

## **Bala**

He calls her Miss Bala and she's just about 13. She's been chewing a lot of gum, loud smacks of her lips, and her breath smells sweet and sour, like she hasn't brushed in days. He doesn't mind.

Her teeth are tiny pearls and he can see the shape of her skull when she smiles, or grimaces. She's swinging her legs back and forth, just scraping the floor with the rubber of her sneakers, and he has never loved anything more than her in this moment. The air smells like burnt rubber in the laundromat, and soap, but her hair smells greasy and unwashed. She's looking past him, at the machines, at the walls, and he wants to pick her small frame up and take her from that place. Among the blue-haired ladies and the cholos trading news, he feels there's something not quite right, something he needs to protect her from.

He knows her type, knew it from the moment he saw her. Her shadows are all over the city, like handmaidens in waiting, little girls trying to look tough. They're nothing new to him. Flashes of flyaway hair, bullet belts, and faces drawn on faces peer out like tragic Greek masks from every corner. Exaggerated eyebrows and lips drawn on to

make them look older, or more enticing. There were girls like Bala in the city, everywhere. Fast talking, perfumed whirlwinds of girls bumping into him on every corner. He missed them when he went home, back to the suburbs where little girls stayed indoors, in their 2-storey citadels of brick and vinyl siding. Those paved, curbless stretches of shotgun houses and trailers were like a sexless, pale child peering out the window blinds. The city was a high waisted chicana with nothing to prove.

Bala is the city, but so much smaller. He could hold her whole head in his hands and crush it. Her wrists are skinny and hollow looking. She's quiet like she knows something he doesn't. She chews her gum and points at the popcorn machine in the corner. He brings her some, and a soda from the machine, and he thinks he would bring her the heart from his chest if that's what she pointed next.

Every Friday he would drive out to the beach and lay down, like a man dead, with Maria who was 32 but looked 45. He used to bring her flowers, or other useless tokens of his gratitude for letting him use her the way he did. She loved him the way a woman loves anything, distantly and obsessively, and he loved her back the way he loved a good breakfast or a cold beer. He stopped bringing her anything except his own palms, outstretched, and they moved

together in the tiny claptrap apartment she shared with her abuela. Some nights she just lit candles, to save on the power bill, and he could forget what she looked like in the light, at least for a while.

The apartment is dark when he arrives, and dinner's bones are still on the table. Her eyes look puffy without makeup. He wonders for a second when she stopped wearing makeup, when she stopped trying for him. He feels bad, seeing her like this. She takes his hand and sleepwalks him down the hall, past abuela's room, and brings him to bed.

"I wish you'd taken me outta town," she says, after. She has a voice filled with water, like she's never been sure of a thing in her life. "You keep saying we gotta go somewhere, but then we just end up here. Abuela can hear us, you know. Her hearing isn't gone yet. "

"Well, does she like what she hears?" he smiles, lightens the mood, but he can tell she's got something on her mind. She opens the bedroom window and lights a cigarette. She offers him one and he takes it because that's what he does, he takes and takes.

"I've got some time I can take off at the clinic," she says, and she's leaned so far back he can't see her face, just the glowing cherry top of her cigarette. He can feel her eyes, though, staring at him out of the dark. "You just gotta say the word."

"I'll talk to the guys," he says, "next week. It's been a rough one and I don't wanna look like I'm cutting out on them right now."

"I'll buy that for now," she ashes out the window and pauses. It's a long pause, filled with the hot air of the night between them. "But you gotta do me a favor tomorrow, yeah?"

"What kind of favor?" he wags his eyebrows at her and her huff of laughter means he's forgiven. Forgiven for never doing anything for her.

"My cousin needs to get picked up in Belle Glade. I know you just kick around town on Saturdays, and I got called in to cover some shifts."

"I've never met your family before. I've barely met abuela and she listens to us every week in here f-"

"Gael, I hate to ask but you gotta do this. You have to do this for me."

He thinks about those words for a minute. He thinks about how he comes to Maria's house, eats her food, lays in her bed, and never takes her anywhere. He thinks about his plans for Saturday, which involve eating a breakfast Maria will cook and then walking around the city, teetering on the edge of something unnameable and immense. He thinks about his flat box of a house back on Royal Palm,

with empty dark windows and boxes still unpacked sitting on the living room floor.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right." He says, "I'll do it for you."

He wants to say something, but he doesn't know what. Bala presses up against his side on the bench, settled in an easy silence. Her bare thigh is a solid line against his. Children are so free with themselves, but Bala's press at his side feels like she's telling him something. She's telling him she wants something, and he wonders who taught her to ask that way, requests made with her limbs, her eyes, the parts of her whole. He can't interpret it, and doesn't think she knows how to ask with words.

She eats her stale popcorn, dropping it everywhere.

He'd left Maria's house that morning, after he'd eaten her rubbery eggs, and she'd booted him out the door with her tennis shoe as she fixed her earrings in. She'd given him an address, up in Belle Glade, and told him to have her cousin down in Miami by 3.

He never went up that way, didn't have any reason to. He'd grown up in Miami, proper, and he'd never had cable but there'd been an above ground pool in his childhood, a hazy summer mirage of the past, and family dinner every night at a real table. Maria told him how

she'd had to fend for herself, but that was nothing new to him. She didn't have a story to tell him that he hadn't heard a dozen times before, and somewhere along the line he'd made a habit of not listening to her actual words. He just interpreted her sighs.

He'd driven out through the Glades, to where the curbs disappeared, and the houses grew squat and fat. Maria's cousin lived in a salmon-colored house, with a broken chain link fence wrapped around it like a noose. As he drove up, 2 young boys stared at him from the driveway. He thinks he should have called ahead, introduced himself, but it's too late.

The boys run back inside and immediately after a girl bursts out, running full bore down the steps to his car. She wrenches open the door, throws herself in, and slams the door behind her.

"*Vamanos*," she says, so quiet he almost hadn't heard it over the engine. He half expects someone to come out of the house, after her. She turns to him, her eyebrows knit in a consternation he is unused to seeing in little girls and repeats, "let's go."

He pulls away from the little salmon house, and heads back South towards the freeway. She reminds him of someone but he can't hold on to the thought as he speeds off. He turns the radio up.

She doesn't say much on the drive. She doesn't even offer her name, which Maria had told him, or her age, which looks to be around 13. Her makeup has been drawn on carefully, but the lines around her eyes swing a little too wide, and the polish on her nails is chipped to hell. He wouldn't notice something like that, not on Maria, not on most women, but Bala keeps pulling at her nails with her teeth and flicking them all over the cab of the truck. Written on her hand in Sharpie marker were the words *contra balas*.

"So, Maria tells me you just started 7th grade?" he tries to make conversation.

She's leaning against the passenger side of the truck, far away from him, but she looks comfortable. At least she doesn't have her phone out, pointedly ignoring him, like his own nieces and nephews.

"You going down to Miami to visit? Got any fun plans when you get there?" he tries again. Maria had said it was an emergency, for the weekend, and that the girl would be staying at her apartment. Maybe something bad happened in her home. Maybe that's why she'd flown down the steps to him, some strange man in a beatup Camaro.

He is suddenly aware of himself, and of Bala next to him, a quiet small satellite. If anyone asked who he was, or what she was to him, he wouldn't know what to say. It's been a long time since he's been around kids, not since the days before Maria and secondhands cars,

back when he had that full house out in the suburbs. He'd been the one at the head of the table, then, a tiny family growing like a delicate shoot in concrete . He's known the magic code then, knew how to twirl a little girl around so that she laughed like a bell that never stopped ringing.

Here, with Bala, he feels big and clumsy. Time has eroded his paternal senses and he can only wonder if he smells bad. He hasn't showered since seeing Maria, and a puff of shame huffs from his chest, before he pushes the thoughts away altogether. He's doing Maria a favor, and this girl is probably grateful to him.

"You like music?" he asks, not expecting any answer. He turns the radio to the popular station and opens his window. He would smoke, but looks at Bala's pink backpack and thinks better of it.

Maria calls him when they're 10 miles outside Miami.

"Gael?" she sounds anxious. All of her statements are questions. "Gael, you got her with you now?"

He glances over at little Miss Bala, who is scribbling more on her hand, snakey lines with no pattern covering her forearm up to the elbow.

"Yeah, she's with me."

"You gotta do me one more favor, okay? I got stuck in the clinic,



there was a big accident on the Northside and they're taking tons of people in here." There's noise going on behind her, squeaky wheels and indistinct yelling, like screaming underwater. "It's nuts here so you gotta take her somewhere for me and you gotta be really cool about it, yeah?"

"We're almost in the city, so just tell me where."

"I'm going to text you an address, and you have to go there with her. You have to stay, too, until everything is done, and make sure she's okay and take her to abuela after, okay?"

"Jesus Maria, yeah, how long this gunna take? Where am I taking her?"

"You just gotta go there, and the rest is already arranged. It'll take maybe two hours tops. Just stay with her and be really cool. She's just a girl." It sounds like there's a helicopter over Maria's head, and he knows he can't see the Northside from where the highway he's on but he imagines smoke and fire rising up from the buildingtops. Some sort of accident. "Thank you so much, Gael, thanks, I'm sending you the address now."

Maria hangs up. A moment later his phone dings with an address and he punches it into his phone. It tells him to go to a laundromat in the center of town.

"Maria can't make it, kiddo," he says to Bala, and she keeps drawing on her hand. "I gotta take you to some appointment. You got clothes to wash or something?"

She looks up at him then, and her tiny black eyes crinkle at the sides in distress. He isn't sure what to say to her then, so he apologizes.

"Hey, hey, I'm sorry, Maria said she's caught up at work so I gotta take you to this laundromat for something? You know what you need there?"

She looks away from him, straight at the highway, before nodding. She folds her hands in her lap, sullen, and sits as if waiting for communion. The silence that felt easy before feels heavy and wet. He clears his throat.

"I'm takin' you right over to Maria's afterwards, so there's nothing you have to worry about. You got me as your taxi for the day." He tries hard to put a smile in his words, but Bala doesn't look at him again.

They reach town.

A short, wide woman comes out of a door in the back of the laundromat, and she motions to him and Bala from beyond 20 tall,

blue washer-dryer combos. She's so far away it looks ridiculous, as if she's waving from the back end of a ship already pulled out from harbor.

He nudges Bala, who is pressed so close to him now he can feel her heartbeat, fast but steady. He doesn't know what's happening but the tenseness in her shoulders makes his stomach churn. Maria had said to be cool, so he's cool, as cool as possible, as he walks down the rows with Bala who takes the heavy, clomping steps of a teenager who doesn't want to go anywhere. Her head tilts down and her hair is a veil over her face.

The woman from the doorway hustles them into a long hallway, and shuts the door. She has a plastic namebadge that says *Gloria*.

"Are you her father?" she asks him, and he shakes his head no. She shakes her head back at him, and he could swear he sees disappointment on her face. She turns away to speak with Bala, and he feels like he's somehow given the wrong answer.

"Alright, sweetie, you can follow me to the back, and we'll get this all over with, it'll be so quick." The woman reaches towards Bala and takes her hand. Bala lets herself be pulled away and he follows, as if they're tied by string. He isn't sure what they're doing here, but he's ready to pick her up and bolt, bolt for the front, and get in his car as soon as something goes sideways. He's never fought anyone in his

whole life, but he would like to think he would fight right now, for Bala.

They walk the dirty, turquoise painted hallway, taking two turns, before stopping in front of a door that looks like all of the other doors. Bala breathes in quickly, but quietly, and he hears her. He suddenly feels as if that door holds disaster. Fire and smoke over the city.

"I'll be taking you in, here, and your friend can wait down the hall for you," Gloria says, as if he does not exist. Bala looks from Gloria, to him, and back again.

"Okay," she says.

The door opens, Bala is gingerly pressed inside, and the he can see that it's a doctor's office inside. Turquoise, like the halls, and mostly bare. There's a chair, a table, and an overhead lamp, like at a dentist. It's so unexpected that he can't even react.

"I'll be right back for you," Gloria chirps, and shuts the door. Her face is a grim line when she turns back to him. "You will have to follow me."

All this time he's done everything asked of him, but he gets the feeling he has deeply offended this woman. He isn't sure how he can even explain, or apologize.

"Hey, " he says, and the woman leads him further down the

hallway. She doesn't look at him. "Hey, what's going on? Is she gonna be okay?"

"She'll be fine, in our care." Gloria says, "I don't know about you, though. I don't know what kinda care you think you're providing her."

"I'm just driving the kid around, okay? She's my girl's niece."

"Whatever you say," she stops at another door, no different than the last. "You can wait here and we'll bring her out to you when it's done."

He enters the room and the door shuts after him. The room is empty of anyone but him, but filled with chairs and low tables. There are plastic standups on the tables, pamphlets and old magazines littered around.

He takes a chair, and picks up a pamphlet. It's about STDs, so he puts it down. The next pamphlet is about the dangers of prostitution. He flicks it back onto the scratched darkwood table. The last pamphlet is about what to expect after your abortion.

"Holy shit," he says to no one.

Bala is 13, and tiny. She doesn't twirl or laugh, but there's something so childlike about the way she sits in silence, unbothered

by it. He thinks that little girls must have whole worlds inside their heads, whole religions and whole dreams, which is why when the dirty little boys of the neighborhood crush the snails after the rains, the little girls pick them up, and make homes for them in jars. That's what Gabi used to do, and he could see Bala beside her, tucking in flowers so the snails have something fun to look at.

He thinks about how she pressed against his side, how he wishes he had said he was her father. Would they have let him hold her hand, then? Would he have wanted to? He reads the pamphlet on abortion five times, but it doesn't tell him anything helpful. It doesn't tell him if Bala is scared, or if she regrets this. It doesn't tell him who did this to her. It only tells him that bleeding may persist for a day or two after the procedure, and to seek a hospital if it persists.

He wants to believe that Maria knows what she's done, that she'll fill him in on the details later, but he feels like some intimate trespass has taken place. Maria has dumped the burden of guilt, of knowledge, into his lap and he'll see the back of Bala's black haired head as the door slams shut again and again, forever.

"Sir?" Gloria opens the door and pokes her square head in. "If you're ready, could you pull your vehicle around the back?"

He stands and faces her. He knows what she thinks now, knows how he looks, and he nods slowly as if to tell her he understands. She

stares at him a moment, and then is gone.

He pulls the car into the alley, to the back of the deceptively large laundromat. There's a turquoise door with the words CUIDADO above it on a neon yellow sign. He stops there and gets out. He knows Bala is coming, but in what shape or condition he can't know. He keeps his hands poised in front of him, as if that will help.

Gloria comes out, and Bala is behind her. He opens his passenger car door, and Bala crawls in. Before he knows it, he's pulling away, driving on autopilot back to Maria's apartment. He wants to say something to Bala but she looks tired, and closed off. Her silence is no longer an easy one. She does not look like she wants to touch or be touched by anyone.

When he helps her up the stairs of Maria's building, he considers offering to carry her but thinks better of it. She walks each step deliberately, with no expression. She allows him to hold her wrist, gently in a breakaway hold of two fingers and a thumb. It looks like a father escorting his daughter but really he is just her follower. Her wrist is so tiny in his hand. Her entire body is tiny, and in another life he might have twirled her around. Maybe then she would have laughed.

He knocks hard on the apartment door since he knows abuela is almost deaf. Abuela opens the door, takes one look at

Bala, and hauls her inside. She regards him in a second, the same look Gloria had given him, a maternal look that has echoed down centuries, from woman to woman. He will never know the meaning of this look, but it pins him to the spot and he is frozen with shame.

Maria calls him again, but he does not answer.

He thinks he should drive back to his house. He should go to the cool dark of his empty home and sleep the day off.

He's got cash in the bank from his last few jobs, but he doesn't want much now. He thinks he'd maybe like to see Bala, as she was 5 hours ago, or Gabi, as she was 10 years ago. He walks the hot sidewalk away from Maria's apartment, down towards the empty shop fronts and the steaming parking lots. Maybe if he keeps walking she'll appear, nebulous and wavy in the heat like a mirage.

The sun is faltering, casting everything in the harsh yellow of evening. The bar on 5th is crowded, people spilling onto the sidewalk. There's never anything good inside, but he tries it anyways. Everyone in the crush becomes one, a sweaty mass that heaves together in the neon and the heat. He goes in and orders a beer. He pays with a \$20 and doesn't look for change.

Music thrums through the crowd, some cubano shit with a deep



bassline, and he needs air. A thick girl presses up against him and pouts her lips in a big showy kiss, and laughs deeply. Her laugh is different from the niñas on the street, it's a singular alto, not a symphony of tinkling bells. He wonders what Bala would sound like, when she's pleased, when she's happy. He wonders a lot of things.

He presses out into the alley, out the back door where some boys gives him the eye, not sure what to do with him. He's sweaty, simple, a working man getting a break with a drink, so they part and let him pass. He pushes through the sweat and breathes the fresh air. At some point it became night, but he doesn't know when.

In the alley there are a few people, chattering. Girls, making a buck in the night, sweating like he sweats on a job. He doesn't begrudge them their business. He stumbles past them, can't remember now if he ordered one drink or three.

A small girl is crouched near the ground in front of a portly man. The man is so wide he blocks her face but it's Bala, tiny and compact, with pretty pink nails flashing his way. He reels forward, pushes the fat man, pushes him and lets a guttural cry, but it's like he's underwater. The fat man is yelling, the girl is yelling, he's throwing fists but he can now see that this isn't Bala, she's too old. She's got wrinkles on her face, big almond eyes rimmed in kohl and big high heels. This woman is wearing a costume, a little girl mask, and he

sees his mistake. It fills him with an ache in his chest. He stumbles onto the sidewalk as quick as he can, and the whole city is yelling at him, screams and noises, as he goes forward just to get away.

"Let's get out of town," he tells Maria, and she sighs long and deep. He can feel a well of joy in her, in the dark as she lies next to him. He'd come back to Maria's late, wasted from beer and the city, and Maria's hair had been blown back, from disaster and ruin. They'd sat on the bed and shared a cigarette in the window.

Bala had been gone by then. Small blankets were laid out in the corner of Maria's room, he thinks he sees blood but doesn't ask. There isn't an answer possible that he would like, not one that would give him peace.

In the dark he puts an arm around Maria, who looks at him like he hangs the stars. Her gaze is content, no different from any other day, but it lifts weight off of him. He thinks of tiny, thin hands folded, as if waiting for communion. He thinks of the quick-steady beat of Bala's heart as they sat side-by-side in the laundromat.

Maria tries to thank him, but he can't accept. She gives and gives, but he's in an empty house in the suburbs where the shadows are long, and the boxes unpacked. He wants to take her out of town,

for once.

"So, what do you say?" he asks.

Maria's smoke curls up into a question mark, and her hair smells like sweat and candy.

"Okay," she says.