the company's Illinois branch. Mother would tell Juanito stories about Tony, how he'd have many different girlfriends when Juanito was just a baby, saying each time, Juanito meet your new aunt, before finally knocking one up and having to actually settle. Tony was tall and had sharp features. When he spoke it always sounded like he was singing. Juanito liked Uncle Tony.

Juanito needed a job with growth, they said, a job that can help support a family. Edna quit the job at the grocery store as well and started training to be a nurse like Mother. Her stomach grew bigger every day. Juanito would touch the outline of her belly and feel the energy beaming from within. Edna was nervous, she had been a mistake too, but Juanito tried

to calm her down. They had a small wedding in a church with only direct family. Her belly showed beneath the white gown. The uncles were proud of Juanito. Mother was too.

There was an ad in the paper. *Clean Up The Mess Chicago Makes*. Juanito thought it was an ad to be a cop, but when he got there he realized it was training to be a garbage man. It was a job that came with good benefits and it wasn't too difficult. He had to wake up very early, earlier than the sun, and it took him awhile to get used to the smell. When contained in the mouth of the truck the smells congealed into an unforeseen stench that could cripple armies. Juanito had never smelled anything like that all his life. When he'd get home from work in the afternoon's Edna would have to tell him to take to bathes and then spray him with a bottle of deodorant before he was tolerable. The stench clung to all his clothes and no matter how much he washed them they still stuck to the fibers of the material. Edna got used to it. She was too exhausted from working at the hospital most nights to let it bother her.

The garbage men called the place where all the trash ended up The Chicago Graveyard. The mountains of trash reached remarkable heights. The things people threw away, Juanito thought. Juanito started to recycle after a few months there and forced everyone in his family to do the same. He found some remarkable things in the trash. The wedding ring he gave Edna he found the first week on the job. It sat snugly beneath an apple core, old shorts, and a broken microwave. After a week of polish and soap it was ready. The men were nice enough to Juanito. They were all like him, guys just looking for stability. They all had wives and kids. They had rent and bills. Juanito became one of them quickly and they never questioned why he came. Actually, the mornings were pretty quick depending on who was driving. If it was Pablo, he'd like to blast samba music and pass out chewing gum after every mile. Ernesto was a bigger fan of the classics, Mozart and Bach, since he learned piano as a kid. It wasn't bad working such early mornings since you were usually done pretty early in the afternoon. Juanito liked being a garbage man.

He got the call while he was midway through a grocery store clean up. The truck was only half filled when his mother rang him. Pablo drove through the alleys laying on the horn, trash spilling out of the mouth of the truck like it was drooling, and when they got there each man bolted from the truck and into the hospital. They ignored the head turns, gross retching

faces, and comically finger-to-nose clamps. They rushed into the emergency just in time to see little Juanita being held by Edna, safely delivered, cooing into her arms. All the men took off their hats and placed it on their hearts. The nurses didn't dare touch them in case of infection, but promptly shooed them away with words. Juanito stood impasto, the lone stinky statue in ward C, in tears, encompassing the two females that meant the most in his life.

5.

Looking into the casket, into her black pearl eyes, felt like he was diving into space. He held his breathe. Edna tried to grip his palm, but it was full of sweat. It was incredibly hot in the church even though it was snowing outside. The six brothers had on the same suit, hands drooped near their belts, bowing their heads. Tony hid his face behind his cowboy hat. People rotated in and out of the church with hushed lips. They told Juanito sweet things, kind things, even people from his high school who were so evil to him all his life. The garbage men had their own section quarantined off in the far end of the pews where they were wailing into one another's filthy suit jackets. Their stench assaulted anyone within radius. The hospital workers flooded in like a white river during their breaks, dropping roses in the casket, and then flowing back into the cold Chicago winter so the next group could pay their respects. Strangers even wandered in from the street thinking there was a procession going on, but then when they found out who died they rushed back to the tall mahogany doors and shouted into the neighborhood, causing more people to push their way into the front to see Mother. She looked like a deflated cake. They put a green cloak over her head and crossed her arms over her big chest. Juanito had never seen anything so beautiful in his life. There were people he'd never seen in his life telling stories into the mic that the priest put into the front of the church. All the pews were jammed with people and since no one wanted to sit near the garbage men some had to stand. Everyone wanted to tell their stories of Mother so it felt like an open mic. His

dad Mike even showed up, but the brother's wouldn't let him in so he sat out in the cold steps and cried into a can of Tecate. There were a few bottles of tequila being passed around the church. The priest thought about saying something, but knew it was probably not a good idea. Joseph, the third youngest brother, found wine behind the podium and started to drink it, feeling holier as he did, saying if this is God's blood then he had a good life, passing it to Jose who is only a year younger than him so he can have a taste. Someone brought a guitar and started to play samba music. The girls started to dance in front of the pews and the boys joined them. There was more alcohol being passed and everyone's eyes turned red. The garbage men joined the festivities and no one seemed to mind since they were too drunk and sad to smell anything. The late shift of the hospital came in and wasn't quite sure what was going on, they thought it was a celebration. Juanito sat in front of the casket, with his back to the party, and his three year old daughter Juanita sleeping soundly in her arms just gazing over Mother. He cried and cried, but little Juanita laughed, poking her father in the face. There she was, but there she wasn't. Edna kept her hand on Juanito since that was all she could do. Eventually Juanito struck a match and tossed it into the casket. It took a minute for the inside to catch, but when it did it blazed in a green rose haze. The tips of the flames whipped upwards, but never left the inside of the casket. It was the preacher who noticed the casket burning and he was quick to put it out with a fire extinguisher. He screamed at Juanito, what the hell you doing son? Juanito said she wanted to be cremated. The fire died, but the party didn't. Everyone in the neighborhood fled beneath the stain glass windows to celebrate death. As Juanito walked out he caught the shadows of their bodies whirling off the cement stairs. Their voices boomed throughout the entire neighborhood. Nothing could quell it.

The months ran passed Juanito. They moved into Mother's place and inherited a mortgage. Edna worked longer hours at the hospital. Juanita spent many days at a daycare nearby, learning more English than Spanish, and she seemed to grow taller and taller each time the seasons changed. She asked for toys, makeup, and danced to the newest pop songs blasting from the radio. The uncles still found themselves kicking the kitchen door with the tips of their boots as if they were sleepwalking with their hands out asking for food from Edna. She kept telling Juanito it was hard to feed Juanita and her uncles every day so Juanito started to

cook. He'd watched his mother cook all his life, how hard could it be? The uncles and Juanita picked at the things Juanito cooked like they were playing Operation, giving him a thumbs up to make him feel better. The uncles didn't come for the food, he told Edna. Edna nodded and kept the kitchen unlocked for them, but eventually they stopped coming.

Juanita didn't stop growing. She dropped the pigtails and let her hair fall passed her shoulders. Her clothes shrank. She wore black lipstick. He couldn't understand the things she asked for. She was in high school before he knew it and it felt like he just left high school. When he visited Edna at the hospital, sitting in the same chair Mother sat in, sinking into it like dough, it felt weird. She told him he needed to spend time with his daughter, she needs a male figure. Juanito looked into the mirror. There were wrinkles in his face. Two strands of grey in his hair. He flicked the flab hanging from his right arm. He'd never seen himself as a male figure. The city kept knocking on all the doors in the neighborhood trying to get people to sell their property. They kept tapping the clipboard saying things like tax hikes, unsanitary, and permits. Juanito stopped opening the door for them, but they stuffed mail in his mailbox with bold red letters on it. It wasn't just him they were shaking. The entire Pilson neighborhood was feeling the pinch from the government. Juanito started a night job in a parking lot since he wanted Juanita to go to a Catholic school. It was an easy job. All he had to do was check in cars. He took his sketch book and played his Gameboy. He watched the lights of the skyscrapers blinking on and off wondering if they were trying to communicate to him. There were days he didn't sleep at all. He'd do the night shift of the parking lot and then go collect the garbage. Twice he fell off the back of the truck, tumbling onto the floor, and snored into the patch of grass he landed in. The other guys were worried about him. He needed a break they said. Edna was worried about him. He was getting thin, too thin. Juanita stopped her dad when he was going to the parking lot and told him to stay home and rest. He kept going for another month, but then one day when he came home from another garbage run he fell asleep on the stoop and didn't wake up. Juanita frantically called her mother at the hospital.

He had an IV drip in his arm when he finally woke up. The uncles, Edna, and Juanita hovered above him as if they were floating. Their eyes looked like wet marbles. They needed him. He needed them. Juanito started to cry, but couldn't move his body. He was too tired.

Outside a light snow dusted the window. Chicago was like a snow globe that was constantly being shaken, he thought.

6.

Mike was never at home. In Juanito's memory Mike always had a can of Tecate in his huge palms and a cigarette in his mouth, on the porch with his eyes searching for something in the headlights of the passing cars. Mother never let him in. Uncle Louis told him it was because his father could hold a job as well as he could hold his liquor. Louis was a slender man. He and his boyfriend would run half-marathons. Some of the neighbors shook their heads and whispered faggots into their hands. It was after Juanito's sixth birthday when Mother kicked Mike to the curb for good. She sat Juanito at the kitchen table like he was an adult. All the uncles were there, even Julian, who was the only brother who went to university. They all sat there with mother in the middle and spoke to Juanito in calm, precise words. They wanted him to understand that it would be only them. Mike wasn't going to be allowed in the house anymore. It was hard to see Mother's face in the darkened kitchen, but she had something blue on her left eye. Juanito wanted to tell her, but didn't want to interrupt them. They all had serious looks, staring at him as if he were on trial. When they left Mother scooped him up and put him to bed. She dug the blankets beneath his butt till it was secure, flipped on the nightlight, and cracked open his favorite Dr. Seuss book. Before she left she gave him a big kiss on the forehead, reached under his bed, and brought out the Gameboy. He had seen it on TV and begged for one. She told him he'd have to make sure to still do his homework or she'll take it away from him. Written on the back of the Gameboy was *To The Only Man I'll Ever Need*

in My Life. She sat at the edge of his bed. He felt her warmth. Her hair was so long it reached her knees. Her face didn't sag and she wore dresses back then. She glowed like those candles of Mary that people lite in their kitchens. Juanito reached out to touch her hand and she cried. He didn't know why she cried, but she did. She left the door open a crack when she left since she knew he feared the dark. He placed his hand on the spot where she sat, not lifting it until he fell asleep.

End.