

Suspended Solids

Diego had arranged to ride with Fernando through Vroom, a ride-share app. They were both the sort of men who used photos from the internet as profile pictures, so Diego hadn't known what Fernando would look like. With his mouth covered, Fernando's heavy brow made him appear a little slow. But after a few minutes of driving, Fernando pulled his mask down to scratch his cheek, and left it hooked under his chin. His smashed nose and the thin pink line bisecting his mustache completed Fernando's face with an unexpected brutality. Diego wondered if his nose had been broken and his mouth split by the same impact, or on separate occasions.

As they drove, traffic thickened in the rearview mirror. Fernando blew through blinking red lights and swerved around stake-side trucks with beds full of scrap metal. They passed Estadio Akron just as sunlight spilled over the horizon. Both men sighed with relief. "I was worried," said Fernando. Monday was Día de la Constitución, and most people had the holiday off.

"Me too," said Diego. "Now that they put us back in yellow, everyone wants to escape." Diego started to say more, then stopped. He didn't want to slide into another conversation about the pandemic. After two years, it was still all anyone talked about. Citing statistics they'd read on their phone that morning. WhatsApp messages about another cousin he'd never met who'd died. His mother, holed up in Zitacuaro, convinced the vaccine was a poison concocted by the PRI to kill off Morena voters. Diego hated the pandemic with an energy that often surprised him. After a half-decade of long days and no weekends, everything finally came together in 2019. Diego had found tenants for all three apartments. La Mordida, his bar, was packed Wednesday through Sunday. The municipal commissioner had agreed, for a reasonable fee, to look the other way regarding his liquor license. It still baffled Diego, how quickly everything collapsed.

"So," said Fernando. "Why are you going to Vallarta?"

Diego noticed the white asterisks denting Fernando's knuckles, and a faded tattoo beneath his right eye that lasers hadn't completely erased. "My brother lives out there. You?" Diego forced an exaggerated yawn, which caused his mask to slip beneath his nose. He flicked it under his jaw. Greasy curls of smoke rose from the trash burning on the banks of el Rio Salado. Bedraggled crows hopped through the molten plastic.

"Work," said Fernando. "My boss has a delinquent client out there, so she sent me to have a chat with him. She has me driving all over the state lately."

"Well. At least it's the beach," said Diego. Fernando shrugged. They drove out of the slums and into the agave plantations that surrounded Guadalajara. In the rearview, smog obscured the city skyline, a shrinking grey smudge against the wide blue rinse. "But Vallarta is a long way just to chat. Doesn't this client have a phone?" Diego's vowels loosened between his consonants. When it became clear that crowds weren't returning to bars anytime soon, Diego began working for his uncle Amir. Cold-calling wealthy families in Guanajuato and Michoacán to sell them home security systems. After getting hung up on 40 times a day for 13 months straight, Diego learned to speak in clipped, apologetic bursts.

But here, watching Fernando's eyebrows climb his thick forehead, Diego relaxed. After his growth spurt in high school, when Diego sprouted from 180 to 192 centimeters, life became much more amusing. Size was a form of wealth in his neighborhood, and by 17, Diego weighed over 100 kilos. Suddenly, people wanted him around at night. Women approached him at parties. Pandilleros urged him to join their crews. Like most unexpected windfalls, Diego's increased stature diminished life's stakes. Lent everything a certain frivolity.

Fernando, although shorter than Diego, was thicker, with corded forearms and a neck like a stump. There was a bond among men of their size. Because, while most people deferred to them, some took their body as a challenge. Typically teenagers, their hands tattooed with unearned initials

that would someday get them shot. Chesting up to Diego at La Mordida and talking shit. They usually clammed up when Diego flashed the truncheon he kept on his hip. But even on the rare occasion when Diego actually had to smack them around, the background hum of mirth kept on.

“No,” said Fernando. “No phone calls. This is the sort of conversation you have face-to-face.” Fernando twisted his head, releasing a hollow pop. “Luckily, I have some friends out there, so I won’t have to go alone. You never know these days.”

“Yeah. How is Vallarta?” asked Diego. “Have things gotten any better?”

“Still tierra caliente, far as I’ve heard,” said Fernando. They drove past Ameca, and Diego realized this was the furthest he’d been from Guadalajara in over a year. The radio host began discussing las Chivas. Fernando turned the volume up. “Shellacked again,” he muttered. “Gallardo is the worst coach yet.”

“Worse than DePaul?” asked Diego. “No way.” The men discussed the Mexican League for the next hour, hypothesizing trades, arguing about starting lineups, and making increasingly outlandish bets. In Mascota, they pulled over and Diego bought a six-pack of Modelo. Fernando reenacted Javier Hernandez’s goal against Argentina in the parking lot with an empty can. Diego did an impression of Mau Nieto that gave Fernando the hiccups. As they pulled into Puerto Vallarta, Fernando invited Diego to his apartment to watch the upcoming game against León.

“It’s a date,” said Diego, the two of them still snickering as Fernando pulled up to an Oxxo.

“Long as you don’t expect me to put out,” said Fernando. “Is here okay?”

“Here’s perfect. We said 200, right?” asked Diego, shifting slightly to reach for his wallet.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Fernando. He held up a scarred hand. “I needed a laugh.”

Diego began to protest, then stopped. Once upon a time, people bought Diego things. Men asked his opinion, mothers introduced him to their daughters. The world used to open in unexpected

and happy ways. “Well...thanks,” said Diego. Through the palms, the ocean sparkled as facets formed, then vanished, then formed again. Diego turned and grabbed his duffel from the back.

“Message me when you’re back in town and we’ll grab a drink,” said Fernando through the window.

“No doubt,” said Diego. Fernando drove away. Diego ordered an Uber. Then he read about the Tláhuac metro collapse until Alfonso pulled up in a grey Toyota Camry. Diego held up his duffel and Alfonso popped the trunk. But when Diego tried to open the back door, it was locked. “Front seat, please, señor,” Alfonso called through the passenger window.

Diego flipped his mask back over his mouth and sat up front. “Here too?” he asked.

“Unfortunately,” said Alfonso. He wore a sweater vest, and looked like the kind of Uber driver who expected a promotion any minute. There was a basket of water bottles between the seats, and the carpets were freshly vacuumed. “Thank you,” said Alfonso. “241 Alvarado Street?” He dragged his index finger over his phone to see the suggested route.

“That’s it,” said Diego, taking a water bottle. Diego prided himself on always accepting complimentary offers. “So there have been some problems?” For two years, newspapers had been documenting a rise in assaults against Uber drivers in cities like Oaxaca and Morelia, as clients became scarce and taxi drivers turned to violence. Diego hadn’t heard about anything in Vallarta, however.

“The mafia. Nothing new,” said Alfonso. A ball of muscle sprouted between the loops of his mask. Diego waited, but Alfonso didn’t continue.

“Have they bothered you?” Diego asked.

Alfonso’s mask shifted, then he hesitated and glanced over. Diego widened his eyes a little. After a moment, Alfonso said, “Me? No. But last week, they followed a friend to his house after he dropped off a client. He spent three days in the hospital with a fractured skull.”

“That’s horrible,” said Diego. “Aren’t you nervous?”

Alfonso pulled up to a light and flicked on the blinker. “A little. But once tourism pick back up, it won’t be so bad. Things are hard everywhere.”

“Así es,” said Diego. A woman stood on the corner selling tamales. Big lungfuls of steam billowed up from the metal pot in front of her. “Have you lived in Vallarta for a while?”

“Six years,” said Alfonso. He turned right. “My cousin owned a hotel, and he asked me to come work for him. I’m from Atlacomulco.”

“Really?” asked Diego. “I’m from Toluca. We’re neighbors, carnal.” Diego let his tongue roll dramatically over the *r*. Alfonso’s cheeks wrinkled, suggesting a smile.

“Neighbors,” Alfonso repeated. “How is Toluca? Have they paid the garbagemen yet?” For the past few weeks, the police, firefighters, and trash collectors had been protesting in Toluca, after not receiving their salary for months. Images of black plastic bags piled two meters high across Paseo Colon had gone viral on social media. So had videos of los federales arresting municipal police officers after the local cops set a city bus on fire. The memes had been ruthless.

“Who knows,” said Diego. A taxi pulled even with them, and Diego wondered how he could contribute to the illusion that he and Alfonso were friends, not driver and customer. He decided to roll his window down and plane his hand through the rush of air.

Alfonso turned left into Emi’s neighborhood and decelerated. “This is it. Thanks,” said Diego. He got out and grabbed his duffel from the trunk. “Adiós,” he called as Alfonso pulled away. His phone vibrated in his pocket. An alert from Uber informed Diego that he’d been dropped off. He gave Alfonso five stars, along with a 20-peso tip. Diego rarely tipped Uber drivers, but had a vision of Alfonso getting yanked from his car by burly taxistas. Then he called Emi. “Que onda? I’m out front.”

Emi unlocked the steel gate and the two brothers hugged. Victor stepped out behind Emi and wrapped his arms around both of them. “Reunited and it feels so good,” Victor sang in clumsy English.

“Are you guys already drunk?” asked Diego. “Really celebrating having the house to yourself, eh?” Emi’s face was rosy beneath a few days of stubble. He’d grown thinner with each FaceTime, and now, standing before him, Diego tried not to stare at Emi’s scooped-out cheeks. At the strands of muscle standing out from his neck.

“Hey,” said Emi. “You don’t know. The boys went crazy, trapped at home. I’m lucky to be alive.” Emi’s wife, Ale, had taken their sons to Colima to visit her sister for a few days. She’d sent Diego a series of messages on the drive. *Emi needs to have some fun*, she’d written. *He’s been so stressed lately*. Emi was a journalist, who freelanced for *Proceso* and *Letras Libres*. There were whispers about a Breach/Valdez Prize for his latest piece, exposing the collusion between a gang of huachicoleros and several PEMEX employees. Emi had uncovered emails proving that senior executives regularly sold thieves maps of their company’s subterranean infrastructure, along with schedules of when the gas flowed, and even offered suggestions on where to puncture the pipelines. After the article came out in *Nexos*, Emi had to move his family yet again.

“And you,” said Diego, turning to Victor. “You’re still fat as ever, thank God.” He pulled Victor in for another hug. Diego and Emi met Victor Hernandez in middle school, and he quickly became the adopted third son of the Juárez family. When Emi married Ale, Victor and Diego split the role of best man.

“Fatter,” said Victor. He had shaved his beard into a brambly chinstrap, and Diego could hear the argument the two of them were going to have about this decision later. Victor grabbed Diego’s wrists and stepped back. “You, on the other hand, managed to stay handsome, you son of a bitch.” The trio walked through Emi’s small house and out into the backyard. A platter of carne asada sat

beside the barbecue. Emi opened the fridge and tossed Diego a can of Modelo. A cement wall enclosed the yard. Shards of green glass sprouted from the top like some kind of dental nightmare.

“How’s Toluca?” asked Diego. “You surviving winter?”

“Barely,” said Victor. “Gets colder every year.” Sweat rolled out of Victor’s beard and down the bulging stacks of his neck.

“How’s the new plaza?” asked Emi. “The pictures look incredible.”

“Una estafa,” said Victor. “400 million? For a park? I’d rather have my garbage picked up, than a couple new fountains. Some politician’s retirement plan. Salud.” Victor held up his beer, and Diego and Emi touched their cans to his.

“Some politician? You work for the PRI, asshole,” said Diego, laughing. “Come on, tell us. How much did you walk away with?”

“I resent that,” Victor replied. “My duty is to God, then country.” He gave Diego a solemn look. After a moment, the pair broke down laughing. “No, I’m not there yet. Someday, maybe.”

“Idiots,” said Emi. A nostalgic ache lodged in Diego’s throat. This had always been their dynamic: Victor and Diego the troublemakers, Emi the valedictorian. “What do you think? Hungry yet?” Emi asked. He walked to the barbecue and held a hand over the coals, then laid strips of meat across the metal grate. Diego started rolling a joint.

“Damn,” said Victor, holding up the Ziplock full of weed. “You think you brought enough, Cheech?”

“No seas puto,” said Diego, licking the paper. “You boys need to relax. It’s ditch weed, anyways.” He lit the joint and handed it to Victor, who hesitated. “Come on,” said Diego. “For God. And country.” Victor grinned and took a hit, then doubled over in a fit of coughing.

The three men ate, drank, and smoked as light funneled into the bright sink of clouds. They showed each other photos of house projects they’d started over the past year, and argued about brands

of power drills. Emi got choked up talking about his oldest son, Humberto, who'd transformed from an avid basketball player to a *Halo* addict during lockdown, raging wildly whenever Emi confiscated his X-Box. After he wiped his eyes, Emi asked Diego about working with their uncle Amir. "Do people actually buy his stupid cameras? Ours broke after a month, I had to order a different one on Amazon."

"After he sends a couple vatos knocking. We can't sell them fast enough," replied Diego. He sipped his beer, then returned Emi's stare.

"Seriously? I thought he was done with that kind of shit," said Emi, frowning.

"The pandemic," said Diego with a shrug. "Times are tough." Emi shook his head. "Only people who can afford it, don't worry," said Diego. "La gente fifi, who want to protect their summer homes." Diego scooted closer to his brother and clapped his shoulder. "Basic redistribution. Galeano would be proud."

Emi finally chuckled and clinked his glass to Diego's. "I just want you to be safe. Remember Dad."

Diego pointed to his wrist, where their father's initials were inscribed. "Every day," he said, and ruffled his little brother's hair.

After dinner, Diego suggested they go out. Emi protested, saying he had work to do the next day, but caved once when Victor joined in Diego's wheedling. The old dynamic. They took a bus downtown, and Diego, sitting in the middle, began humming *La Bikina*. He hummed louder and louder, swaying back and forth. Other passengers glanced at them. Victor elbowed Diego with a giggle, and Emi apologized to two women in scrubs across the aisle, before Diego belted out, "Dicen que pasa las noches, llorando por él!"

After a moment of silence, one of the nurses clapped. A few other passengers joined in the applause. "Encore!" called an old man from the back of the bus. Diego launched into *Te Sigo*

Queriendo, and by the time they pulled in front of the malecón, the whole bus, including the driver, was singing along.

“You’re crazy,” said Emi, wrapping his arm around Diego’s neck. They walked to a small plaza overlooking the sea and sat at a table outside a bar called El Negociazo. A band played beneath the quiosco in the middle of the plaza. Two gringos stood nearby, making a big show of smoking their cigars. Victor snickered as he pointed out the white smears rimming their nostrils. Neither Diego nor Emi laughed along. Three women sat at the next table over, their conversation tripping over Castilian lisps. One of the women wore a sash that read: *Cumpleañera*.

“Happy birthday,” said Diego, turning his chair. The woman’s forehead crinkled with instinctive annoyance, then relaxed when she saw Diego. She had bobbed hair and a swooping flourish of a nose. Diego held up his beer. “How old are you?”

“Gracias,” she said, lifting her margarita. Her voice dragged over a slight rasp. She pushed her bottom lip into a pout. “I’m 32.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Diego. He looked her up and down. “Well. Maybe.” Her friends giggled.

“Que grosero,” said the woman. She ran a fingertip around the rim of her glass, then licked the gathered salt.

“Sorry,” said Diego. The band started playing *La Piragua*. “Could I make it up to you?” he asked. “Do you know how to dance cumbia?” The woman rolled her eyes. Diego stood and took her outstretched hand. He remembered. This was how things had been, before masks and lockdowns. The world soft and pliable. People delighted by his disregard for the imaginary gulf between them.

“What’s your name?” Diego asked, leading her onto the plaza.

“Marta,” said the woman, her hand warm in Diego’s as he caught the drumbeat and drew a tight circle. Diego was an excellent dancer, and always relished the first moments with a new partner.

He marked a turn, touched Marta's hip, and sent her back under his arm. She frowned as Diego whirled her through a series of spins. "Where did you learn to dance?" asked Marta. One of her friends clapped.

"The internet," said Diego. He led her through an enchufla, then cocked his head toward Emi. "My brother and I used to watch videos online and trade off being the girl."

"Funny," said Marta. Her bare back pressed into his belly. She looked up and rotated her hips. "That's how my twin sister and I learned to kiss."

Diego missed a step. "Really?" he asked.

"No, pervert," said Marta. She arched a thin eyebrow. "Are you always so gullible?"

The song's momentum carried her an arm-length away. Then she was back, her chest against his. Marta's eyes were the color of a dahlia leaf held up before the sun. "I'm pretty sure I'd believe anything you told me," said Diego. A pale delta spilled from the moon and fanned across the black ocean.

Marta's face broke into a mischievous grin. "Well," she said, and stepped further into his arms. "That could be fun." The song ended, and the band struck up another. Victor offered his hand to one of Marta's friends. After a minute, her other friend pulled Emi from his seat. Soon, more couples joined them on the plaza, clapping and laughing. Two toddlers held hands and bounced to the sob of the trombone. One of the gringos pulled out his phone and took a video.

Marta worked for a nonprofit bringing clean water to rural communities throughout Jalisco, Diego learned over a shared cigarette. Her visa was expiring, so she had to return to Europe, where a post at Iberdrola waited. Diego asked if he could run away with her. He said his life's dream was to be a trophy husband. Marta squeezed his thick arms and said, "Perhaps." Diego imagined shepherding a trio of daughters on bicycle rides through the Spanish countryside. Patiently answering their questions as they followed a stream, flashing beneath the continental sun. After the cigarette,

Diego left Marta with Emi and walked into the restaurant, to find an *Out of Order* sign pasted on the bathroom door. A busboy crouched in front of the toilet with a toolbox.

“Dammit,” muttered Diego, and walked back outside. A pair of police stood beside the restaurant’s entrance. “Discúlpame,” said Diego. “The bathroom here is broken. You know where I could take a piss?” The rest of the shops surrounding the plaza had closed hours ago.

One of them glanced over while the other watched Marta dance with Emi. “Yeah,” said the cop. “Just go up the promenade a bit, to the rocks.”

“Thanks,” said Diego. The cop nodded. Diego’s head swam pleasantly. He wandered up the malecón a couple blocks, until slime-bearded rocks abutted the cement. A few meters below, water dragged small stones over big stones with a hollow, toe-breaking percussion. “This can’t be right,” Diego said. Then he chuckled. A cop telling him to piss on the sidewalk did seem to fit the mood of the night. He unbuttoned his pants and settled into a wide stance, facing the sea.

After a moment, a voice behind him asked, “What are you doing, idiot?”

Diego zipped up and turned around. A new pair of cops stood in front of him, one shining a flashlight in his face. “Sorry,” said Diego. “But I just asked one of your compadres and he told me I could piss here. Our restaurant’s bathroom was out of order. I swear, he’s just over there.” Diego pointed toward the plaza.

“Really?” asked the officer with the flashlight. “You’re sure he didn’t mean that?” He shined his light across the promenade, illuminating a sign that read *Baños Públicos*, above the entrance to a bathroom.

“Hijole,” said Diego. He grimaced theatrically. “Honest mistake. I’m sorry.”

“Hands on your head,” said the other officer. Diego looked up at the sky, and felt palms work their way up each leg, then around his waist, before the cop pulled the Ziplock of weed out of Diego’s jacket. “Ah. What’s this?”

“I have glaucoma,” said Diego. He blinked a few times, then squinted, as though suddenly half-blind.

“You have enough for intent to distribute, is what you have,” said the cop with the flashlight. “I hope you’re local. Our jail is *not* fun for out-of-towners. Unless you like acupuncture, I suppose.” He unclipped his handcuffs.

“Acupuncture,” his partner said, chuckling. “Que culero.”

“Listen, guys,” said Diego. “Is there any way to take care of this between us? Save everyone the trouble?” Diego was certain he would be let go. They were three men, briefly occupying the stations that life had swept them into. Law, and lawbreaker. But these men had desires and duties of their own. They had bills to pay, families to feed.

“How much do you have?” asked the cop holding the bag of weed.

“About a thousand, I think,” said Diego.

The policemen glanced at each other. “I suppose we could look the other way, this once,” said the cop with the flashlight.

“I appreciate it,” said Diego. He pulled a sheaf of pesos from his wallet, counted the bills, and handed them over. “1200, actually. For your trouble.” After a pause, Diego asked, “So...can I have my weed back?”

The policemen looked at each other again, then laughed. “Don’t be a moron,” said the cop with the flashlight.

Diego unclipped his watch from his wrist. It cost four times what the weed was worth. But convincing the cops to return the drugs seemed important. It would prove that the world was the way he thought, and not some other way. Diego smiled, held out the watch.

The cop handed Diego the bag of weed, then clipped the watch to his wrist. “How does it look?” he asked his partner, turning his hand.

“Pretty cool, actually,” said the cop with the flashlight. The three men laughed, and Diego had the urge to kiss both of them on the cheek. Strains of music floated from the plaza. Diego bid goodbye to the officers, and walked back toward the brassy sound. “Where were you?” asked Victor.

“I made some new friends,” said Diego. He danced with Marta, felt desire arc between their bodies. He danced a song with Emi, everyone cheering as the two brothers cut a waltz back and forth across the cobblestones. On the other side of the malecón, waves lifted toward the moon, then fell. The sea still determined, after all this time, to one day touch that shining light far, far above.

After the band played its final song, Diego asked Marta if he could see where she lived. She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth, then said, “How about I give you my number? And we can go on a proper date?”

Diego handed Marta his phone, wondering when he’d next be in Puerto Vallarta. He’d brave the seven-hour bus ride from Guadalajara to see her, he decided. Who knows, maybe he’d move here for her. “Expect a call,” said Diego. He leaned in and kissed Marta’s cheek.

Diego, Victor, and Emi walked towards the street, pawing at each other and laughing. They all staggered, playing up their drunkenness for old time’s sake. Diego told Victor that he was going to shave his beard the moment they got home. Emi said he thought it looked distinguished. A taxi idled down the block. The driver was chatting with the same pair of police who’d frisked Diego. The cops spotted him, and the one wearing his watch pointed to Diego. The taxista nodded. Diego smiled broadly and waved. The cops waved back as the driver walked over. “Where to?” asked the driver. He stared at the ground, his eyes darting back and forth as though searching for something he’d dropped.

“Ixtapa,” said Emi. “Alvarado Street.”

“60 pesos,” said the driver. A muscular flatulence, the smell of a ruptured colon, wafted from an open sewer line behind them.

“Deal,” said Emi, and slid into the back seat, followed by Victor. As Diego started to climb in after them, a hand caught his arm. He looked around to find Marta. She glanced toward the policemen, who had turned toward a commotion in front of a bar down the street. Men tumbled out, yelling and shoving each other. One of the cops tapped his baton against his thigh.

“I changed my mind,” said Marta. “It is my birthday, after all.”

Diego turned back to the cab. “See you guys tomorrow,” he said, and slammed the door on their catcalls. The child-lock clicked, and the cab pulled away. “Where to?” Diego asked. Emi shouted something, his arm waving out the window. The cop with Diego’s watch turned to his partner and laughed.

“I’m just a block away,” said Marta, taking Diego’s arm. He pulled her mouth to his. She tasted like lime and salt. Diego felt a tide within him rise. They walked to her apartment, arm in arm, remarking on the beauty of the moon. In her room, they undressed quickly and tumbled into bed. Marta wriggled beneath Diego, wrapped her smooth legs around his hips. She nipped at his neck, ran her nails along his ribs. “Que quieres?” whispered Diego, looking down.

“Tú,” said Marta, and breathed.

Diego awoke to Marta tracing the tattoo on his side with her index finger. “Hello,” she said quietly, examining the thin lines of his jaguar. Midmorning light shafted in through the windows above the bed. Dust glittered like mica in the bright striations.

“Good morning,” said Diego. He braced for the familiar morning-after polarity reverse, when he would want nothing more than to leave. When a list of possible appointments he could be late for would ticker through his head. Instead, Diego wondered if Marta might want to join him, Emi, and Victor on the hike they had planned for that afternoon. He propped himself on his elbow and looked

down at her naked body. “Jesus,” Diego said, shaking his head. “Being so fine should be illegal. I could have you arrested.”

Marta swallowed a smile, and tried to fix Diego with a stern look. “Just so you know,” she said. “I’m not usually this easy. Last night was an anomaly.” The air stirred by their small movements jetted through the shimmering dust particles, sending them reeling.

“I’ll propose right now, if it would make you feel better,” said Diego. He was surprised to find that the idea didn’t sound crazy, floating between them in the daylight. “So long as you don’t make me sign a prenup. I want some of that VP money if things don’t work out.”

“Hmm,” said Marta. She touched Diego’s stomach, cupped his jaw. “You *are* very pretty.” She ran her fingers through his hair, then gently pushed his head towards her waist. “But what else can you offer? I need more than just a pretty face.”

Afterwards, Marta went to the bathroom to shower. Diego lay for a while, regarding the buoyancy expanding in his chest with a slight unease. Through the balcony doors, he could see small white cuticles march across the sparkling sea. Their movement dictated by vast, inexorable forces arising from the deep. Diego heard the shower shut off, and Marta quietly singing *Di Mi Nombre*.

Diego turned on the television and began gathering his clothes. His shirt was draped over a chair, his pants in a bundle at the foot of the bed. Diego fished his phone from a pocket. Red numbers, like puncture wounds, strafed his screen. 27 missed calls, 42 unread iMessages, 387 new WhatsApps. Like anyone born in this country, Diego had learned to fear unexpected notifications. He locked his phone again, then unlocked it.

There were texts from family members he hadn’t spoken to in years. A voice message from a girl he last saw at high school graduation. Random words from the truncated previews in his inbox seemed to glow: *sorry, best, help*. A professional voice sliced through the static building in Diego’s head. *A renowned journalist, he was best known for his work exposing corporate crime*. Diego

looked to the television. Two bodies swung beneath a bridge. One heavy, one thin. Both naked. Long strips of skin dangled from their waists, the corpses half-peeled like fruit on display at some hellish market. Channel 4 would only show this footage once before the RTC threatened to censure them, Diego heard himself think. A sheet flapped beside the bodies. A warning painted in childish, blocky letters.

Apparently confusing them for rogue dealers, sicarios of La Nueva Generación once again demonstrated their trademark ruthlessness toward any perceived competition. Diego tried to push away comprehension. He remembered his mother's call when the police found what remained of his father. The keen of a madness that would soon replace her ringing through the laptop speakers. His mother's on-screen face bulging strangely, like the victim of a botched blepharoplasty. Already, other journalists are alleging law enforcement's involvement in the murders. This is the latest in a series of...

Marta came into the bedroom, wearing a towel wrapped around her head and nothing more. Her smile folded when she saw the bodies on the screen. Diego turned at the sound of her voice. She looked at him. He looked past her. On the street below, people looked past each other. Diego once heard that Puerto Vallarta was overdue for a massive tsunami. That the earthquake detection systems in place would offer seven minutes of advance notice before the first wave hit shore, destroying every city within twenty kilometers of the Jalisco coast. Diego wondered how he had ever moved through a world like this. A world with such brutal potentialities trapped inside its countless fault lines. The initial flicker of a guilt so sprawling it might as well have been the entire race's brushed Diego. What would he do.

Diego finally returned Marta's glassy, brilliant stare, and shrugged.