

PIENSA EN MI

Gulfport, Mississippi. 1990

Lyn was not herself that morning. She had forgotten to bring him jam with his toast and never came back to refill his cup with fresh coffee after he had finished his breakfast. Yet, Mike had visited Al's Diner every day of the week for time immemorial and Muriel had been waiting on him for a full five years after old Miss Lucille had decided to retire in South Carolina where her daughter lived. And so, her substitute had had ample time to learn his routine. First, the coffee, which he would sip while waiting for the order of white toast with jam; strawberry most of the time but raspberry was fine too. The choice was hers. Then, after he had eaten, would come the second cup of coffee that he used to drink slowly while doing some serious reading of the sports section of whatever newspaper was left there and that Al kept for his customers.

Mike always sat in the same booth at the front of the diner. He was a regular. Every one of the others knew that it was his place and would not sit there at that time – that is between seven forty-five and eight. Lyn was in her mid thirties, a woman with a surprisingly low pitched voice when she was saying hello to him, what with her frame so small and the lady looking so fragile, not one inch over five foot one and weighing ninety pounds max, if all wet. Not that he ever conversed with her, him not being very good at small talk, or any kind of talk for that matter. It was not for nothing that his mother had

called him the sphinx. So, five days a week for the last five years, at seven forty-five, Lyn would say to him in that low bass of a voice she had, "How are you this morning?"

And he would answer, "I am feeling fine, thank you very much". Not a word more either from her or from him. Ever. Why? No need to!

So Lyn was not herself that morning. Furthermore, she looked like she had had no sleep the night before. Al's Diner was in the middle of a mall, one of those that had seen better days. There had been once an Albertsons supermarket in that mall and that store used to bring in a lot of traffic. But it had closed in the mid-nineties and where the Albertsons used to be, there was now a thrift shop, a storage facility, and a Blockbuster video store with here and there, some space left to spare. His place of business was at one end of the mall. His father had operated Enzo's barbershop at that site for thirty years and now that his old man had retired, the place was his but his clientele, old and new, persisted in calling him Enzo.

One big fellow who worked as a butcher at the Publix on Third Street dropped his coffee cup on the counter with a bang and that got Lyn's attention. There was nothing wrong with the meat man, though, just his usual brutish way, him earning his living by moving and cutting big pieces of dead animals. Lyn's eyes caught those of the exiting barber. He had his hands on the knob and was already in the act of opening the door. What he then witnessed in her gaze brought him to a halt. What was there? Was it pain, anguish, or agony? Or was he imagining things? She turned away from him, busy with one patron or another. Dreadful torrid air and annoying noises coming in from outside made him leave, finally. Still, he felt that some odd communication had occurred.

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In the parking lot, one motorist in a metallic blue Miata convertible was honking at a truck driver stuck in a mass of cars that were either going in or out of the mall and doing it in a very disorderly fashion. Mike saw at once that the old lady in the big Lincoln should back up five feet to let the young man in the Cadillac go through and then, the black man in the Corolla could follow, which would give space enough for the truck to get out of the way of the Miata. He walked through the confusion, though. These people were nothing to him. What did he care if they ran over each other?

At five after eight, he pushed open the door of his shop and found his first patron already installed on one of his two chairs. Those went back to his father's time when he was still a kid and liked to think that he would become an astronaut. Marvin was an "habitué," having had his hair done once a month at Enzo since the opening of the place, many decades back. As an old friend of Mike's father, he would pretend to entertain the son with endless stories of all that Enzo and he had done together when they were both fit and young. Mike had no such story to tell. He would have been quite annoyed to find in his life one event worth mentioning and even less to make up a story about. His existence was made out of little things, mostly cutting hair, and what he was doing when not cutting hair, which was not much. Moreover, he found most of Marvin's narration without merit, proving just how silly the old geezer really was, and that if he would just stay quiet, he would not reflect so badly on his father.

He finished cutting a few hairs here and there off of Marvin's skull and made a show of reflecting the end result on a hand mirror, left and right, and so, getting the usual nod of approval.

Ten minutes passed.

With Marvin babbling non-stop. Then, he started a sentence with the words, "Me and your father."

That was it. Mike had had enough. He interrupted; "Marvin!

"What?"

"I am working here."

"Yes. On me, as a matter of fact."

"You are done."

"So?"

"You should pay me and attend to your business, whatever it is.

That kind of "exchange" between the two must have had occurred previously because Marvin took it in stride, did not look shocked by the rudeness, did not even seem to mind being kicked out. He took a twenty-dollar bill out of his shirt pocket and put it into Mike's hand. "Enzo, at least, knew how to be nice with the clientele."

"I know."

It did not matter. Marvin would come back and both knew it.

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By two in the afternoon, there had been four other customers in the barbershop. A slow day. Wednesdays usually were. Larry had just left the little white room full of mirrors. While sitting and having his moustache trimmed, he said, "I do not know why I still come into this neighbourhood.

Larry had been a lawyer at the legal office that operated in this mall and had closed shop shortly after Albertsons leaving. He was now attached to a big firm in downtown Biloxi, quite far away and he lived farther away. Still, he persisted, over the years, to drive the distance so he could have his hair done by someone he was familiar with. Men were creatures of habits. If Mike knew one thing, that was it.

"Because you feel comfortable here." Mike said.

"True. But you go and take a look. It is not safe anymore, all those suspicious characters overtaking this area. What about these properties that the banks give away or rent for next to nothing? What kind of people does it bring around? Not the right sort, I am telling you. Why! Half a mile up that street I use to come here, I stopped for gas. Nowhere did I find one friendly face to look at and what about the lingo they used for talking, not one of those darkies using proper English and worse, resenting me for employing the language. I ended up giving the guy at the cash register forty dollars, expecting some change and getting instead dirty looks from his beer drinking buddies."

"I know the place you are talking about. I wouldn't go fuel there either."

"Four dollars and some should have been my change. Since when are we expected to tip gas station cashiers? Not in this country. That's for sure! I don't know about in theirs."

"Here it is okay anyway."

"Believe me. They will find this place. One out of four homes in these streets is in some kind of foreclosure or other. Most are inhabited. The grass left uncut. Even the legitimate owners don't care to try selling their homes because there is no market, what with all those banks giving away properties like they were junk."

He interrupted himself, looked at his watch, and then said, "Tell me Mike. Is my car still in the parking lot?"

Larry had a blue Lincoln and it was still there.

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Mike first saw her from far away in the mall's parking lot, coming toward his establishment. She was wearing a scarf. He remembered having asked himself if she could have been of the Muslim faith. Nah! With a t-shirt and jeans, she didn't look the type. She had no chest to speak of. So, he assumed the girl was young. With that piece of cloth around her face, he could not tell if she was plain or pretty.

He was alone, busy with mopping the floor, able to recognise all who had sat that day on his chair just by glancing at the hair that covered the black and white tiles on the ground. Where could she be going, he had asked himself. To the laundromat? With no plastic bags full of clothes? If she had been there before and now was just returning, he would have noticed. He made it his business to scan every male that moved outside his store's front glass wall since they were all potential customers in need of a clipping.

He stopped musing when he realised that the teenager was pushing open his door and had gotten herself in; quite an intrusion of his little domain. Once inside, he saw that she

was carrying a purse made of cheap vinyl with a cartoon of Mickey Mouse on it. Out of one corner of that sac, he believed he saw protruding a tuft of thick brown hair. But, then, the girl uncovered herself and he realised at that instant that the hair in the purse must have been hers.

She said to him, "Can you fix it?"

"Who did that to you?" Mike asked her.

"I did."

"You did?"

"She made me do it."

"Who?"

"Pralina, that's her."

She was twelve. Maybe thirteen. She was showing him two plaits of interlaced, braided of hair, ten or twelve inches long with the ends attached by a red ribbon. Just looking at her head around the ears, he could tell where it came from.

Astounded, he could just say the name again. "Patricia? Who's Patricia?"

"Pralina," repeated the girl, giving him an exasperated look. "What, you don't know her?"

"I am afraid I don't."

"I knew it, that you were not real...Another of her silly stories. She is my mom."

"And where is she now?"

"How should I know? She must have left the diner at four this afternoon. You breakfast there, don't you?"

"Al's place, you mean?"

"Sure! She waits tables there."

Suddenly, Mike reviewed the scene from that very morning when Al was on the phone and Lyn, nowhere to be seen. Al was saying in a subdued voice, "Thank you, officer. Yes. Irma Sanchez. She was last seen yesterday night. Yes okay, I will tell her. Thanks again."

But Mike had paid no attention, more preoccupied with the score of the game last night between the Lightning and the New York Rangers. Martin St. Louis had had two goals and two assists and this had gotten Mike's full attention, putting everything else in the far back of his mind. Now, he said to her, "You are Irma, yes?"

"Who else?"

"Then, Lyn is your mother."

"Pralina."

"Oh now I understand. Sorry. At Al's, everybody calls her Lyn."

"As if I cared."

"Your mom was quite disturbed by your little disappearing act."

"It's all show," Irma snapped.

"But, you must tell her where you are."

"I did. I called at Al's at the end of her shift."

"She knows that you are here?"

"She told me... Go see Enzo. He will put your hair straight."

So, Mike invited Irma to get into one of his chairs. She was small and he'd had to use the mechanism to elevate her to a height at which he could work properly. Her cranium had the aspect of a cauliflower. He mumbled between his teeth, "This is a mess."

"Yes, I know."

"Why did you do it?"

"I hate braids."

"And she wanted you to have them?"

"It serves her right. No more of that now."

"Still, there was no need to take to the streets."

"She made me angry. I hate her."

"No you don't. This, I know. You will see."

"You live with her. After, you can give advice!"

He thought of his own mother; she who was always arguing with him over one or the other of his numerous shortcomings. The shabby way he dressed, him not being a great conversationalist, a black hole for all her gossips. His mother, who kept inventories of all that he should change in his ways, blaming him for Chrissy's leaving him, because he was childless, his passivity, him ploughing through life with nothing to show for it, after so many years. "What! The last movie you saw is *E.T.*," she argued against him. "And it took a scene with Chrissy to make you go." Yes, his mother could reveal herself to be a real pain in the ass. And quite unfair too. After all, he was keeping his father's place going still and what was it in it for him, apart from a meagre living? Did the old lady appreciate the fact that Enzo was still living through him? Instead, she complained that Mike did not know opera and that his father had Bergonzi singing arias of *Aida* all day long before his passing away. She was saying that under his tutelage, the place had no class. Damn! People were calling him Enzo. What was he if not the shadow of his father? Family, he knew about.

"She must love you very much. That's why she cares."

"I wish she wouldn't."

"Grown ups do that all the time. You will too"

Now, he was using his scissors, cutting here and there on her scalp, attempting to achieve some kind of balance between pilosity and features. At last, he said, "You know of Twiggy?"

"What's that?"

"Whatever. In a few minutes, you may look like her."

"Who was she?"

"An actress, a model or something..."

"Anything will be better than tresses and silly lulus attached at their end."

After it was finished, he decided that he would take her home. So he said to Irma, "Call your mother and tell her we will be there soon."

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His car was an old Chrysler Cirrus that did not reveal its age easily, due to him making sure that it stayed in showroom condition. He invited Irma in; this girl that now reminded him of a boy. With her cropped hairdo, she had not seemed to mind seeing in what must have looked to her like the face of a total stranger in the mirror. He had seen those astonished looks on men who would come unannounced into his barbershop with hair at their shoulders and Barbarossa kinds of beards, and these old hippie types would ask him to get it all out.

"Like Yul Brynner," he would say, just to stay on the safe side of the transaction.

Most knew Yul Brynner. After all, those guys were old and seeing their long forgotten faces was a shock for most of them.

As for Irma, she didn't care. As a matter of fact, she said to him, "You did fine." She was smiling at him – a Mona Lisa kind of smile, luminous and mysterious. And at that precise time, Mike decided that he liked the girl.

Inside the Chrysler, Mike asked her for directions. It was the end of the day and already, the sun was setting. Night was half an hour away. She told him and he remembered Larry telling him about that gas station where he had stopped to refuel. Irma's house was in that area. He was not afraid. Beside, the lawyer was an old fool, as dull as a five days opened soda bottle. In a discussion, you could bet your life on the good solicitor giving the Rush Limbaugh line of obvious and expected answers. It was as if Larry had that crazy notion that wherever he spoke, there were hidden microphones and he wanted to impress the CIA or whoever was listening through those devices that he was a good American.

As soon as Irma got into her seat and put on her seat belt, she started working the car radio. She pushed the channel buttons on the FM and the AM frequencies and got nothing except static. "You are not much of a listener, are you?" she asked him.

He looked sideways and saw what she was doing. "You mean, the radio? No. I have no use for it."

Suddenly, there was some loud music in the Cirrus– a Latin tune with a lot of brass and ardent rhythm. A male singer was enthusiastically repeating the refrain. Some

words, Mike could make out; Madrid, Cica, Amor. Irma pushed one button to fix that station into the audio system memory and then, dialled herself to another position.

Mike said to her, "Whatever you are doing, it is all for nothing."

"So, you do not mind my doing it, do you?"

"Suit yourself."

And she did.

Soon enough, Irma had found a station for all five pre-set knobs on the Chrysler sound system panel. As far as Mike was concerned, it was just some noises coming out of loudspeakers he did not know had existed up to that moment. The racket left him unconcerned, though, the girl was doing her thing under his benevolent eyes, a thing that girls do and who was he to know what they were.

There it was, the garage where Larry had said he had stopped this same morning. Mike tried to look inside through the windows of the store but could not discern much of anything with all the beer ads that covered the glass all over. He saw that the place was selling the twelve pack of Bush Light for six dollars. WOW! That was a deal worth stopping for.

He heard the girl saying to him, "That Street over there. Next light. You turn left."

It was red and he had to wait at the corner. Traffic was heavy this late in the afternoon. It was the end of another day's work. Behind him, he saw a monster SUV approaching, perched on ridiculous-looking wheels that lifted the vehicle two feet up in the air. Mike could see nothing of the driver towering over him like he was in a lunar vessel and most probably pondering whether he should pulverise the obstacle or just drive over it. At last, the light turned green and Mike moved ahead while the pilot

behind revved his engine like he was readying his spatial module to separate from the ground.

"All kinds of crazy-looking folks around here," Irma said in a matter of fact tone, as the strange-looking machine hurriedly passed them in a roaring cacophony. They were now in a residential area made of small, ground-level, sinking bungalows in need of paint and more forsaken, on sorry looking, yellow, meagre grass overrun by broken down pieces of car junk and home appliances. There were just the trees, mostly Spanish oaks, to give the place a semblance of habitability. Mike cruised through the desolation without issuing a word. From the car speakers came a male voice finishing talking. He thought he heard PENSE ME. That's when the music started. Next to him, Irma cried, "This is Mommy's song!"

Did he hear it the first time he listened to the beautiful rendition of the song by Ivy Casal? Probably not. Later, he would ask himself if his mother was not right when she was urging him to use his eyes and ears to connect with the world around. "Get involved," she would tell him. "Look around and get an interest." Could it be that he was missing things just because he did not care they existed?

But tonight, alone in the car with Irma, what he took notice of was the girl's face during the short time it took the singer to finish the piece. She said to him, "How I would love to sing that way."

"Why don't you? I am sure you can."

He would have expected her to argue the point. Instead, she asked him, "Why are you not married?"

Taken aback, he objected, "How do you know I'm not? Does it show that much?"

"You don't wear a ring."

"No ring, no bracelet, no medal. No metal of any kind on me."

"And you only shave twice a week. Tuesday and Friday."

He didn't have time to respond to that because she directed him to turn right where there was an entrance with a gate left opened, which looked upon a parking lot at the rear of a three or four story, sixteen-unit condo building. There was no place left for the Chrysler in the reserved guest spots. So Irma told him, "Move around and exit where we came in. You'll find places on the street."

To that, he answered, "There's no need for me to get out. Maybe, I'll just drop you off."

"No! Mom will want to see you. She told me so."

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Thus, he parked the Cirrus a block or so down the street and they walked together back up to building number two, where Irma and Pralina both lived, on the second floor. Pralina opened the door of her unit when they were both walking the outside corridor, which was accessed through exterior stairs that serviced all three stories of the building. First, Mike had found it difficult to recognise Lyn, the morning waitress at Al's diner, in the stylish woman who now was smiling at him. She was wearing designer jeans that showed her legs and a top that put her breasts where they could be noticed. Her black hair fell on her shoulders in a wavelike fashion. It looked nothing like it had that morning at work when it was hidden under a hideous-looking little cap with the letters AL on the

front, with that same hair all flattened up and pulled out at the back. She had also put on a little makeup; lipstick, powder ,and stuff and as if all that wasn't sufficient to make her a knock-out, the woman who was now in front of him was well worth looking at because you could admire her beautiful eyes and that happy smile, which was illuminating her face.

Obviously, she must have made up with Irma at some other time because there was not a trace of tension in her greetings to the girl. "Little Irma, my baby and her new look. Come now, dear."

"I am not a baby. I am no longer little Irma. I am a grown up, from now on," hissed the daughter.

"You must give me time to get used to it. You look so old, suddenly."

"That was the point, wasn't it?"

"I guess you're right," answered Pralina in a contrite voice. "Silly me not to have prepared myself for the atrocity."

They were still all outside the flat. Now, Pralina addressed Mike, inviting him inside. He reluctantly went in.

"It's so nice of you to have taken care of this sorry matter. Don't take what I just said seriously. Frankly, I look at Irma and I find the cut you gave her absolutely charming. And it suits her perfectly. Gives some character to her face."

They walked through an open space with a small kitchen in spick and span condition to the left. To the right, Mike discerned a corridor with two closed doors and then, they found themselves in the dining and living area; a vast room with a glass table and four chairs at one end near the open-wall kitchen, plus the usual sofa and arm chairs

facing a sound system and TV cabinet. In the middle, there was a coffee table on a blue and white carpet. The floor was tiled and there was a patio door that opened on a Florida room overlooking a ten thousand square foot garden with the street and all three buildings facing each of its side.

Pralina had Mike sit on the sofa and settled herself beside him. Near enough, he noted. He felt uncomfortable, not used to the attention and not knowing much about what to do or what to say. The woman smelled good, though. He decided to do nothing, to say nothing, and wait it out. He saw Irma choose a CD from a rack that contained a few dozens and put it in the CD player. He was surprised when Pralina addressed her daughter in Spanish. Then, he remembered Irma's last name— the one that Al had told the police officer while on the phone. SANCHEZ. Why! He was in a Mexican home – first time in his life. He looked at the walls to see the expected crucifix, rosaries, and portraits of the Pope, the Virgin Mary, and saints but saw nothing of the sort. His father had been born a Catholic and had married his mother, who was of the Episcopalian faith, in the 'fifties. There had been not much religion in their home and any there was, was of the Protestant variety.

Now, the CD player was turning and Pralina was telling him over a merry Spanish melody, "You will drink something. I can offer you white wine or beer."

Irma then let out, "She went to the store just for you and got you Coors Light."

"Irma," protested the mother, "you embarrassed me." And turning to him, she added, "It was not much to do."

He was red in the face and hoped she would not notice. He mumbled, "The Coors would be fine, thank you."

"And you must tell me how much I owe you for Irma's hair cut."

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Don't talk about it."

"I must insist."

"No. It's on the house. Irma is a nice gal. It was my privilege."

That got him a smile from the girl. The woman got on her feet but not before stopping herself in mid-air to put a quick and soft kiss on his left cheek. "Thank you so much, Mike."

And then, she went in the kitchen to get him his beer. She had called him Mike. Not Enzo. How come she knew his name?

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In the end, he stayed there until nine o'clock. They dined on some Mexican-Spanish cuisine that miraculously appeared all done and ready. And the stuff had looked and smelled so good while the beer and the one that came after the first had made him hungry. And with time, he started to thaw a little and they talked – her for the most part but him participating also, in small bursts of words that he regretted saying as soon as they left his mouth. But later, he became less and less bothered over his more than welcome contributions to the conversation.

They had had white wine with the meal and that had helped too. And there was also, at one moment, that song that came out of the CD player. They were having dessert, upside-down pineapple cake with vanilla ice cream and then, it was that song again. He

recognised it instantly and it stopped him dead in his tracks as he was telling them a story about his father opening the barbershop forty or some years before.

They all enjoyed the song, quietly. He listened to the lyrics even if their meaning escaped him totally. There was no need to understand the language to know what the song was about. It was all about love and having someone thinking of you. PIENSA EN MI. That, he could make out. He was now attracted to each and every mournful note and chord of the guitar accompaniment. It was then that he got his first experience of what certain people called a magic moment and from now on, he would know what it was they were talking about when referring to similar occurrences.

"That's Mommy's favourite song," Irma announced after the melody was finished.

"It is so nice, don't you think?" Pralina asked him.

Mike came out of a trance-like episode, willing himself to say the right thing and having absolutely no notion of what it was or should be. At last, he sheepishly agreed, "Yes, it is."

Irma said, "He knows nothing about music."

"Irma!" interjected her mother. "You are rude!"

He laughed, dejectedly, "She's right. I'm not much of a listener."

"But, you did real fine just now," his hostess objected.

"My mother would say that's a first."

"And I'm happy that it was here and with that song." She plunged her gaze into his eyes and there was a lot there that he wouldn't dare to decipher. She added in a voice so low that he had to read her lips, "I am glad you love that song."

When it was time for Irma to go to bed, he chose that moment to justify his leaving. Pralina didn't object even though it was Friday night and she was not working on the weekends.

Mike was now at the door, searching for the right thing to do or say before exiting and Irma helped him find his way through that awkward moment, "I liked sitting in those big chairs of yours," she said. "Perhaps you will have me back."

"Why would you? You are all fixed now."

Though there was not a lot to take, she grasped a lock of her hair and added, looking at her mother, "As if I would let those grow again. Not a chance!"

After that, she disappeared, going through the door in the wall between the living room area and what must have been the space behind for two bedrooms plus a bathroom. Pralina followed Mike outside the condo. Stars sparkled in the sky. There was also a full moon that he made a show of staring at since there was not much else for him to do, or so he thought at the time. Nevertheless, he could see her out of the corner of his eye. She was not so thin now that he had a good look at her. And not so small either. She must have been forty-five but still could have passed for a woman five or ten years younger. And she had a good figure. No doubt about that, the jeans and the t-shirt all filled up at the right places. How come he had not realised that before? As his mother had often said, it pays to have a real and serious look at things.

Pralina cut through the embarrassing silence, "I think that Irma took a shine to you".

"She is a good girl."

And those words were his cue to walk out of her place, too confused to say anything more except, "See you at Al's, then."

As he was pronouncing this short sentence, he regretted the words he had employed; those words that took away all that could have been intimate between them and brought back the business side of their connection; that of a waitress and the patron she served.

"As you say! Goodnight now."

He did not hear her close the door behind him but he knew she had. From there, he would have been of the opinion that the scene was finished, never to be replayed again. Normal life would take over. Complicated outcomes from mingling with people would be avoided. He had no need to have his life jumpstarted like it was a car.

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He was walking on the street away from Pralina's condo, in the direction of the side avenue where he had parked the Chrysler. There was not much light around and he noticed that some lampposts had no working bulbs or else they had been broken out by kids throwing rocks at them. He turned the corner of the avenue. Now, he could see his car a hundred yards away.

That's when he saw them – three boys or young men. Athletic looking. One was black while the other two were Cuban-brown. The dark one was bouncing a basketball on the sidewalk. Seeing Mike, he threw the ball in his direction and it would have hit him

hard in the face had he not caught it in time with both his hands. All three jokers were laughing at him and speaking between themselves in Spanish.

The smaller and mean-looking guy with tattoos all over his impressive biceps addressed his friend who had a White Sox baseball cap on his head. "Now, look at what we have here. A gringo that plays ball."

Baseball Cap added, "It takes four to play. What do you say, Gringo? You want to make it a foursome?"

Mike was not afraid. Not yet. He gave them his best smile while returning the basketball to Black and then, he tried to pass by them. But Tattoo put himself in his way. "Not so fast, Gringo. What's wrong with you? Suppose you don't appreciate us having a talk with you? What is it, Gringo? You don't like our kind? Is that it?"

Tattoo's nose could have touched Mike's and he could smell the punk's sour breath. He pleaded, "Come on, men. I just need to go home. We live in a free world. You do your thing. Let me do mine."

They all laughed at that even Mike, though he thought himself pretty stupid for doing so.

"So, what will it be, Gringo? Tattoo insisted. "Where is it that we will be enjoying this freedom you talk about so well? Our place or yours?"

Mike said nothing and the joker continued teasing him. "But I am telling you, Gringo. You really do not want to see Paco here's place. Because believe me, Gringo, Paco's place is a pigsty, isn't that true, Paco?"

And Paco agreed that yes, his place was a pigsty.

There was a lot of talking in Spanish that intercalated itself into those exchanges and there must have been some jokes between the three because there was a lot of giggling and chuckling that made absolutely no sense to Mike.

"So, you see, Gringo," Tattoo now said to him, like it was the reasonable solution and that Mike too should find it obvious, "it will have to be your place. You will invite us, yes?"

"Hey guy," Mike answered, his tone now uncertain. "You have to stop this. It's not funny."

"Oh, you want funny. We will give you funny all right. You have a car, don't you? So, perhaps we won't go to your place, after all. Why? We will just use your car to get ourselves a ride. What do you say?"

"My car is over there. It's the white Chrysler. Take it if you want but leave me alone."

"No, no, Gringo. This is not to be. You must come with us. As Nimo already said, it takes two to tango."

They were all walking toward the Cirrus. The avenue was as deserted as it could be for punks wishing to act foolish. Mike stopped moving forward and got his car keys out of his pocket. "You take the car. Really, I don't mind. But I am not going with you."

"Like you have a choice, Gringo."

And then, Tattoo got out a knife that made a neat little click when it opened. There was no need to do more and Mike, defeated, started to walk again.

Baseball Cap, or was it Nimo, took the key out of Mike's extended hand and opened the door of the Chrysler on the driver's side. He got in and Black, or was it Paco,

opened the other door and sat in front, beside him. In the back were Tattoo and the car owner. Baseball Cap put the key into the ignition and started the engine. This activated the car radio that had been left playing when Irma had left the car. At once, there was Latin music blasting all over, loud enough that it got them all startled. Black turned his head to throw a puzzled look at Mike, showing him, in so doing, the small diamond that embellished his left earlobe.

Meanwhile, Baseball Cap hit all five buttons that gave access to the pre-selected radio channels and found them all of the Spanish sort. Nobody said a word in the car and the punks acted a little weird, like the discovery of some anomaly in an otherwise quite preordained world had gotten them all confused.

And then, it happened. Out of the sound system came a song that Mike recognised on the spot and he cried, without thinking, "Let it be. This is a good song."

The song was just starting. Already, the melody, now that Mike knew it, got to him in a way that he would not have believed possible the day before.

PIENSA EN MI.

When the lady singing the song got to these words, it was so nice and so sad that Mike could have cried there and then. The singer went through the piece like she was an angel visiting them.

After the song was finished, Black said something in Spanish to the others. "Este gringo es bien chévere."

Nobody argued. All three bad guys looked kind of subdued as if there was nothing left of their previous bluster; the cat that suddenly tired of playing with the mouse. Then, Black let out something that sound like an order, "Vàmonos!"

Mike saw Baseball Cap take the key out of the ignition and throw it at him. Tattoo opened the door on his side of the Chrysler and left. Black also got outside of the car and again said something, but addressing Mike this time. He looked him right in the eye and said, "Me gusta tu musica, Gringo." Then, he turned around and left.

Baseball Cap was still in the car. Mike asked him, "What are you all doing? What did he say?"

Baseball Cap looked at him. He smiled at him – a friendly kind of smile that was no longer threatening. He explained, "My friend Paco, he just told you that he liked your taste in music." And then, he too left Mike's car. As he was leaving to rejoin Black and Tattoo, who were walking away in the direction they had all came from, he turned and said to Mike, "You are a cool gringo, man! That's what he just said to you. Now, get lost and have a good night's sleep."

x x x x x

Mike made it to his home.

Sunday, he did nothing, except think. Monday, he got to work but did not visit Al's place in the morning. He saw Pralina finish her shift at four o'clock and he waited until five to call her home. Finding the number was easy.

She answered the phone on the second ring.

He asked her for a date.

She said yes.

They had a lot in common, after all.

Breakfast at Al's diner, Irma, and a Spanish song.

THE END