

Ants

Frank sat on a creaky aluminum lawn chair outside of his front door eyeing a uniformed gardener planting something in brand new flowerbeds built around two Texas Live Oaks saplings. If they were flowers, he couldn't tell what kind because they weren't blooming and Frank's vision was even worse during the dusk, as he often complained about to whomever would listen. He shook his head and took another sip from his beer bottle as the artificial street lights on the Anthill started to take over for the setting sun. The Anthill was a neighborhood on a hill, south of the train tracks that was made up entirely of apartment complexes and duplexes, mostly rented by college students and lower-middle class families waiting for the opportunity to move to a real neighborhood.

From the pile of empties beside his door, he had already downed a six-pack since he had gotten home from work. The fresh trees and the flowerbeds looked out of place in a yard barren of any other life. It was mostly cracked, packed-down dirt that didn't even stir with a breeze with patches of determined weeds here and there, so he assumed it was just a matter of time before they rolled out brand new grass too. He figured the owner of Morningside Heights was just trying to justify stealing more of his money. Morningside Heights was a cookie cutter four-plex with identical counterparts littering every block on the Anthill. Frank laughed at the idea of the word "heights" in the name of his home. He couldn't remember the last height that happened on the Anthill.

When the gardener finished, he started to load up his truck, which was parked on the street near the four mailboxes. Frank approached him and asked, "*Que tipo de flores son esos?*"

The gardener responded, "*Narcisos,*" and continued about his work.

Frank placed a bottle of beer on top of the gardener's rusty toolbox in the bed of his truck, and he walked back to his chair before the gardener could thank him or even consider the gesture as an invitation to drink it with him.

On his way back, he saw his neighbor, Ana, attempting to open the front door of 1B while carrying too many grocery bags.

"Hey, Ana. Check this out!" Frank's groaned as he sat.

"A little busy."

“Come check it out.”

“I said I’m busy.” She repeated as she disappeared, kicking the door shut behind her.

Frank liked Ana, although he knew that she didn’t like him in the same way—yet. She was nice to him most of the time—often enough for Frank to think that they were in the middle of this long flirtation that would culminate in their getting together, but he hadn’t planned out his next move after this step. He was just waiting for a moment that he knew he would recognize once it happened. He wasn’t prone to fantasies about most aspects of his life, but he did imagine what life might be like with her. He imagined trying to make her laugh on a daily basis, and she would make him work hard. At first, she wouldn’t laugh because she was preoccupied, but that would turn into her not laughing just to make him work harder. He imagined how satisfied he will feel to have all of his day’s effort paid off with the beautiful sound of her laughs close to his ear as they embraced—the clean smell of her short, midnight hair that she didn’t seem to need to style and the smoothness of her neck against his cheek—it was all more than he thought he deserved, but his whole life he’d seen guys with girls they didn’t deserve and he thought, why not him? He may not deserve her now, but if he had her, he would make sure to treat her like he deserved her. He thought about how different his apartment would be with Ana’s influence—maybe colored curtains and a carpet that matched or pictures on the wall or maybe even a smell that wasn’t from microwaved dinners or the stench of a long, sweaty day at work. He knew that if it happened with Ana, his house wouldn’t look and sound as empty as it did.

When Ana first moved in to 2A, she had a boyfriend—a white guy with a goatee and a backwards cap named Josh. Frank couldn’t put into words how much he hated guys in backwards caps. He drove a lifted, brand new pickup that was never dirty, Frank noticed. One time, Frank asked her, “What kind of guy owns a truck that clean?”

She answered, “A clean guy.”

“Naah. He’s the kind of guy that wants women to think he’s a real man because he owns a pickup truck, but real men know he’s not a man because his truck is never dirty.” Frank smiled.

“It might have something to do with the fact that he’s proud of his truck because it’s new or because it runs,” Ana responded as she turned to walk back into the house.

That stung Frank particularly harshly because they were under the carport while he was fixing a leak in his radiator.

“And even if you’re right,” Ana looked back before she closed her door, “maybe the fact that you know what real men think explains why I never see women hanging around your apartment.”

“Maybe I’m just waiting for you.”

"I hope you like long waits."

She was about to close the door before Frank called her, "Ana."

She leaned out of her front door to look back at him. According to Frank, Ana wasn't the most feminine woman—something he didn't necessarily think was a bad thing. It had nothing to do with her body or her face, but because she was so determined to be tough, most of the time, she didn't pay attention to feminine details. Maybe she didn't fix up her hair as much as other women, or maybe she didn't take the time to put on infinite shades of makeup to show how artificially realistic her was, or maybe she didn't take time to match the proper blouse to the shoes. But every once in a while, her femininity was so bold that it shattered all of her toughness, her anger, her failed marriage and her kid that doesn't get to visit her, and the way she leaned on her hip and craned her beautifully delicate neck back at Frank with a patience that only the women in his life seemed to have distracted Frank for the slightest of moments.

"You'd be beautiful if you smiled," was Frank's attempt at flattery.

"Yeah, well you'd be cuter if you had a job," Ana punctuated it with a slam of the door.

"I do," he replied to his leaking radiator.

Frank was pretty sure that was another chapter in their long flirtation. The fact that she kept slamming doors at the end of their exchanges could've been interpreted by anybody else as a bad thing, but not to Frank. He thought of himself as a patient optimist.

Ana and Josh broke up not long after that. Frank heard it all through the thin walls. Shouting and thuds on the wall that made him consider going next door to make sure Ana was all right or going outside because he knew it wasn't any of his business. His curiosity was much stronger than his integrity. He heard her cry when he left. She wasn't crying because she was sad or desperate. He swore they were cries of anger, which gave him hope. He thought that she would get over being angry sooner than it would take to get over anything else. Although he felt bad for her, there was a part of him (and he wasn't ashamed to admit it) that was relieved. When he usually heard things from his side of the wall, he heard things that he wished he couldn't hear. Sounds that made him empty and alone. Sounds that he really did not want to hear and went outside to escape them when he did—not because of his integrity, but he didn't couldn't bear to hear.

The remaining sunlight slipped from behind the trees to the horizon, fleeing from the humming streetlights. There were a group of kids running down the street. Some were teenagers who Frank didn't like. They didn't care about the neighborhood. Everyone thought they were responsible for vandalizing some of the buildings on the block. Behind them, a group of smaller

kids chased—the youngest looking like he was seven or eight. Frank wondered what kind of parents let their kids run with assholes like that.

When the kids ran passed Morningside Heights and were out of sight, he turned his focus to his neighbors living their lives behind their walls. Across from him in 2A were the Balderas—an older, married pair of hunchbacks, about the age Frank's grandparents would be if they were still alive. He could always smell Mrs. Balderas cooking as he sat outside. It nearly drove him crazy—not crazy enough to be nicer to them to maybe get leftovers every now and then, but crazy. Their television was too loud most of the time. From his perch outside his door, he could almost follow the plights of the hysterical characters on the *telenovelas* that Mrs. Balderas watched.

When they first moved in, he knew it didn't take long for them to dislike him. He figured that it was probably because he sat outside his door every night. Mrs. Balderas used to open the front door to go outside, see him sitting near a pile of empty beer bottles, and immediately close the door. Sometimes she snorted before she shut it, and sometimes she slammed it. Eventually, they only used the front door to leave and enter the house, and they did it without the slightest acknowledgement of Frank when he was sitting in his chair. He initially felt bad about preventing them from ever opening the front door just to get some fresh air, but one time he heard Mrs. Balderas call him a *borracho* before she shut the door. Since then, he made it a point to get to his chair early and stay until after he saw the lights in their window go out and their TV went silent. He figured that if they needed fresh air, they could open the back door to the tiny concrete slab that served as a back porch where whatever peacefulness was polluted by the constant rattling of old air conditioning units.

Frank didn't know whether the Balderas had kids or not. If they did, he figured that either the kids were assholes for never visiting, or the Balderas were assholes, and that was why their kids never visited. Either way, it made sense to him. He honestly couldn't imagine them as loving parents—or loving anything for that matter. They really didn't even seem to love each other, but seemed to tolerate each other instead. Seeing them together didn't melt his heart like other people claim that the sight of older couples do. They seemed to be a reminder of what he didn't want if he was ever lucky enough to have the privilege to be with a woman like Ana.

A younger version of the Balderas lived in 2B with the exception that they always had a crying toddler in their tow. Norma and Ray were the parents, and Zach was the crying toddler. He hated the kid's name. Zach Dominguez. He couldn't understand why they would give a white first name to a kid with a Mexican last name. He was careful not to refer to Norma and Ray as "Mexican" too often because he thought they barely qualified. They may have had Mexican last names and

brown skin, but nothing they did was “Mexican,” according to Frank, from driving a Honda to bringing home Taco Bell.

Norma was mean—so mean, it made her ugly to Frank. He could see that she was attractive not so long before, and that was probably why Ray fell for her, but something turned her. Her face was constantly bitter, and her features sharp and angular like a statue chiseled from rock. She carried the bitterness of her life on her face like she did Zach on her hip. Sometimes he heard her laughing from behind their front door, but it sounded unnatural. Her laugh was loud and guttural reminding Frank of a farm animal. It wasn't Ray's laugh because he was too quiet and reserved and seemed incapable of the kind of laugh that Norma produced. He often saw them fighting on their way out of the apartment and loading up the Honda with car-seats and diaper bags and travel toys. It didn't seem that Ray ever fought back. He just let the load he was carrying to the car drag him down. Frank thought it was sad.

The night grew stagnant as the breeze disappeared. The gardener had long since packed up. The lights and the television in 2A were off, and it seemed to be bedtime in 2B. Frank stayed out longer that night hoping that Ana would come back out. Every once in a while she came out for a beer. She'd listen to Frank talk about how the neighborhood was before she moved in and how it all seemed to be changing. He'd make jokes about everything he could think of, trying to prolong her visit. He kept searching for that sign—maybe a hesitation or an unplanned smile that indicated to him that she didn't want to go back in or that she was enjoying his company, but she always went back after she finished the bottle. One day, he hoped, he could crack the ice. He considered that he was wasting time by waiting for the moment. Maybe he needed to make it happen. He could invite her to dinner or to a movie. It all seemed too typical to Frank. That's probably how Ray asked Norma out, and Frank wanted nothing like what they had. Frank considered it, and decided that he would barbecue for her as a surprise—maybe even ask his mom to cook some rice and beans. He wasn't sure what it would accomplish. He knew it was only a step in the right direction. She would have no other option but to consider how thoughtful he was. And it might not immediately result in the kind of relationship he wanted with her, but maybe the next time she came out for a beer, he would get that hesitation or that smile that told him that it was time to proceed.

Frank decided to pack it all in now that the night was full of promise. He stood up and started to pick up his empty bottles—eleven. He carried as many as he could to the dumpster. He needed two trips. Before he went in, he looked at the unopened flowers in the flower beds one more time. He hated them. He hated the flowerbeds too. He considered for a second tearing them down, but that required more effort than he had energy. He walked over to them and yanked out

the flowers. He carried as many as he could to the dumpster and wiped his hands clean on his jeans. "I'll be damned if they're going to raise my rent."

Frank stood up from bed feeling a slight pressure at his temples and swallowed hard making sure everything stayed in its place. It was nothing to him—certainly not enough to get him off schedule. He had hangovers that were much worse than this one and still went to work. His father died too young to pass any real wisdom on to him, but one of the pearls that he learned from his father was that he should never miss work because of a hangover. When Frank was a teenager, he spent one (of many) nights drinking with his friends at an abandoned house they called, "The Acre" (because it sat on an acre of land—they weren't all that clever). One morning after a night at The Acre, he decided to skip school and stay in bed. His mother was going to cook him breakfast when he was ready, but when his father found out, he kicked the door to Frank's bedroom in and started to kick the bed, throw things against the walls, and yell at him, "Get up and get to school!" Frank tried to reason with him and even explained that he was too hung-over to go—thinking that his father would understand since he spent so many nights drinking on the front porch—but he wouldn't hear it. He yanked him up by the collar of his t-shirt and told him, "If you can't handle your responsibilities and drink, then you shouldn't drink." He slapped him and pushed him into the bathroom to get ready for school. Since then, Frank has never even thought about calling in sick because of a hangover, regardless of how much throbbing was in his head or stomach—it was a matter of honor.

By the time he was showered and out the door, Frank had already forgotten about the effects of the previous night. He was too concerned with getting to and through work so that he could go to the grocery store and shop for his surprise for Ana. He wasn't sure what she liked, but he figured if she grew up around the same kind of barbecues he did, she had to like chicken and fajitas.

He walked towards the back of the four-plex where his truck was parked. He didn't have a clean work-shirt that morning, but the one he wore on Wednesday wasn't really that dirty. He was sure no one would notice. He opened the driver-side door of his pickup truck and it squeaked a complaint and squealed once again when he slammed it shut. As he turned on the truck, the engine roared out of tune. He saw Ray emerge from 2B, arms full of toddler toys and bags and equipment.

He looked at Frank but not for long. He didn't acknowledge him with a wave or a nod or anything. Frank judged him as someone who would call in sick for a hangover—if his wife ever let him drink.

To show his disgust, he slammed the truck into reverse and backed up into the alley with a heavy foot. He slammed the gear shift into first gear and the bald tires responded by kicking pebbles behind the truck. He knew Ray must've seen and heard. Whether or not he got the proper message from it, he couldn't say. Frank drove with the windows open—especially during fall. The mornings were crisp and soon to disappear. He sped through the alley and turned onto Jackson Road on his way to the university. He liked working the day shift. All the hard cleaning was done by the night crew, so all he had to do was empty trashcans, clean up spills, keep the restrooms presentable throughout the day, watch the students, and smoke cigarettes while bullshitting with the professors. The night shift was lonely, and he hoped he wouldn't ever be sent back there. The three years he spent working the night shift could've been the worst three years of his life. He just moved from one empty space to another. He went to work at night where he worked in an empty building, then went home where he lived in an empty apartment, and continued the cycle. The days blurred together and that whole period in his life might as well have been one long binge. The events were as gone from his memory as if he had blacked out—except that he could never forget the hole he lived in. It was as much a part of him as his arms or legs. It slowed his senses every day. Every opinion he had and decision he made was formed while squinting through the murky haze of depression.

As he turned left on onto Main, he noticed a car pretty far behind him gaining speed. It looked like it was kicking up dust. As he reached the next stop sign, Frank was focused on his rearview mirror watching the car speeding towards him at a really unsafe speed. Frank liked to drive fast, but whoever was driving this car just seemed to be on a mission. As it approached, Frank thought it looked like a Honda—maybe even Norma and Ray's Honda, but he couldn't imagine Norma ever approving of Ray driving that fast. It was closing in on Frank's truck a little too quickly for Frank to feel comfortable. It was Frank's turn to move from the stop sign, but he hadn't taken his eyes off of the Honda. By the instinctive calculations Frank made in his head, either the Honda was going to have to skid to a halt or it was going to swerve around him and run the stop sign. He saw the car start to fishtail before he heard the brakes squeal and the tires slide on the pavement. It wasn't until the car had come to a complete stop an inch away from Frank's rear bumper that he smelled the burning rubber. Frank had tensed and flinched thinking the car was going to hit his truck and exhaled when crunch didn't come. When he looked back he saw Ray gripping the steering wheel with both hands with his eyes closed. In the passenger seat was Norma, and she was

yelling at Ray. In the middle of the backseat was Zach fast asleep. Frank looked back just to make sure it was them, and he could hear Norma's muffled voice escaping through the closed doors of the car. He couldn't discern any particular words, just a constant, high-pitched hum that sounded like pinching the mouth of a full balloon and letting the air seep out slowly. He considered getting down to see if they were all right, but he didn't want them to think that he was someone they can count on to care. He knew it was stupid, but it was important to him that Ray knew that he disapproved of him. He kept looking to see if they would look up, but they didn't. Norma just continued to yell at Ray while Zach slept snugly in his car seat.

Frank put the truck into first and turned right while keeping an eye on his rearview mirror. After a few seconds, the Honda followed him. He thought it was a bit weird, but University Boulevard was a street with heavy traffic. It wasn't out of the ordinary that anyone from the Anthill would go down University to go the grocery store or the post office or any number of fast food joints.

Frank made several more stops and turns, and the Honda continued behind him—even through the university streets. There was no doubt left in Frank's mind. They must be following him. He pulled into the Liberal Arts building reserved parking lot, and his shadow followed closely behind. When Frank found an empty parking space, he pulled in, and the Honda blocked him in. Frank saw through his mirror that the passenger side of the door flew open, and Norma came stomping around the car with the angriest look he had ever seen on anybody's face. She moved in like a hawk in a dive determined to swoop on some unsuspecting prey. She darted straight to his open window.

"Do you realize how fast you were going down the alley?!" She looked Frank right in the eyes and didn't blink while Frank just stared at her. He didn't quite know what to say. There were tons running through his mind, but none of it made any sense. When he left home, Norma was nowhere to be seen. Ray was loading up the car. Even though there was a hysterical woman standing outside his driver's side door, he seemed to be trying to figure out how the morning's events could have lead to this exact moment. How did she see anything that happened in the alley? And why was Ray driving like a crazy drunk? And why the hell was Norma—whom Frank hated more than anybody else he saw on a daily basis—standing outside of *his* truck at *his* work yelling at *him*. Nothing computed. She repeated, "Do you realize how fast you were going down the alley?!"

Frank looked in his side view mirror and Ray was sitting in his car watching his wife yell at him with a hint of disinterest as if he was watching characters on a television show argue. He didn't look anywhere near as angry as Norma, and just sat there.

“Are you deaf?!” She looked down her beak at Ray, who looked as stunned as unsuspecting prey would look. “Are you deaf or just stupid?!”

The insult snapped Frank out of his confusion. The mere fact that she had invaded his life was the equivalent as punching Frank in the face. He was stunned at first, but fairly quickly became angry because he got punched, and the reason why he got punched didn’t matter at the time. As Frank’s senses began to clear up, he started to ignore the confusion. It was one thing to see Norma and Ray at home—there was no helping that. They lived twenty feet from his front door, but this crossed a line that Frank needed and loved. “Who the hell are you to follow me to my work?” Frank didn’t give her any time to answer before he yanked the handle of his door and shoved it open so forcefully, it didn’t have time to complain. Norma had just enough time to jump out of the way of the swinging door. “Who the hell are you to come here?”

“There are children on the street and in the alleys!”

“Why are you here?”

“The way you drive in the alley—”

“The way I drive?”

“The way you drive, you are going to kill someone.”

“The way I drive? Did you not almost smash into the back of my truck?” He paused for a second. “Why the hell am I talking to you?” Frank turned to walk towards Ray in the Honda.

Norma grabbed his arm, and Frank wrenched it back in an upwards motion. He quickly turned back to her before he had a chance to put his arm down, and she flinched and let out a high-pitched scream as she fell backwards onto the pavement next to his truck. At that point, he felt someone else grab his arm. Thinking it was Ray, he wrenched it away and pushed back, but when the moment caught back up to him, he saw that it wasn’t Ray. He had pushed a history professor Frank knew from the Liberal Arts Building named Bill.

“Calm down, Frank!”

A crowd of people who seemed to be rubbernecking an argument seemed to get closer at the prospect of a man hitting a woman. They all seemed to close in on the scene—some with cell phones to their ears.

“Are you calm, Frank?” Bill, who had now stepped in between him and Norma, asked. He was normally a very laidback man who could talk about anything for any period of time provided he had enough cigarettes in his shirt pocket, but at that moment, his chest was inflated larger than Frank’s.

“Yeah. I’m calm.” Frank looked over to see Norma on the ground. Ray had just gotten out of the car and was checking on her.

“Now, I think the police have been called.”

“Why?”

“People are concerned, Frank. We’ll get this figured out.”

“What’s to figure out?”

“Why’d you hit her, Frank?”

“What?”

“Why did you hit her?”

“I didn’t hit her.” Frank thought the idea was so ridiculous that it didn’t even warrant an explanation, but the looks on everybody’s faces as they sympathized for Norma and judged Frank seemed to clue him in. “I didn’t hit her.” He responded more soberly.

“We’ll let the police figure it out, Frank.”

Frank looked at Norma. “Tell them I didn’t hit you.”

She was silent.

“Ray, tell them.”

He was silent.

“Really?” He looked at Norma. “Now, you have nothing to say?”

Frank’s anger hadn’t subsided, but it was pushed aside by uncertainty. He tried to remain defiant and adamant, but there was a part of him that was scared. This was his work. There were consequences to what happened there. He knew how things looked, but he wasn’t sure if the truth would come out or if it would even matter. He tried to look relaxed like he had nothing to worry about. He tried leaning against the truck and controlling his thoughts enough to have a conversation with Bill, but he couldn’t. As soon as he’d open his mouth, the lump in his throat caused him to lose his breath again. If he even had two moments of silence, he would’ve broken down and cried, so he was somewhat grateful it wasn’t silent. The crowd around Norma had grown bigger, and they were urging her to stay down and not to get up and to wait for the paramedics. The only one around Frank was Bill, but he seemed to be on guard duty.

Eventually the university police showed up. When Bill filled them in on what he thought had happened, they pulled Frank over to the car and turned him around to face it. A sergeant who was straining the tensile capacity of his police uniform was about to put cuffs on him before Norma finally spoke up. In a voice so quiet, Frank couldn’t believe it came from her, she told the sergeant that I hadn’t hurt her—that she fell. Once the mob seemed to understand that nothing sinister

happened, they started to disperse. The police sergeant and Bill seemed to have a conversation. Ray was tending to a waking toddler. And Norma offered a smug look at Frank as if she was doing him a favor by telling the truth, which made him simmer.

The police sergeant came over to them and asked if everything was settled.

Norma responded, "Yes, officer."

Frank responded with an honest question, "Can I file a report on her?" He pointed at Norma.

"Why?" The sergeant asked.

"They followed me from my home to harass me."

"Don't push your luck, buddy?"

Frank spent the whole day in meetings with his supervisors. At the end of the day, he couldn't go home. The thought of starting a familiar cycle was more than he could bear. He needed more time. There had to be another solution he couldn't see. There just had to be one. If the world made any sense, there had to be one—even if he had to pray to see it, which was a pretty foreign concept to him. Even during his depression, he never resorted to praying. At the time, everything he did, he did in defiance. But things were different, he thought—he was not as strong as he used to be. Frank was caught in a moment where what was behind him and in front of him frightened him.

Despite not actually hitting Norma and, technically, not doing anything wrong, something still had to be done, his boss told him. Frank didn't understand. To him, the situation was simple: he didn't do anything, so nothing had to be done.

Frank's supervisor explained to him, "Look, anytime the police are called, we have to suspend you—with pay—until we figure out that nothing happened."

"Nothing did happen."

"We have to wait until the police say that."

"They did. That's why I'm here and not in a cell."

"I know. But you know how this place is. We need a stamp and a signature for everything—especially this."

"So, I just go home?"

"Yeah. For now."

"And then I come back tomorrow morning?"

"I don't know."

“What’s not to know? The day after tomorrow?”

“Probably not.”

“I’ll stay home as long as you want me to if you’re paying me.” The first hint of a smile appeared on Frank’s face.

“No. I think you can come in next week, but we’re going to move you to the night shift.”

It might as well have been a death sentence for how Frank took the news. Even though the episode is hazy in his memory, he remembers that there was no principle or integrity involved. He pleaded and pleaded desperately, but his supervisor couldn’t budge. If there was any chance that his mind could’ve been changed, Frank thought that his lapse into a blubbing child chased it away. He had no options. He could accept his sentence back to emptiness or quit and willingly walk into the emptiness. Those weren’t options. He imagined it was like being asked if you’d rather drown or burn to death.

Instead of going home, he went to Cadi’s, a pool hall across the street from the university that was a little too loud for his liking, but he had bigger issues than how loud a jukebox in a pool hall was. He was probably the only customer in there without a declared major. He watched everybody in there with envy. They didn’t know what life was like for real people. They hadn’t seen the cruel world yet. To them, a hard week was trying to find a way to cheat through two exams. That wasn’t real, Frank thought. All of those people at the university had no idea what the real world was like—even the professors living their lives within the book-lined walls of their office that might as well serve as the walls of a prison keeping them from the real world. According to what he saw, most professors’ idea of the real world was hiding their relationships with grad students from their spouses or keeping their status as “intellectual big-shots” to the students who couldn’t possibly know any better. What could any of them know of loneliness? Their whole existence relied on other people. What good were students without professors and professors without students? And what good were any of them without janitors? The last question angered him, but he couldn’t fool himself. Even when he was employed (which was just earlier in the day), he couldn’t have convinced himself of his own importance. To him, he was never a cog in the machine. That never drove him. His job was a way to pay for food and beer and fixing his truck. Being around other people was just a perk—a perk he grew to rely on.

As the hours passed, Frank’s thoughts became less coherent. After all, what was one to do in a pool hall if one was not playing pool, but become less coherent? The bartender seemed to understand him, but it occurred to Frank that being a bartender meant understanding that your customers need more beer, and that was it. The why didn’t seem to matter at the end of the night.

Another thought occurred to him: maybe a bartender is something he could do. How hard could it be? He'd have to work nights, but at least he could be around people. Maybe even the people at Morningside Heights would even appreciate his schedule as a bartender. The Balderas could open the front door for some fresh air in the evenings. Norma and Ray wouldn't have to see him at all in the evenings. And Ana...

What about Ana? The thought made him collapse onto the bar. How was he going to pursue Ana without a job? He thought about what his life was supposed to look like with her. Life was supposed to change with her. They both would open up and make each other happy. They both would lean on each other and make each other whole. She would get her son back, and he would become a better man. He would get to look at her and absorb her beauty with slow glances instead of the quick ones he was forced to take. He would wake up in the morning with the confidence that regardless of anything that happened to him that day, he was Ana's. The thought would make him proud. It would make him stand tall like wearing a suit to a funeral. It was all supposed to start that night with a barbecue. Frank looked down at his watch and saw that it was almost nine o'clock at night. He thought that she should be home by then.

He shifted his weight from the barstool to his unsteady legs. The bartender looked at him with a confused expression. Frank asked, "Are we square?"

The bartender replied, "Square."

"Good." Frank walked towards the door. The bartender tried to get Frank's attention as he gained momentum to the door, but Frank had no more use of him.

The fresh air was welcomed. He even smelled fried chicken coming from one of the bright neon-lined buildings across the street. Frank made his way to his truck, fiddling through his pockets looking for his keys in his pockets. By the time he sat in his truck and turned on the engine, the thought of surprising Ana with his thoughtfulness had refueled him with a new purpose. His posture straightened up. What couldn't he accomplish with Ana by his side? Everything else was unimportant—details to be figured out later.

He pulled out of his parking space and headed towards the street. Frank saw the bartender in his rearview mirror, but couldn't think of a reason why the bartender would need him since he was square with the tab, so he took off into the street. Frank felt like he was in a tunnel. The night sky was dark, but the street lights, stop lights, neon fast food lights all blurred like he was on a merry-go-round at a carnival. He stopped at the red lights and slowed at the yellows and drove at the greens. He had driven in this condition before, and it was nothing. He just had to keep it simple. There wasn't a lot of traffic on the road anyway. As long as he focused on the yellow line on the

street on his left, he would be fine. Just hug the line. If the line's straight, then I'm straight, he kept telling himself.

The closer he got to the Anthill, the more his disposition improved. He turned away from the carnival lights on University Boulevard towards the Anthill, which appeared darker than usual. Sometimes the streetlights didn't work, but that was something that people hardly noticed. He knew streetlights didn't seem to go out in nicer neighborhoods. The traffic was less and that made Frank's confidence grow—not that he was ever really worried about being pulled over, but the chances were much slimmer.

He turned down the alley which seemed to be one long shadow. Even if the streetlights on the street were working, they barely shed any light in the alley. To his left was a eight foot tall cedar fence and on his right were the duplexes and the cars parked under covered parkways. There were no lines to hug in the alley, but it was a straight shot from where he was. He had been down that alley thousands of times. He could drive it with his eyes closed and not hit anything. It was half a block to his destination. He sped up to get there faster. It was already late. If he started the fire as soon as he got home, the food wouldn't be ready until midnight—Food! He forgot the food. Frank slammed his fist on the dash at the same time the passenger side of his clipped and bumped over something, slowing him down for a fraction of a second.

"Shit!" Frank kept driving. "Fucking trash men never put the dumpster back in the same place." As Frank pulled into his spot, he heard a high-pitched screech. "Fuckin' fan belt!" Frank had replaced it about two months earlier. He was tired of this damned truck. The only thing his father ever left him, but it didn't seem worth the trouble anymore. He slammed the gear shift into first and turned off the engine. As he got out of the truck and made his way to the hood, the screeching hadn't stopped. The truck was off and the squeal was as loud as ever—and it wasn't coming from under the hood. The screech took a breath and turned into a wail. The door to 2B opened and Ray ran out. He looked at Frank confused and then looked toward the noise. Frank still couldn't tell what it was. Could he have hit a dog? It didn't sound like a dog, maybe a goat, but that didn't make sense. Ray ran towards the screaming. He thought he heard Ray say, "Zach" before he took off. Ana opened her door and came out. And to Frank, it was one of those moments where she wasn't trying to be tough. She was a woman in every sense—graceful and vulnerable. She must have gone out of the house without giving much thought. He'd never seen her so honest. She looked at Frank and looked as if she was about to ask a question when she covered her mouth with her hands.

"What's the matter?" Frank asked her.

"What did you do?"

Nothing was registering, but after a moment, Frank figured out why she must be so upset, “I swear I didn’t hit her, Ana. I can explain.”

“Her? Who are you talking about?” Ana’s eyes welled up—an overreaction according to Frank.

“She followed me to work, and—” Frank took a step towards Ana, but he was knocked off his feet by an explosion of light under his eyelids. He felt his face lying on the asphalt and his mouth full of blood and...pebbles? He tried to clear the haze by shaking his head, but that just caused pain to shoot through his head, worse than any hangover he’d ever had. A man stood over him, but he couldn’t recognize who it was although there was something familiar about him. He came out of nowhere and stood tall over Frank. He had hit him, but he couldn’t figure out who it was. Whoever it was grabbed him from the collar and was about to hit him again before someone pulled him off. It looked like Ana pulling him off. A flash of relief shot through him as Ana was helping him. Was that the moment he was looking for?

He tried to stand, but Morningside Heights spun around. He couldn’t even manage to get up on a knee before he fell onto his back. He tried to smile at Ana, but he couldn’t control the spinning. Screams and shouts and chaos turned to silence and darkness as Frank closed his eyes. He stirred at familiar sounds. He recognized voices, but had never heard them so heavy. He couldn’t open his eyes even if he tried, and sleep pulled him down so peacefully he couldn’t do anything but surrender all resistance. It’ll all wait, he thought. He’ll deal with it tomorrow in the daylight.