

Hidden Highway

By Tom Lichtenberg

Copyright 2009 by Tom Lichtenberg
ISBN:

David Morales

Roland was never without his radio. Switching back and forth between salsa and contemporary rock, Roland's little radio went everywhere he went. You always knew when he was around. Even now, in the middle of the night, as he set about his work cleaning up the motel kitchen, the radio sat like a flightless canary on a nearby shelf, twittering above the faucet, the songs pouring through and around him like the water he used to wash dishes. Every so often he'd pause to change the station, from the one to the other, and a few minutes later, back again.

Josefa was a fan of silence at night. She would have preferred no music at all. The old woman came and went throughout the evening, always busy with a chore, never stopping to rest. In any ways, the motel was her own.

Although she only worked there, she knew everything about it. The little buildings were like her children; untidy, wild and in need of constant maintenance. Hadn't she seen a lot in her time? It was Roland who wanted to know, who kept asking her to stop and stay awhile and tell him stories. It was Roland who flashed her that smile, that friendly face, wily in the ways of the world, that tempted her to slow her chugging train.

'Oh, I could tell you', she'd reply, leaning for a moment on her mop, but always, 'later. The work is never done'.

'Of course' said Roland, 'the work comes first, and then?', he suggested. 'We could talk?'.

Josefa eventually agreed and pushed her buckets down the hall. Roland hummed along with every song as he worked, though it was his own that he was singing, all

mixed up, whatever tune he felt to whistle or sing on top of whatever happened to be playing. Dishes needing to be washed and dried, counters to be cleaned, floors swept and all things put away. By the time Josefa returned, the kitchen was sparkling and neat and even quiet. He'd turned the radio off for once. She glanced around, approving. Roland, though new, was a good one, she thought, and so she offered him her smile, and offered to make some tea, but he'd already made some, and just the kind she liked, and so she sat, for once, and let him wait on her.

'So', she began. 'Where to start?'

'Anywhere', he replied, while gathering cups and saucers and a bit of dessert he'd saved from dinner, a German chocolate cake, enough for two.

'Anywhere is nowhere', she countered, and Roland smiled. She would need some prodding.

'Then tell me about David Morales', he said, and Josefa looked up, surprised. How could this man know about that already? she wondered. The queen of gossip was not used to being scooped, but a shrug and a crooked smile from Roland put her back at ease, and it was an old story anyway. Anybody might have told him.

Antonio Morales

'Do you believe in ghosts?' Josefa wanted to know, and Roland nodded and grinned.

'Of course', he said. 'There are ghosts even here'.

Josefa laughed at that. 'Especially here, you mean', she said. 'But David Morales did not believe and that was just the beginning of his problems. Even when Eugenia gave him proofs beyond all doubt, he stuck with his non-belief. He figured she must have had a crazy twin, or a mutant daughter. The ghost who gave birth to their child was not amused. Ghosts can have a sense of humor too, just like anybody else, but this was carrying it too far.'

'Gave birth to a child?' Roland was always alert to the new and unexpected.

'Antonio Morales', she replied. 'Oh, his father raised him for awhile. He had no problem about that, but he refused to talk to the mother, or even acknowledge her presence. She'd badgered him for years. Everyone around here knows. Well, everyone who was around here then. It was awhile ago.'

'And David?'

'David went about his business. He built this motel with his own two hands. Afterwards he started drifting. Seemed to lose his sense of purpose. His house is on the highway, the brown one over there', she gestured toward the window, 'behind the trees.'

'He's still around?', Roland said.

'Oh no', she replied. 'David still here? No way. He had enough of this place. Moved on.'

'And Antonio?'

'Oh he's here', Josefa told him. 'He's still a kid, you know. He gets around. You see him when you're least expecting to.'

'And he's the last of the family?'

'The last Morales, it's true. The old brown house is empty. Sometimes there's a squatter there. You'll see a car and even lights on in the house. Occasionally a dog will trot on out the road. Been awhile since someone lived there regular, though. Eugenia's still there, they say. Waiting. What for, I don't know. I haven't seen her myself. And Antonio, he's here and there, now you see him, now you don't. They say he's a good kid, basically, but sometimes you just don't know.'

Roland poured her some more tea, and offered another slice of cake, but Josefa waved it away.

'That stuff's too good', she said. 'I don't want to be up all night. So what do you know about ghosts?'

'They don't stay put', he told her. 'Just when you think you've got 'em sealed and set, back they come. Like the one I was just telling you about before. Beauregard Sweet.'

Sugar

'Ghosts don't usually like roommates', Josefa observed, 'especially when they've been haunting the same house for a long time. Some other ghost comes along, thinks he can haunt wherever he likes ...'

'It's plain rude', Roland continued. 'And Sugar, that's what they always called Mr. Sweet, because of his name and because of his sweet tooth too, he was always a bit of a slob, and lazy at that. Do you know if they have a TV?'

'At Morales'? I think so', Josefa said. 'Most everybody does these days'.

'Sugar would like that', Roland said.

'Eugenia wouldn't be happy' said Josefa. 'She's been known to throw a fit. One time she threw all of David's stuff out in the weeds. He just calmly picked everything up, put it back. Everybody said, you've got to do something about that woman and he just shrugged and said, what can you do? She's already dead.'

'How'd she die?' Roland inquired.

'Oh, suicide', said Josefa. 'Eugenia was always claiming she'd be better off that way. Even as a little girl - she and my grand-daughter Elana were at school together, you know, and even then she was pretty morbid. Squashing bugs. Burning ants. That sort of thing. She had the biggest crush on David, used to bring him dried lizards. He never wanted to have anything to do with her. He used to write very formal letters to her mom and dad. Dear Senor and Senora Lazario, please keep your daughter, Eugenia, away from me. I am very sorry but I simply do not like her. Yours

truly, David Morales. And he was only seven or eight at the time. You can imagine, by the time they were in their teens, she was hanging around his house all the time, following him to school, leaving little notes tucked in his locker. I will love you till the end of time, that sort of thing. Even death will never keep us apart. Little did he know how much she meant it. Poor David, he could never find a girlfriend because of her. Lots of girls liked him okay, but she was always there, always Eugenia in the way, and she would threaten them too. Seriously. You get close to my David and I'll cut your heart out, she would say. I would try and tell her, Eugenia, if you love him let him be, but she said, no. I love him so I cannot let him be. He is mine forever.

It got to the point where David just accepted it. He grew up, became a man, he built that house. All that time, Eugenia haunted him. Finally she hung herself, right there in David's house. She broke in, brought her own rope, tied herself up. Just so she could be with him forever. Right then he should have sold that house, or burned it to the ground, but David had a feeling for his destiny. He was never one to run away. Everyone could see her plain as day, for years. You went inside, you felt it. Her voice, her smell, the image of her in every corner. When the baby was born, oh wasn't that something? All at once in the middle of the night, David was asleep upstairs and he heard a noise like screaming in the living room. When he got there he could tell it was a baby crying. Antonio was there on the rug with the cord still bloody but cut. She always said she would have his child. There was nothing that could stop her, not even being dead.'

'That explains a lot', said Roland. 'Sugar was not having a good time in that house. He never got comfortable. At least it got better for him when LeMaster showed up.'

'LeMaster?' Josefa asked. 'Our Mister LeMaster?'

'Yeah', said Roland, 'It's not like Sugar was happy to see him, not after their previous encounter, but what with Eugenia I guess it must have been a relief'.

Sharad

Roland said 'excuse me' and got up from the big oak table and stepped over to the sink. He reached up and turned the dial of his little radio, back to the salsa station he loved best. Josefa thought at least that was better than the oldies they'd been listening to. She never liked those long-haired boys with pretty-girl voices. Roland brought back a pack of loosely wrapped cigarettes, shook one out and offered it to her.

'These are from my country', he announced.

'Country?', she asked. 'I figured you were from down South, New Orleans maybe. You kind of got that Delta look about you. That copper skin, that wiry hair.'

'Down South all right', he said, 'but you got to keep going till you get to Brazil. The only thing Delta about me is the Amazon.'

'Well I knew you had that big river look', she smiled as she took one and let him light it for her. He lit one for himself as well and removed his saucer from under his tea cup to use as an ash tray.

'They're okay', Josefa said, after a nice long drag. 'Different.'

'You said you were a little girl right here. Born and raised, I guess?'

'Born and raised', she nodded. 'Used to be when I was a girl we Mexicans had to pretty much stay over there on the inland side of the highway. It was something when David Morales built his house on the coast side. First Mexican to do it. Things they might be changing now.'

'It's kind of remote out here', he said and Josefa laughed.

'We always said, if you're on this road, and you ain't from here, you must be lost.'

'Got the beaches.'

'Too damn rocky and the water's too damn cold. People go South for that.'

'Got the views'

'Highway doesn't get close enough, really. Mostly all you see is trees and brown dead grass.'

'Got the cities'

'Two hundred miles South, and four hundred miles North. If you want to get to one or the other you take the Freeway.'

'Still, people come here. Got this motel'

'Maybe they come for that', Josefa laughed and nearly choked on the smoke. Roland merely smiled.

'I know', she said, after she recovered from her fit. 'It's got it's own kind of beauty around here. Lots of people like to see the countryside, drive around. But when I think about all the places in the world, all the things you could see, I wouldn't be thinking of here.'

'People don't always know why they end up where they do', Roland murmured. 'Sometimes they get a feeling that just moves them and they go. Maybe they think they know. They got their reasons. They tell themselves a story. Sometimes they're just looking for something and that

something could be anywhere'.

'Even here', Josefa agreed.

'Could be anywhere', he repeated. 'LeMaster got here by heading North. Out of the city, over the bridge, just North. He told himself, just keep going and you'll know when to stop.'

'I thought he came for the job'.

'First he just came. He was hoping to be lost.'

'Then he came to the right place', Josefa smiled.

'But you can't run away from yourself', Roland disagreed.

'Not even if your name's Sharad LeMaster.'

Mr. Pitts

'He was lucky to get this job', Josefa said. 'We thought that mean old Mr. Pitts would never leave. That man was here forever!'

'What happened to him?' Roland asked.

'You'd never guess', Josefa laughed. 'Whoever would have thought that fat old sack of shit would've wound up finding himself a Russian mail order bride and moving out to North Dakota to buy a damn dairy farm? After all those years of dragging his sorry ass around here, never helping an old lady, just yelling all the time at the maids and the kitchen help. Of course we didn't make it easy for him, neither. God how we hated that bastard! One time Pepita filled his slippers with dog shit. Oh, that was funny. I can still hear the squish when he stepped into one!'

Josefa cackled with glee as she remembered. 'That Pitts', she continued. 'People who just walked in the door already hated that man. You could feel it in the way they dropped their bags on the floor and sighed. He'd be sitting there in his fat man bar stool, pretending to be busy on the phone instead of helping them get their rooms. Never was nobody on the other end of the line. He just liked to make 'em wait. They'd say excuse me or clear their throats but he'd just wave them off, turn his fat ass around.'

'How long was he around?'

'Oh god, it seemed forever. I want to say eleven years. It must have been. From the time Joe Junior took over, I guess. Pitts and Junior had some kind of previous connection, like maybe he was his teacher or something. I don't really know. Otherwise he never had so much as a

person to talk to. Then all at once one day he was gone. It was Junior who told us about that North Dakota and the Russian thing. Not sure I believe it myself.'

'Why would he make it up?'

'Oh you never can be sure about Joe Junior. That man might say about anything. He told me once that Ricardo Jimenez was growing lemons in the trunk of his car.'

'Lemons?'

'Shit! Ricardo was like, what the hell are you doing? when he caught me trying to break into it. You think I was going to tell him about lemons?'

'What'd you say?'

'I just ran as fast as I could! I saw Joe Junior laughing so hard I thought maybe he would have a heart attack and he would deserve it too. Serve him right.'

'I never trusted that man ever since', she continued.

'Mr. Watson has never said nothing to me', said Roland.

'That's only because you're new', she told him. 'He don't know you that well. Give him time and he will. But Mister LeMaster, he's nothing like Pitts. He's almost exactly the opposite. I can't help it but I like that man'.

'No one can help it', said Roland. 'That's really the problem he's got.'

Kitty Lake

'What do you think about that Swallow business?' Josefa asked, rubbing her hands together. She always did that when she was warming up to the gossip. The chocolate cake, the warm lemon tea, and the Brazilian cigarette were combining with the natural steam of the kitchen to put her in a state of happy chatting.

'There was something strange about that from the beginning', Roland replied, 'from the day those two walked in the door. Sharad had a feeling too, you know. He's always known right away when something's not quite right, ever since he was a kid. Maybe because of the way his father was. Did you know about his father?'

'I don't think so', Josefa said. 'It's funny to even think about that. You see an old person - like me - you don't even think of them as a child, or they had a mom or dad. I remember when I was around fifty I suddenly realized that people looked at me and saw an old woman. And that was already a long time ago. Mister LeMaster, he must be around sixty, I'd guess.'

'A little older I think', said Roland. 'Sixty-four, maybe five. It's the bald head makes him look younger.'

'And that trim little beard', said Josefa. 'I always did like a man with a beard.'

'Besides that he's from India, or at least his dad was. I never knew about the mom. No one seems to know. Back when he was a boy growing up in the Buena Vista Trailer Park, it was always just his dad and him. Mandar Malhotra. The dad's name was. Sharad Malhotra was his given name.'

'Not LeMaster?'

'No, that came later. Much later. He went through a bunch of names. You know the way kids are. Harry. Rod. Pookie at one time.'

'Pookie!' Josefa cracked up. 'I bet nobody calls him Pookie anymore.'

'Not if they don't want that look he gets. You don't want to see that look.'

'I don't know about that. He's always been friendly to me.'

'Oh yeah. He saves it for when no one's looking. I've seen it, though. A lot of times.'

'You knew him before?'

'Oh yeah, didn't I tell you? I knew him from back in the city. Some of my friends and me, we used to run into him, now and then. Had some dealings. I used to work in auto repair. He had the trailer park down the street. Business, mainly. Some other stuff. Odd jobs, you know. Knew him from a long time back.'

'So that's how you ended up here?'

'Well, not really on purpose. Just sort of, the way things go.'

'I never lived anywhere but here,' said Josefa. 'Never wanted to, really. It's beautiful out here. All my family and friends. Hard to make a living sometimes, but they say it's the same all over.'

'Up here, I don't know how they do it. You see people stuffing animals, carving wood, hauling junk. How they get

by, it beats me.'

'Most of us got lots of jobs, different things going on. I do the cleaning around here but I also do some weaving, some leather repair, some toy making. Things like that. You get to know people. They get to know you. A thing needs doing, you do it.'

'Mandar Malhotra was living like that. LeMaster's dad. He'd go around the city, just knocking on doors, offering his services. A little of this, and a little of that. Until he totally went crazy. After that, he just locked himself up in trailer seventeen. Hardly anybody but his own son ever saw him after that. Sharad, he did everything then.'

'Poor kid. How old was he then?'

'Fifteen, sixteen, I guess. Around then. Just the friendliest kid. He was always with a smile on his face. Didn't walk for dancing. Good looking kid, too. That's about when he caught the eye of Miss Kitty Lake too, and that was just the beginning.'

MacAfee

'I remember Kitty Lake', Josefa said, 'Wasn't she voted something like worst movie star ever?'

'Yeah, she was terrible', Roland agreed.

'Temptress by Dawn? The Rock Crab Killers? Moonlit Fiasco?'

'Moonlit Bonanza', he corrected.

'Always some kind of a slut'

'That's our Kitty', Roland laughed, 'and she wasn't much different in real life. Hard-drinking. Had a mouth on her like you wouldn't believe. Sharad was her good side. She'd trot him out whenever she needed something from someone. Make nice with the cops, city planners, whoever it was she owed money to. At first he just had to do it, otherwise where was he going to live? She'd've kicked them right out. She had her big goon, MacAfee. Nobody messed with him.'

'Rumor was', Roland continued, 'MacAfee'd killed some folks. Everybody thought so. People had a way of disappearing around that place. There was some crazy story about trailer seventeen and how it had the power to make someone invisible. People thought so literally. Invisible. You believe it?'

'Only one way I know', Josefa said, 'and that's when they plant you in the ground.'

'I'm with you', said Roland. 'But Sharad and his father lived in there, and no one ever saw Mandar again after awhile. Never came out, not once. And then they said he was

gone. Passed away. Like that', he snapped his fingers. 'Poof'.

'Sharad never said a word about it, as far as I know', said Roland. 'By that time he was working for Kitty Lake full time. He was around twenty, I'd guess. Kitty must've been around sixty.'

'She still have her looks?'

'Pretty much', said Roland. 'but the way that woman lived she must have made a deal with the devil to keep looking like that.'

'It's been known to happen', said Josefa.

'Soon turned out Sharad had a way with people. After awhile it was Kitty who was doing what he wanted, and not the other way around. MacAfee started taking orders from Sharad. Here's this skinny little kid, pushing around this giant six five, two eighty pound monster. Nobody knew the secret, but I thought it never was a secret, it was just a gift he had. He was magnetic.'

'Still is', Josefa nodded.

'Even now', said Roland. 'The day that Henrietta Swallow and her man showed up'

'Henry', Josefa inserted. 'Henry and Henrietta. Seems to me that man had a snake coiled up around his heart. Mean one, you could tell.'

'That very first night, she came drifting down at midnight, hung around the lobby. Sharad had a sense right away. He knew she didn't fit in'

'To hear it from Henry, they were made for each other', Josefa said. 'He was always saying things like that.'

'She even had his sign tattooed on her ass'

'His sign?'

'That snake you said.'

'I didn't know it was for real'

'Oh yeah,' said Roland, 'He had that mark and he put it on her too. She was trapped, poor thing. Son of a bitch wouldn't let her out of his sight, so she had to drug him to sleep. Then she went out. She'd been looking for trouble for years.'

'She already had enough as it was'

'Wanted more, it seems', he said. 'She started leaning in on the counter, where Sharad was trying to read. He still had Pitts' old fat man barstool! Trying to swivel away but she'd come right around the counter. Small thing. You know I thought first thing that she looked just like Kitty Lake.'

'When Kitty was a star'

'Back in the day', he nodded. 'Change the hairstyle fifty years and there it was, Kitty Lake reborn. I think Sharad had a sense. He was trying to keep away. She was hanging all over him, talking and talking and she wouldn't shut up. Telling him how good he looked, how lonely she was. Sharad couldn't turn off the spigot. At the same time, he knew. That guy in 12-C. He was just the one for her.'

'12-C? You mean Mr. Barclay?'

'Don't remember his name. If that was him. Tall guy. Glasses. Salesman.'

'Sounds like him. Paul Barclay. Decent tipper. Stays a few times a year, makes a regular round.'

'Lonely guy?'

'Never saw him with anyone. Minds his own business. Watches a lot of TV.'

'Sounds like the one', said Roland. 'Sharad could mix and match alright. It's what he did. Got him in hot water more than once. Back at the Buena Vista Trailer Park, it was his specialty. He'd take families, re-arrange them. Put husband X with wife Y, kids Z and before you know it, you had a brand new family, better than the first.'

'You serious?'

'Absolutely', Roland said. 'Started out he was only doing them a favor. People couldn't pay the rent, he'd double them up in a trailer, give 'em a break. Then he started noticing who was getting along, who wasn't. He got tired of having MacAfee breaking up fights. Didn't want to have that kind of trailer park, he said. Lowlifes causing trouble. It was going to be a different kind of trailer park, wholesome. Happy families, if he had to re-create them himself.'

'Sounds kind of crazy', Josefa said.

'You wouldn't think it would work', agreed Roland, 'and sometimes it didn't. People'd get all bent out of shape. Those people he would move along. Or MacAfee would. The rest, they got to liking it. Some kinky stuff going on. More than wife-swapping. He kept 'em guessing, moved them around a lot. A lot of people came and went but after a

bunch of years it got to be more stable. By then, it was a way of life. Outsiders got to calling it a compound, like it was some kind of cult and he was the leader, but he had no religion or anything like that. No message. No purpose. He just kind of ran their lives, like a king.'

'If he was like a king down there, how the hell did he end up here?'

'It all went down', said Roland. 'Kind of unexpected. One day the E.P.A. showed up. Turned out the trailer park was sitting on some kind of toxic dump. They tore the whole thing down and Sharad, he took off. Just left. Nobody knew where he went. The people, his people, they were lost. Didn't know what to do. Some of them just wandered away. Others set off to try and find him, but he didn't want to be found.'

'He picked a good place then', said Josefa. 'Nobody'd think of coming here.'

'Yeah, but he took himself with him', said Roland. 'and the thing that makes you rich will make you poor.'

Henrietta Swallow

'Sometimes, you don't know who's the strange one, and who's the one that's normal', Josefa said. 'Like that Barclay man. I was thinking all along, and he's been coming here for years, and I was thinking, that has got to be the most normal, the most typical, the most boring man in the world. Never had a word to say, but always had a smile, even if it was a fake one. I'd knock and come in to clean up the room. He never minded. He'd just get out of the way, make excuses as if he was the one who should. Most of the time they'll tell you to go away, come back another time. Not Mr. Barclay. Whenever I knocked he was like, oh, go right ahead. I was just leaving. As if I care. I can always clean the damn room. It's what I do all day. So he goes and leaves and usually I poke around a bit. I suppose if I was younger, or if I was busier, or if I wasn't such a nosy old bitch I wouldn't do it that much, but I am so I do. Turns out he's got some things going with him.'

'Oh yeah, what kind of things?' asked Roland.

'Oh, bad things, very bad', Josefa smiled. 'There's always messes of the kind there shouldn't be, if you know what I mean.'

'I'm getting the picture', he replied.

'And pictures too', she said, 'he always had a lot of those.'

'Normal? Or kinky?', Roland wanted to know.

'Well, it's like I said. I always thought he was the most normal, the most typical, the most boring guy in the world, and I was right. Been around too long, I guess. He would've gone for Henrietta Swallow. Absolutely. All the way. She

was everything he liked. Short, white, brunette, a little on the plump side. If she only got up in some of those uniforms he liked ...'

'Uniforms?'

'He preferred the military type', Josefa confessed.

'Well so did Henrietta, I suppose', said Roland. 'After all, she married a Sergeant. Marines, at that.'

'But Barclay was not like that himself. He was on the other end. He was the kind who liked being bossed around, not doing the bossing.'

'Henrietta, she was kind of cooped up', said Roland. 'She never got a word in edgewise long as they were in public. He ordered all her food. He told her what to wear. He decided where they went, what they did. They were out here on vacation. He said he wanted to hunt. Had a need to kill some things. And being deer season and all, I think he had a license. Couple of days he went out there by himself, didn't come back till night. During the day, Henrietta hung around and waited for Sharad. It was killing her that he was only on the night shift. It didn't fit in with her plans at all. Mr. Watson wasn't what she wanted. She was sniffing around him a bit, but he was totally missing it.'

'Joe Junior misses everything', said Josefa. 'It's so easy working for that man. I could tell him I cleaned the B wing when I didn't do it at all and he'd go tell me take a break, good job. I don't know how he does it, but he's hardly even there. Lost in his own little world of comic books and fantasy football leagues. He's on the computer all day long. If he didn't own the place, he'd've been fired long ago.'

'So he's ignoring Henrietta, and she's just trying to get him to

tell her where's Sharad, but he won't do it. Maybe it's because he didn't know.'

'Me either', said Josefa. 'I don't know where he was. Do you?'

'Can I tell you a secret?' asked Roland, and Josefa nodded eagerly.

'Sharad was over at the Morales house, with Eugenia, and Sugar'.

'No!' gasped Josefa. 'In the Morales house? You sure?'

'I know it', Roland said. 'I went over there myself. Everything they say is true.'

'About the curtains?'

'Dripping blood. Continually.'

'And the lights?'

'Go on and off by themselves, any time, day or night.'

'And the kitchen?'

'Clean as a whistle'.

'My goodness', said Josefa. 'Are you messing with me? I swear. Just because I fell for that thing about the lemons, it doesn't mean ...'

'I'm not joking', Roland said. 'Sharad went there for a reason. He was still trying to get Sugar to teach him how to go invisible.'

'Sugar knows how?'

'Well, that's the thing. He does, but he doesn't know he does. After all, he's dead. It's hard to think straight when you're in that kind of condition.'

'Ghosts don't think?'

'Not most of them. They just do. And what they do is just whatever they do. You put a ghost in front of the TV set and he will sit and watch forever. You give him a book to read and he will read it. Eugenia, what she does is haunt. A lot of ghosts will do that. It's like a zombie. Most of the time, a zombie will start out tracking down people so's to eat 'em. They don't really like to eat people, it's just what they do. It's one of those unwritten rules. But if you catch a zombie or a ghost in just the right way at just the right time, and change their habits for them, you can get them on a new track, and they'll just keep going on that. I met a zombie once that only went after blue jays. Had a hell of a time considering he couldn't fly.'

'Damn', said Josefa. She was trying to keep up with all of that.

'Now Sugar, he likes donuts. And coffee. And regular TV. As long as he has those things, he'll just pretty much sit there. That's the kind of ghost he is. But that Henrietta Swallow was persistent. As soon as Sharad showed up for his shift, there she was, hanging around the lobby, trying to get him interested. He must have thought of sticking her with Barclay just so he could lose her, but he didn't do it. He was holding out. Lucky for him, the husband came back in the evening, but Henry didn't have no deer. Claimed he killed some, but no one ever saw 'em.'

'Probably took them over to Salvador's', said Josefa, 'sell the

meat and get the head stuffed.'

'Never saw the heads.'

'Salvador would take his time', Josefa said', and usually ship 'em by the post.'

Mike Gramm

'Swallow's the reason Detective Mike came all the way up here from the city', Roland said. 'Henry Swallow, I mean.'

'The big fat cop?' asked Josefa.

'That's the one', said Roland.

'He was holed up with Joe Junior for a whole morning, it seemed', said Josefa. 'That was just the other day.'

'It was funny what you said about Pitts'.

'About Pitts? I thought you were talking about the cop and Henry Swallow'.

'And Pitts', said Roland. 'Detective Gramm found himself a whole lot of trouble when he came up this way. I can tell you it's the last thing he ever wanted to do. I know that cop from way back. He's not the kind who breaks a sweat, if you know what I mean.'

'Calm under pressure?'

'No. No. Lazy. Always getting someone else to do his dirty work for him. The kind that hands out bribes like you wouldn't believe. Calling in favors. Leans on you hard. Every way he can, he gets out of doing the job for himself. He must've done something wrong for them to send him all the way up here. So the Swallow business came up. That's what I heard.'

'What'd he do?' Josefa asked. 'Is it murder?'

'Not sure they really know', said Roland. 'That's the whole

problem. People had a way of disappearing, wherever that Swallow guy went. Which is why the Pitts thing came up too. Joe Junior let it slip that Pitts had disappeared. Gramm picked up on that. Even though it happened before Henry Swallow came around.'

'Like a month at least'.

'But there was correspondence. That's what Mr. Watson says. There was something tricky about it. So Gramm gets here and talks with Mr. Watson, and first the Pitts thing comes out, and then he mentions LeMaster too. You can bet Detective Mike was interested in that.'

'Don't tell me. Let me guess. He knew LeMaster from the city'.

'Oh yeah, everybody did, especially the cops. There was always trouble going on where we were from. Cops were every day. So he is thinking Swallow, Pitts, LeMaster. It can't be all coincidence. One thing they had in common; people disappear.'

'LeMaster didn't disappear.'

'His daddy did. Famous case was that. Also there was trouble with him and Sugar. Remember I was telling you?'

'The ghost that's over at Morales?'

'The very same. From trailer seventeen. So Mr. Watson tells the cop about the hunting trips, and the way he comes back with nothing, and so Detective Mike heads out to see if he can track him down. Way I heard it, he got himself lost out there in the woods.'

'Easy enough to do', Josefa said.

'He forgot to bring his partner. So he's out there all alone, driving around, probably cursing up a storm, the way that fellow does. Turns out Ricardo Jimenez finds him stranded by the beach. Car got stuck in a swamp. The cop was covered in mud and mad as anything. Ricardo Jimenez brings him back, but Swallow is still missing. Cop was pissed. Someone's going to pay, he said'

Mister Pete

'After that, Detective Mike had his sights set on Sharad as well. Some kind of a grudge, it must have been. That cop had a long history of never solving a case, of letting the bad guys get away, of fucking up the evidence. Sharad was in on some of that. There was the case of MacAfee and Mandar. Then there was the mysterious death of Kitty Lake. After that there were a bunch of domestic disturbances coming out of the trailer park. After Mister Pete showed up, there were some assaults, some broken legs. Every time, it seemed Sharad was going to get it, but he didn't. Mike said he was slippery but one of these days.'

'Really it was just his luck. Sharad never seemed to know it. He was one of those guys, you give 'em some power and they think they got some kind of special powers. You give 'em one thing and they want more and more and more.'

'I've had a lot of bosses like that', said Josefa.

'Exactly', Roland agreed. 'Little dukes and barons. He went through a long time when he thought he must be chosen by the gods for one thing or another. The man was running a trailer park and a bunch of people seemed to do whatever he told them to do. Anyway. Bad times,' concluded Roland.

'But he put all that behind him', Josefa said. 'Maybe he learned his lesson.'

'I don't know', said Roland. 'He did say he was never going to mix and match again. Made a promise. He told me so himself and that was just the other day when I saw him at Morales.'

'I know you said that you went over there. I didn't know you saw him.'

'I did. I saw Sharad, and I saw Sugar. They were hanging out in the living room, watching something terrible on TV. Sugar was sprawled out on a couch and had a plate piled high with donuts on his lap. Sharad was rocking in a rocking chair and sipping lemonade. He didn't seem surprised at all to see me.'

'Roland', said Sharad. 'You remember Mr. Sweet.'

'Sure' I said, 'How you doing, Sugar?' but Sugar only glanced at me a moment, didn't seem to know me, and went back to watching his show.

'He gets kind of glued', said Sharad. 'Anything to do with drunken celebrity whores, he's on it. They have a channel just for that.'

'What are you doing here?' I asked him, just like that. 'This place is supposed to be haunted.' That's when he pointed out the curtains dripping blood. Then he gestured over at Sugar and I remembered that he was also dead.

'How come we can see him?' I asked and Sharad just nodded and smiled.

'I've been wondering that myself', he replied. 'Last time I had him, I mean, had the pleasure of his company, I thought that he could teach me how to get invisible. That's before I found out what really happened. It explained a lot of things.'

'You mean about your dad?'

'Right', said Sharad. 'It wasn't that MacAfee had turned my

dad invisible, and then gone invisible himself, like everybody said.'

'He killed your father and ran away', I told him.

'I know that now', said Sharad. 'I used to think a skill like that would come in handy. Turn invisible, I mean. Then, when the cops come looking for you ... poof! You're gone.'

'But you got to come back sometime'

'Oh I don't know', said Sharad. 'Once you're invisible, you can pretty much go anywhere you want.'

He stopped and thought about that for awhile. You could tell he was feeling a bit nostalgic for the old days.

'Those days are gone', I told him.

'I know, I know', agreed Sharad. 'I've renounced my powers too.'

'Your powers?'

'Getting people to do what's best for them', he said. 'I never could get them to do anything else. Like Sugar here. He'd never give me what I wanted. He couldn't. So I gave it up. I'm just trying to make it up to him now. I'm trying to make amends.'

'I don't suppose you really owe anybody anything', I said. 'Like your people back at Buena Vista. It was always up to them to do the things you told them. It's not your fault if somebody left his wife, or somebody else was raising their kids.'

'It was always the best for them', said Sharad. 'Did you ever

see it not work out? Like with the kids. I always put them in with people who were going to take care of them better than their own folks would. I never made a mistake with that. There was never one complaint. With the grownups, sure, some people felt left out. Sometimes I couldn't find a match for everyone and someone had to go. Mister Pete got a lot of work that way.'

'I guess you did some people wrong', I said.

'Can't please everyone', he shrugged.

'Like Henry Swallow?' I suggested, and then Sharad got really mad. He jumped out of his chair and jabbed his finger at me and yelled,

'God dammit! I don't have anything to do with that man's wife, and anyone who says I do is lying!'

Ricardo Jimenez

'That's funny', said Josefa. 'Because what I know about Henry Swallow doesn't have a damn thing to do with Mister LeMaster.'

'Really?' Roland was curious. 'What do you know?'

'Well, and I got this from Salvador, mainly, who's the one guy who should know, considering his business dealings with that man. You remember I was telling you about the mail order?'

'Yeah, the taxidermist, Salvador.'

'Like most of us around here, he's got a lot of little jobs going on. Some of it has to do with sales. It just so happens Mr. Barclay, Paul, remember him?'

Roland merely nodded, and lit another cigarette. He offered one to Josefa, but she refused, waving his arm away.

'He was into the sales thing too. No accident he comes around here several times a year. Salvador, he got to know this Barclay guy, learned a thing or two from him. They get together sometimes. There's other things I should not be telling you about.'

'Oh, come on,' urged Roland. 'After all I'm telling you, you got to tell me your side too.'

'Of course I will', she laughed. 'I was only teasing you. It looks a lot like we got two sides of the same coin going on. What you don't know about Henrietta Swallow. You're thinking Mister LeMaster went and fixed her up with Barclay.'

Uh-uh. It's got to do with the shape of her head.'

'The what?' Roland was truly confused.

'Eugenia's witchcraft, really', said Josefa. 'Ricardo Jimenez got some spells from her. That's why Joe Junior was teasing me about the lemons. Had to do with Eugenia's potions. What she could do with certain skulls. And the magic it would bring.'

'You have totally got me lost', said Roland. 'Henrietta Swallow was going to be a shrunken head?'

'When that husband said they belonged together, he didn't just mean because their names matched. He has been up here before, and not alone. Henrietta Swallow was definitely not the first.'

'What do they do with a shrunken head? Isn't that like, New Guinea or something? Cannibals?'

'Magic is magic', Josefa shrugged, 'it doesn't matter when or where. When you're scuffling like we are up here ... First we had some fishing, but it was never enough. Never enough. After that we had the logging. Then they put a stop to that. Not good for the spotted owls, but after that it was even worse for us. Some of our people came up here for the seasonal work. Walnuts. Olives. Hothouse flowers. There's a still a bit of that left, but seasonal, you know. Tourist trade ain't much. You can see that for yourself. So we got to work some different areas, help each other out, bring in outside business. Marijuana, trucking, crystal meth. They got all that going on. Once you're busy cooking up junk, you start to wonder what else you can use a cauldron for. And then there was Eugenia, a witch from the start. She was getting up to crazy shit.'

'Before she hanged herself.'

'Before, and even after. Didn't you see her for yourself?'

'See her? No. I saw the signs, but not Eugenia.'

'Then she didn't want you to. Others see her all the time. I wonder if Mister LeMaster did.'

'He said he did', acknowledged Roland. 'He told me a bit about it.'

'Ricardo Jimenez. Her nephew. Sister's son. He got her secret recipes, her spells. Other people got involved. First Salvador, then others through the grapevine. There's a lot you'd never think of going on up here.'

'You got me', Roland said. 'I thought Sharad was into some weird stuff, but shrunken heads ...'

'Oh, that's just trinkets', said Josefa, 'Christmas decorations. Henry Swallow, he had bigger plans. Salvador didn't like him much. Said he was bad news. Figured the cops would come around because of him. Looks like he was right.'

Erik "Peanut" Haskins

'The other thing is Swallow was the go-between between the Mexicans and the hippies.'

'Hippies?'

'Sure. Who do you think is buying all that dope?', Josefa said. 'They come here in their beater cars, bunch of 'em all crammed in together, girls, boys, you can't hardly tell which ones are which. Got some crazy names. Rainbow Sky. Sunflower Elf. One big fellow name of Peanut used to come around a lot. Looked like a bruiser but he wasn't much. Sometimes he would tag around with Swallow. Seemed to me was scared to death of us. Imagine that! Little Ricardo Jimenez, not more than five foot four and lame in one leg from the war, and this giant Haskins fellow, that's his name, he would tremble and shake like a leaf. Swallow'd smack him on the head - Swallow's even bigger you know - and Haskins looked like he's about to cry. Some smuggler he was!'

'They just come up on drug runs?' Roland asked.

'No, not just for that', said Josefa. 'For awhile they were coming for Eugenia too. She had 'em convinced she was like some kind of goddess. Satanic stuff, you know. They'd be carving their symbols on shit, sacrificing little tiny birds and other animals that never did anybody any harm. She would dress up all in black, lipstick, nails and all, and they'd smoke a lot of dope and dance around their campfires, wailing. Least it sounded like wailing to me', Josefa cackled.

'That must have been when Eugenia was, you know.'

'Before she killed herself', Josefa added.

'Not sure she totally meant to', she continued. 'It's possible somebody just screwed up there. Those kids were pretty much high all the time. Hard to know exactly what they were thinking, if anything. But anyway, there was a whole collection of them, and Swallow was the one who showed 'em all around. Spoke a little Spanish, even. Got to know the area pretty well. After awhile, he was coming up by himself. That's when that crazy shit started happening. With the heads, I mean. Girls as fresh as daisies, but dumb as rocks I guess.'

'Hard to believe', said Roland. 'Nobody was on to that?'

'Well, it was mostly rumors, you know. Hard to know what you ought to believe, especially when it's coming from Salvador. He'll tell you a thousand different ways he lost his little finger. And just because you never saw those girls again it don't mean nothing. So take it as you want.'

'Swallow always had a different girl. That's what I'm getting at. Always made for each other too. Like every man, so full of shit. No offense, I mean'

'None taken', Roland laughed.

'Like this one guy, hippie dude, hair down below his ass. This was one of Swallow's sidekicks. He always had one around him. This one they called Sherlock. Don't know why. Looked like every other loser of that time. He was such a talker, going on and on about all the revolutions and how everything was going to change, and he was gonna be in on it. Used to brag about something called a micro founder stock he had. I remember it because I asked him if he meant the founding fathers, you know, George Washington, and he just laughed and laughed. He said just

wait, man. I am going to be so fucking rich someday!

'Doesn't sound like much of a hippie'

'Not really, no. I think he was in it for the girls. It's like anytime, anywhere, guys will do just about anything for pussy.' Josefa burst out laughing. Roland smiled and shook his head.

'Revolution', he sighed. 'They'll say just about anything too.'

'Ladies went for that. Swallow used to talk the line as well. Later he just talked cocaine and magic and witchcraft and potions. He was getting pretty creepy. People started backing off. Salvador kept up with him because he was all business, but the younger folk, I think they were afraid of him. Started showing up with guns, and bigger and bigger bikes. The scene was getting ugly.'

'Around that time', said Roland, 'there was bad stuff everywhere. Instead of peace and love, it was everything turned out phony. All the big talk was a fake. Hippies, going home to mama. Vets were getting the shaft. Pretty dreams turned into shit.'

'Around here it was live and let live', Josefa said, 'as long as you had the cash. And Swallow was still the money man. Sidekicks came and went. Swallow, you knew he would always return.'

Pepita

'That's what Detective Mike said too', interrupted Roland, 'When he got back from his adventure in the swamp. He just plopped down in the lobby out there and said, I might as well wait for Swallow, because that bastard's due to come back. Guess it was some kind of joke.'

'Got it', said Josefa, with a twinkle in her eye. Coming from California she knew better than he did.

'So Mike was just taking up the sofa and he didn't care. I stopped by to say hello. He was pretty surprised to see me there, but then he said, seems like the whole damn city's up here sometimes, and I said, well, the highway don't go nowhere else, and we both laughed. We got to chatting, he was asking how long I been up here. I tell him. Then he says, I got this thing, you know. I can always spot a crook. I said, I know, you were famous for that, man. And it's true. Remember I said he was lazy? Well, he was, but he also had a nose for crime. Called it his Spidey Sense. And it was tingling something fierce, he said.

'Seems to me that everyone I've met up here's involved in something shady. Even the lady that does the laundry.'

'He was talking about me?'

'I think so', Roland laughed. 'I said, what do you think she's done?'

'I don't know for sure', he said, 'but she's got a look in her eye. She's taken money under the table. She's done some favors for people. Probably been a carrier of one illegal substance or another.'

'Holy moly', declared Josefa. 'He really said all that?'

'Just that', said Roland. 'And he went on. He knew about Ricardo Jimenez. He said, guy that helped me out's some kind of grower. Maybe not pot, but something. Though it probably is dope, around here. Then he went on about Salvador. That guy, he said, is into very shady stuff. Even Joe Junior. He asked me what I knew about the guy who owns this place. I said, nothing. Mr. Watson's normal as they come, I said, and Detective Mike laughed. Don't tell him I said so, Mike told me, but I think he's got some card games going on, and probably prostitution.'

'My God', declared Josefa. 'How did he know? Did he ask about Pepita?'

'No, no, he didn't have nothing', Roland said, 'He told me so himself. He only had his Spidey Sense. And he laughed and said, I can't be going and arresting everybody in the whole damn town. That's your sheriff's job!'

'As if Sheriff Lucey ever bothered anyone', said Josefa. 'He's the biggest crook of all.'

'I think that Mike knew that', Roland replied. 'He went on to say he was only interested in Swallow. Swallow, and maybe Sharad. He was suspicious about LeMaster being here. Kept asking me when his shift started. Where he could find him. How he'd been acting. Lots of questions but I didn't give him any answers. None of my business, you know. I always minded my own. Never one to interfere.'

'It doesn't pay', said Josefa. 'Got to live and let live. It's the only way that makes sense.'

'So', Roland paused. He looked at her across the table for a long moment and then he asked,

'So, what about Pepita?'

At this, Josefa burst out in hysterics. She tried to talk but choked and sputtered and nearly fell off her chair. Roland jumped up and came around to steady her. He was actually worried the old lady might have a fit and hurt herself. Finally she managed to calm down, and looking up at him, she nodded and said,

'It's true.'

Roland looked disappointed. He had a crush on the maid, and didn't like finding out she was a whore.

'Everybody here has got to get some income on the side', Josefa muttered encouragingly, and Roland, taking his seat again, shook his head as if to say he understood.

'Don't be too hard on her', said Josefa.

'No, don't worry', he replied. 'I just like her that much, you know?'

'You're a sweet man', said Josefa. 'Pepita? She's not your kind.'

'I know', he said. 'I know.'

'But tell me', Josefa said, 'About Detective Mike. Did Swallow ever come back that night? Did Mister LeMaster show up?'

'Well, Mike passed out around eleven. No one wanted to wake him up. LeMaster never did come in. Maybe he had the night off. I don't know. Mr. Watson stayed all night.'

'Yeah, sometimes he does that', Josefa said. 'It seems that man can go a week without getting even an hour of sleep.'

'Swallow, he came back. Looked down at the sleeping cop and laughed. Looked over at Mr. Watson and said, do you think I should leave my card? Mr. Watson, he didn't say anything, so Swallow just walked off chuckling.

Sylvia Marquez

'He wasn't the only one waiting up for Swallow', Josefa said. 'The woman was too. Henrietta. Every night he'd tried to sneak in late, but she would be there waiting. They would have the loudest fights. I mean, out in public he was the boss, and she would do whatever he said whenever anybody else was around, but get them behind closed doors and he was all 'please baby please' and she was all 'no no no'. You know I told you how she carried on like she was his first and only, and they weren't even married.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, they just signed in that way. She wasn't even named Henrietta Swallow. She was Henrietta Hagen. Planned on being Swallow. Talked about the wedding all the time. Wanted to have his baby. Four of 'em in fact. Two boys and two girls, alternating. She was on that all the time. He was 'oh baby I don't know. I don't think I'm ready', all that kind of crap a man will say who just wants that one thing he wants but has to put up with all the other stuff.'

'I thought you said it was the shape of her head'

'Yeah, he had plans for her, but he had to wait. Preparations were under way. In the meantime it was the usual boy-girl stuff. That was why it was kind of funny and kind of sad at the same time, you know? Here he was, plotting the end of her days, and there she was, making him go to eat at Cormorants every day, and you know how lousy the food is there!'

'Ugh. Please. I don't even want to think about it'

'She was a lot like Eugenia that way. Down to the little

details, but totally missing the big stuff. You could have said Eugenia! Your pants are on fire! And she'd look down and remember that she forgot to ask you if you liked her shoes.'

'Crazy', said Roland'

'Well, you never know for sure about some people', she replied. 'Salvador might do just about anything, and Ricardo Jimenez did get those potions from Eugenia.'

'You ever seen these potions?'

'Not exactly, but one time I heard he used one on Sylvia Marquez. She has minding her own business, too. Had a flower stand at the market. Didn't bother anyone. But Ricardo got the idea that she was looking at him funny. He didn't like the way she smiled and said hello, or the way she just said 'thank you' when he bought some roses from her and gave them right back to her as a gift. I think he was in love with her, if you want to know the truth, but she was not in love with him. She had a thing for the ladies, you might say.'

'The flower girl!'

'So he sprinkled some of this Eugenia powder on some roses one time when she wasn't looking, and made sure she smelled the flowers when he handed them back to her. She took a deep sniff, and some of that potion got in there, and the next thing you know she had the biggest fight with her girlfriend. I think her name was Annie. She was a hippie chick from the South. Nice as could be but a little bit stupid. Anyway, Sylvia started yelling at her and wouldn't stop. From that day on, she was just as mean as anything to that poor little Annie. Eventually, the girlfriend went away and Sylvia was so unhappy. Ricardo Jimenez kept coming around, buying those roses and giving them to her, but you

know what happened? She stopped even saying thank you to him. She just took those roses, refused to smell them, and just dropped them on the ground and gave them a kick.'

'Guess the potion didn't work', suggested Roland.

'Oh, it worked too well', said Josefa. 'It was a "fall out of love" potion, and Sylvia, she fell out of love with everyone. Didn't do her business any good, that's for sure'

'I was wondering if you were talking about the same one I know', said Roland. 'You just don't meet too many miserable florists.'

'Everything that had to do with Eugenia turned bad', said Josefa.

Little Jimmy

'Didn't turn out so well for Sharad, neither', said Roland. 'When I saw him over there he took me aside and started telling me some of the things she was putting him through. At first she just played stupid tricks, like the blood always dripping from the curtains, or making hoo-hoo sounds at night, just when he was about to fall asleep. She also kept pulling on the living room carpet as soon as he stepped on it, so he'd slip and fall down. Stupid little things. And then that girly giggling ghostly laugh she had. That was maybe the most irritating thing at all. At first, that is. It got more serious. Funny thing was she never bothered Sugar much. He didn't like that she was there, she made him nervous, but she didn't really try very hard. According to Sharad, she kind of tolerated Sugar.'

'Stories were she scared the hell out of anyone who tried to stay in that house', Josefa said. 'There's even been stories about people who never came out. They disappeared forever.'

'How many?'

'Oh, you never can tell. I Don't even know if any of it is true. Nobody I ever knew ever vanished like that. Except, maybe, now I come to think of it, there once was this girl named Rosita. Eugenia always hated that girl. She was jealous of her, thought that David Morales had a thing for her. So one time Rosita went over to visit him there, or so they said. And this was before he took off. Well, of course. And then nobody ever saw her again. But like I said, it's probably just rumors. A lot of people have left this town and never come back. Why would they?'

'Eugenia had enemies, I guess. But didn't she also have

friends?'

'She had worshipers, mostly', said Josefa. 'Those hippie kids and a few of the locals. She was magnetic for sure. People were always drawn to Eugenia. Even when she was in high school. She wasn't a popular kid, but she had followers. I mean really, like they would literally follow her around. It was like they were puppies, and some of them were kids, and some of them were older. She would act like they weren't even there. The whole thing bothered her, I think. All she wanted was David Morales, and all she got was these barnacles. My leeches, she called them. She would laugh at them and call them names. They lapped it up.'

'Sounds like Sharad', mused Roland. 'He ended up with a whole trailer park full of followers. By the end, he couldn't even go outside without somebody lining up to ask his advice, or get his permission, or just tell him a story about their day. He was always in a bad mood by then. Nothing was working out quite the way he had planned. So when Eugenia started taunting him, well, that's when he really got mad.'

'What'd she say?' asked Josefa.

'Well, according to Sharad, she kept calling him a miserable failure. She seemed to know everything about him. She'd tease him about the time he tried to learn how to fly by kidnapping Johann Schluck, the leader of the Sawdust Nation.'

'Sawdust what?'

'Strange group of people from the North', said Roland. 'Seems like some of them could fly, but most of them couldn't do it very well. They had a whole lot of accidents, and refused to wear helmets, so you can imagine there

was some brain damage too.'

'I really don't know', Josefa replied, shaking her head. 'Fly?'

'Yeah, so Sharad was a king and he had all these tenants, but he didn't actually have any powers. Here's this Schluck fellow, kind of an imbecile, and yet he could fly, well, sort of. He could hover a bit for awhile. He could land with a pretty good thud!'

'Sounds painful', said Josefa.

'But he never fell far', added Roland. 'Considering he couldn't get elevated. So then he got ahold of Sugar. Everyone thought that Sugar could turn himself invisible, so when he came back, Mister Pete brought him in and Sharad tried to get him to give up the secret. Seems Sharad didn't know that Sugar was actually dead. Boy, did he feel stupid when Eugenia finally told him.'

'So Mister LeMaster thought he could fly, and turn himself invisible? I got to admit I'm surprised. He seemed like such an intelligent man.'

'Oh, he's not stupid, just greedy. He thought he should really have powers. And every time he failed he got more and more angry, went around yelling god dammit. Eugenia mocked him by mimicking that. She'd keep him awake all night. God dammit, she called him, like, excuse me goddammit, but you're right in my way, goddammit. Think you could move, goddammit? Thank you, goddammit. And at first he would mutter, goddammit, but after awhile it sounded so silly.'

'And she teased him about his followers. She'd say, you want followers? Ok, I'll follow you, and then everywhere he went around the house she'd be there right behind him,

reminding him, here I am, I'm following you. Isn't that what you wanted? And she'd say, I know just what it's like, I had followers myself, like you were just telling me about. She said, I wanted to kill them, chop off their feet, push them down the steepest hill, just to keep them from tagging along. God, I hated them, Eugenia said, what nuisances, what pests. Useless bags of rotting flesh. I put curses on them, she said. You want me to put some curses on you? Sharad would say no, no curses, and she would reply, you'd better be nice to me then.'

'How can I be nice to you', yelled Sharad, 'when you won't leave me alone?'

'Isn't it what you wanted?' she asked, 'Mister The Master? Where'd you ever come up with a stupid last name like that?'

'I made it up, okay?' he replied in desperation. 'I heard about Le Car so I thought it'd be cool. How the fuck was I supposed to know the car was such a lemon?'

'I like lemons', Eugenia replied. 'Some of my best potions use lemons.'

'God dammit', Sharad yelled and Eugenia laughed and laughed her giggly ghostly girly laugh. 'If I were you, I'd change my name', she said. 'Change it again, I mean!', she taunted.

'Isn't your name Malhotra?' she asked, and Sharad replied,

'How do you know that? How do you know all about me?'

'Oh, when you're dead there's really nothing to do but gossip', she told him. 'Here was are, watching you all, forever and ever and ever. Watching Little Jimmy grow up

to be a baseball player. How proud we all are of Little Jimmy when he swings his little bat and he hits his little home runs. And how sweet when he points to the clouds, as if that's where his rotting dead grandpa is watching his every cool move. Way to go, Jimmy, says Grandpa. It's fucking boring when you're dead! Especially baseball. Do you realize how boring that is?'

'I don't think you watch a lot of baseball', said Sharad, and Eugenia cackled.

'You're right. I do not. But I do get around for a dead girl. Did you know that you stay the same age when you die? So I'm still only twenty-six. If you were to die right now, you'd be, what, sixty-four? Forever!'

'I don't care', said Sharad.

'Sure you do', she replied. 'You'd much rather be young like I am. Too bad you didn't die when your daddy did, isn't it? Did you know Kitty Lake had him strangled?'

'What? What do you mean?'

'She was sick of him', said Eugenia. 'Crazy old bastard. Kept trying to rape her. Didn't you know? He'd break into her trailer - why the fuck were you living in a fucking trailer when you were taking all those people's money all those years? What is the matter with you? Anyway, he kept trying to fuck her and she had enough, so she sent her boy MacAfee to get him. Broke his neck with his own two hands, then snuck him out to the coast, buried him in a twenty foot hole. I could show you the spot'.

'I don't believe you', said Sharad.

'But it's true', she replied. And poor MacAfee. He's still living

it down. Did you know he's alive? Ran away to the desert but it didn't even help. Lives in a shack near the Mexican border. Old bastard is covered in fleas as we speak.'

'You're making it up', said Sharad. 'It's all a bunch of lies.'

'Harry Malhotra', she said, and he gasped. It was always what he called himself privately.

'Might as well be who you are', said Eugenia. 'Now is as good a time as any'

Llewellyn

'So this went on and on for days, according to Sharad,' said Roland. 'Every time he turned around, there she was. He couldn't eat in peace. He couldn't sleep at all. She wouldn't even let him watch TV and it was football season! Sharad's a Seahawks fan, by the way.'

'Niners myself', said Josefa.

'Raiders for me', said Roland. 'I like the vertical game. So he missed that Packers-Seahawks game. Would've loved it.'

'I still think', Josefa said, 'they've got to change that overtime rule. I mean it's stupid the way they do it.'

'Agreed', Roland nodded.

'Sorry', she replied. 'So what else did Eugenia do to him? She's like a dog with a bone, you know. Once she gets ahold of something, she will not let go no matter what.'

'Yeah. She told him it was over. Everything was over. She said I'm going to cure you of your leaderness. When I am through with you, you will never want to be in charge of anything ever again. You will never want anyone to do a damn thing for you, and you won't want to do anything for anyone either, except for me. You're mine now, Harry. All mine.'

'He resisted', Roland continued. 'He yelled at her, called her names, and she said go ahead and scream all you want. Call me anything. No one's gonna hear you and no one's gonna care. He told me he could feel the end coming. I asked him what he meant and he said he felt his powers draining away, moment by moment, day by day. The

powers I really had, he said, my personality, my look, my attitude, my ideas. I never had anything else, he said.'

'You can only be who you are', said Josefa.

'He didn't used to think so', said Roland. 'He thought you could be whatever and whoever you wanted to be. He thought he had created himself. He thought he was shaping other people's lives. I was wrong, he told me. I didn't do anything those people didn't really want to do themselves. If they hadn't they wouldn't have. Like with Kristen O'Leary. I tried to match her up, but she said no. She just walked out. On the other hand, Frieda Cates was happy to raise the baby Llewellyn, even though she wasn't her kid. That baby's mom was glad to get out of that chore. Don't know why. That little girl was always a sweetheart. Loretta just didn't want to be mommying and Frieda did. I thought it was me but it was them. All those people, all that time, maybe they were just using me.'

'You don't believe that, do you? I asked him', said Roland. 'You were the man down there. For years. Forever. How long had you been running that trailer park? Something like thirty years, he said. Generations. It all seemed like a dream to him already. One week of Eugenia's constant hectoring and he was losing all sense of proportion. It was like it all adds up to nothing, said Sharad. Everything you do does not add up.'

'Of course not', snorted Josefa. 'What'd he think? He was going to get some kind of award for getting old? For bossing people around? For managing a trailer park? For giving them a room at a crappy motel in the middle of goddamn nowhere? I swear I thought that man had a lot more going on than you are telling me. You got to live your life every day. There's no adding up, but there's being alive. You'd think that that would be enough.'

'For some people yeah', said Roland. 'But others are never satisfied. Look at your Eugenia. Making up her potions and going around haunting. What is that with haunting anyway? Ghosts got nothing else to do? If I was a ghost, I'd think of something.'

'I'd practice the piano', laughed Josefa. 'Of course, even after a thousand years I'd probably get no better than I am right now.'

'I didn't know you played', said Roland.

'Oh a little salsa here and there', she replied.

'I love that', said Roland. 'Will you play for me some time?'

'Sure', said Josefa. 'But whatever happened to LeMaster?'

'He couldn't leave the house', said Roland. 'It's like he was trapped. I tried to get him to come with me. We got as far as the front door but he couldn't step outside. I want to, he said, but I can't. It's like Eugenia would not let him go.'

'Oh my', said Josefa. 'That really is bad. What did you do?'

'Sharad said I should find Ricardo Jimenez, that he was the only one Eugenia would listen to. He was begging me, get me out of here, he said.'

'Poor guy', said Josefa. 'Didn't anybody ever tell him about that house?'

'He walked right into a trap, he said. Sugar was the bait. Eugenia saw him coming from miles away.'

Spring Hill Lake

'So I did the only thing I thought of, and that was go and find Ricardo Jimenez to see if he could help', said Roland.

'Good idea', Josefa replied. 'He's the only one who could'.

'But he couldn't', said Roland. 'After all the trouble I had, finding him.'

'You didn't go to the yellow barn?'

'No, not right away. Somebody told me about his townhouse over in the new development - Spring Hill Lake. It's pretty fancy over there. Swimming pools, workout room, playgrounds for the kids.'

'Yeah, he's got his families there'

'But they wouldn't tell me where he was.'

'They didn't know you, I guess', Josefa said. 'But everybody knows he's usually over at the yellow barn, right off the highway past the bridge?'

'Yeah, I found that out, after a whole bunch of asking around. And there he was. It's more like a shack than a barn. You'd think the roof was going to cave in any second. What is holding that thing together anyway?'

'Magic', joked Josefa.

'Well, I believe it now', said Roland. 'I think he heard me coming because when I got inside there he was hiding behind some boxes and I practically had to drag him out. I said hey man, I need your help and he said, sorry, man,

there ain't nothing I can do. Then he comes out from behind the boxes and just like you were saying now, a little guy with a limp and a mess of paint-white hair even though by his face he really doesn't look that old.'

'He's only forty', Josefa agreed. 'It's the magic. It'll get you every time. One thing they never tell you about witchcraft is the price you pay. He's got all sorts of physical problems. Liver, kidneys, beside the limp and the hair. There ought to be some worker protection program for those people.'

'Yeah, like a government bureaucracy!', laughed Roland. 'Health and Safety regulations. Like those potions ought to carry some certified warning labels.'

'So what'd he say?'

'He said he'd never go up against Eugenia, not for a million billion in cash. He said once you're in that house you're in that house, and didn't I see the sign out front? And how come I got out of there myself? I said, I didn't see no sign.'

'She keeps taking it down', said Josefa.

'That's 'cause she keeps taking it down, exactly. That's what Ricardo Jimenez said.'

'So how come you got out?', asked Josefa. 'I was wondering that too just now.'

'She didn't me, I guess', said Roland. 'At least that's what Ricardo Jimenez said. She must have not wanted you, he said. But the other guy, your friend? He's toast. I said there's got to be something. The poor guy. I tried to pull him out the door but it was like there was some kind of crazy magnets holding him inside. I tried to push him from behind but then he got so heavy, it was like trying to move the

house itself. Hopeless. Isn't there some kind of spell? I asked. And Ricardo Jimenez he said, oh yeah, there's all sorts of spells, but I ain't gonna get involved with it. Eugenia's the real thing, he said. I'm just a student, sort of. I can follow out the recipes. I can make these potions here, and he opened up a crate and showed me a bunch of bottles inside. I can give you something else, he said. How about a bus-catching potion. I promise you will never have to wait for more than seven minutes for a bus, anytime, anywhere in the whole wide world. No thanks. I said. I don't need to catch a bus. Well then, he said, how about this dryness spell. You can walk around in the rain and you never get wet. That's okay, I said. I got an umbrella that does the job just fine.

'You're funny', said Josefa.

'I know', laughed Roland, 'but not as funny as that guy. What kind of useless magic is all this stuff? I asked him, and he said, it's not actually useless. It's just mostly obsolete. Look, he said, I got this guaranteed job-getting stuff, but nowadays people want experience. Used to be you could just spray 'em and they'd give you a job. I also got this incredible stop-baby-crying juice. I still use this one at home. I got a lot of babies so I need it.'

'It's true', Josefa said, 'He's got about four wives and something like eleven kids by now. It's all because of his super-duper get-laid potion that always works. Too bad for him it doesn't come in a handy birth-control formula'.

'He tried to sell me some of that', laughed Roland. 'But I told him I wasn't interested.'

'It would work on Pepita', Josefa joked, but added, 'hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that.'

'That's okay', said Roland. 'If I can't do it on my own, it wasn't meant to be. That's how I see it anyway.'

'Ok', said Josefa, 'But I have used the stuff myself and I can tell you. It really works!'

'Goodness', said Roland. 'Did I really want to know that?'

'Stop', said Josefa, 'So Ricardo Jimenez wouldn't help at all. I kind of guessed he wouldn't.'

'But he told me something interesting. Something I wonder if you know. He was trying to push me out the door because he had some customers coming. Very important appointments. Seems he's got two dealers and he was worried they would meet. Both of them you know.'

'Sure. Henry Swallow', said Josefa. 'He comes up every now and then, does regular business with both Salvador and Ricardo Jimenez.'

'Right', said Roland, 'but the other one is. Are you ready? Mr. Barclay'

'Oh my', Josefa gasped. 'I really did not know that. Oh my. And both of them staying right here, practically under the very same roof. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. There ain't too many people who come up here more than once or twice, and those men, they've been lots of times. Barclay's a salesman, though'

'Salesman. Dealer. Same thing', said Roland. 'From what Ricardo Jimenez said, it sounded like they were rivals - both selling the same potions to the same market in the city. One of them - Barclay I guess - has got all the modern methods. Distribution channels. Marketing. An office with a fax machine. The other one - Swallow - is the old-fashioned,

wild west kind, comes up here on his chopper, sells it freelance, sort of. Ricardo Jimenez never wanted either one of them to find out about the other, so he was pushing me out of there fast. He said, if you want to help your friend, you'll have to find another way. There ain't no magic that'll work against Eugenia. And then he really got kind of frantic, and I didn't want to bother him that much, so I took off, and just as I was leaving I saw Swallow riding in. He didn't recognize me, though. Not that it would matter. I ain't nobody at all.'

Levantín

'So I figured I'd better go back and see if there was anything I could do for Sharad, being stuck there in the house and all, but when I got back there, I couldn't find him at first. You know that house, right?'

'Well, sort of, I guess. I really haven't been inside since David Morales was there, and even then I think I only visited once or twice, when my grand-daughter was there.'

'Your grand-daughter lived in that house?'

'No, not exactly lived there, you wouldn't say, but she did go over there. She was, well, she knew David too, you know.'

'Did I ever meet her? Who is she?'

'Oh, she's not around anymore. You wouldn't know her. She had some problems, and now, well, she's gone.'

'Oh, that's too bad', Roland paused, curious at Josefa's sudden reticence. He got the feeling she really didn't want to talk about her grand-daughter, so he didn't press the subject.

'Where were we? Oh, yeah, about the house. Well, it's pretty big. Kind of ugly from the outside, I hope you don't mind my saying so. All big and brown with those shingles. I'm not a fan of those shingles.'

'David put them up there all by himself, one by one. Took him days and days.'

'Bet it did. That house is three stories high and a whole lot of

rooms inside. I must've gone in every one. Downstairs there's a couple of living rooms - Sugar was in one of them, watching his favorite show, "Babes In Heat", but he only glanced up to ask me if I had any donuts and when I didn't, he went right back to watching. It was funny to see him there, all sprawled out in his white cotton bathrobe, his face as pale as a, well, as what he is! Then a big old kitchen behind there with a porch out to the back. Then upstairs on the second floor there's like three bedrooms and a bathroom, and then another two bedrooms and an attic all the way to the top. I didn't want to go in the attic, but I was looking for Sharad, so I opened the door and I called inside. All I could see in there was dusty old boxes. It smelled like nobody's opened that door in years. The steps and the floors are all creaky and old and I remember I was thinking that it was just like an old haunted house in the movies, and then I remembered it was and I started to laugh, just to keep myself from freaking out, for sure, and then I almost bumped into Sharad back by the front door. Man, I nearly fell over! He did too. He was like, what the fuck! And I was like, what the fuck! And then we both started laughing, but just for a minute, and then I thought, this is my chance and I gave him the biggest shove right into the door and I think he went through it, I think he really did, and he was falling, he was heading to fall there right on his ass on the steps and then, man, it was crazy, it was like he was pushed up again from the ground and he flew back inside and landed nearly on top of me. I have never seen anything like that before. Then he wouldn't get up, he just lay there on the floor, and he was crying. I'm a dead man, Roland, he said. And I said, there must be a way, but I just couldn't think of one.'

'So we sat there together, right on the carpet in front of the door, we were looking outside at the highway, and at the cars going by, and it looked like maybe it was going to rain. It was cold and a breeze was coming right through, and

then, then we saw him, he was out there, on the highway. A boy, maybe ten, maybe twelve. Long hair on a skateboard, crazy. He would grab right on to the back of a truck and just go, you know you can see for a mile from that house. He'd ride for a bit and let go, and coast to a stop. Then the boy crossed the road and waited and hitched on to another truck coming back our way. We watched him, I don't know, for an hour it seemed. Back and forth, up and down the highway, but it was impossible. Nobody could do what he did. Those trucks they were going at least sixty. It was almost like he was, but he couldn't.'

'Almost like what?' asked Josefa.

'There's some people I knew once', said Roland. 'They came from a long way away, from back home. There were things they could do that just aren't allowed. Tricks they had picked up from nature, when she wasn't looking. These people, they don't have a name'.

'The boy has a name', said Josefa. 'Antonio Morales. That's him.'

'Eugenia's son? You did say that he was around.'

'And he is, in a way. His own way. Nobody knows much about him. He comes and he goes. He's stayed at my house, at my daughter's. People are kind of afraid of him. When he was a baby, we worried about him a lot, but then David discovered the kid was not human, not in the way that we know. Lorena, my daughter, she took over for David, and tried to give him a childhood. She sent him to school but Antonio, he didn't care. He'd get up and leave and no one was going to stop him. He can walk right through walls, did you know? It's not all he can do.'

'I believe it', said Roland. 'I've seen it. It's something to do with the Hybrid.'

'The what?'

'It's something my cousin Levantin once told me. He was one of them too.'

Tuesday

'The Hybrid', Roland continued, 'it's just an expression. Those people come by it all sorts of ways. Sometimes they're dead and come back. It could be for a moment or two. The heart stops beating, the brain goes away, and then all of a sudden, restarts. Sometimes there's crazier ways, like what you described with Antonio. There's been some who were born from fathers who died even centuries before. No one knows. There's been some that were born to dead mothers. In a car accident. After a plane crash. But also a lot less dramatic. My cousin was taking a nap at the beach. He was dreaming, and then in his dream he saw something strange, the world opened up from the ocean, unzipped, and he opened his eyes and he saw, right behind it, another entirely different world.'

'Behind the ocean?'

'Behind it. Inside it. Hard to describe. He said it was like the ocean was only a cover and he saw it peel off. He woke up from his nap and the thing was still there, like it wasn't a dream after all. Then, zip zip, it closed up, all gone. In the moment, though, he got the idea that some laws of nature are not laws at all. He stood up and he flew. Just like that. A lot of us were there on the beach and we saw it. He soared. Just spread out his arms and he leaped and the next thing you know he was up in the air. Did it right the first time.'

'What did he do with it?' asked Josefa. 'He was like Superman?'

'There was not much to do', said Roland. 'He realized quickly he looked like a freak. Word got around. We left town. Actually, we left the whole country, came here. He

can still do all that, the walking through walls, the flying, the mental projection, mind-reading, thought bending, telekinesis, breathe under water for days. But he doesn't much use it. What could you do? Next thing you know you'd be in a lab, under study, or you'd be on TV like a clown. He didn't want that. None of us did. So he only does things when he has to, like restoring a balance, when something goes wrong. Mostly he's got to watch out for the others, make sure they don't do stupid things.'

'The others?'

'Other Hybrids. It's not all of them came with the brains to know better. They could do a lot of damage sometimes. You know, like bring back the dead. Who wants the dead? They smell bad and got nothing to say. Or they can turn people into fanatics. This is one of their favorite things to do. Show off a miracle, a face in a tree, something Jesus. Or just put crazy thoughts in their heads. You know how you got all those nut jobs around? You think they're just sick in the head by themselves? Sometimes it's somebody fucking with them. Oh, there's a lot of bad Hybrids out there. Levantin, sometimes he will catch 'em, but most of the time they're too slick, and anyway, it's not like he's on a mission. If it happens it happens. It must have been this way forever.'

'Antonio's never done bad things like that', said Josefa. 'At least I don't think that he has.'

'He's just a bored kid, seems to me', Roland said. 'Does he even know what he is?'

'He does', she replied, 'Eugenia told him.'

'He sees her?'

'Oh yeah, he's around there a lot. It's basically really his

home.'

'I thought he was looking at me', Roland said, 'He'd go by and look up at the house every time. For a moment I thought he was standing right there right in front of me. Even Sharad almost jumped. Poor Sharad. You know what Eugenia calls him?'

'Harry?'

'Le Hamster', Roland said. 'She calls him Le Hamster. She says, who are you going to fuck with now? Oh, you're Mister Wonderful aren't you? You with your shiny bald head and your little gray beard and your Lexus out there in the driveway with that stupid stupid license plate. PRF MSTR! What were you thinking? Are you still perfect now? He was telling me the things she was saying, while copying the sound of her voice. I think she wasn't too thrilled about that, because the whole house suddenly got dark, and cold. I could feel like it was raining on my head, drip drip, but when I reached up and touched my hair, it was dry! Then I felt itchy all over. This was not where I wanted to be.'

'She's got all sorts of tricks', said Josefa.

'So I had to go. I was worrying that I might get stuck there as well. I dashed out the door in a panic. Seeing that I got outside I calmed down a little and yelled back at Sharad, don't worry, I'll do something. There has got to be a way. That's when I heard Eugenia laughing. The first time I heard it out loud. I will never forget, and man, did I run. I'm an old man but I ran like a kid till I got all the way back to my room.'

'What day did you say this all was?' asked Josefa.

'Tuesday', he said. 'Two days ago now.'

'Oh', she replied. 'That was some kind of day'.

Paul Barclay

'That was the same night Pepita ran into Henrietta Swallow in the lobby', Josefa said. 'That girl was hanging around, looking for Mister LeMaster, and bothering Mr. Watson, who didn't want to have anything to do with her. He called Pepita over and asked her what the hell am I going to do with this young lady who keeps coming up here every couple of minutes and asking me one stupid question after another? and Pepita said I'll take care of it. So she goes over to where Henrietta is sitting on the couch in the lobby by the Coke machine reading a Vanity Fair and plops down right next to her and says, you got a nice looking head, do you know that?'

'A nice-looking head?'

'Yeah', Josefa laughed, 'That's exactly what Pepita said she told her.'

'I don't really remember her head that much', said Roland.

'Well, it must have been something, because Pepita was not the only one who said so. Or maybe she was the first, it's possible. Henrietta was this scrawny pale redheaded thing and she kind of reminds you of that famous painting of the lady who was yelling on the bridge. So Henrietta looks over at Pepita and asks her what she means about her head so Pepita goes on and tells her just what I said now about the painting and Henrietta says, you think so? and Pepita says yes.'

'So', Josefa continued, 'they got to talking. Henrietta got to talking, I should say, because Pepita hardly got a word in there. Henrietta was a talker all right. She was telling her all about Henry and the coiled snake around his heart and

how mean he was but what a pussy at the same time, a total motherfucking asshole in her words, not mine, and Pepita finally holds up her hand and stops the talking machine and says, Mister LeMaster thinks you ought to be with the guy in 12 C. Do you know him?

'She told him that? Oh, man.'

'Yeah she just came out and told her. Henrietta had a lot of questions, like who's Mister LeMaster? Oh, you mean the bald Indian guru-looking guy who usually sits behind the desk? Why does he think I should be with the guy in 12 C? Who is the guy in 12 C? What's his name? What's he look like? And Pepita goes on to tell her about Mister LeMaster and how he has this special gift for knowing who goes good with who, like he told Pepita about this guy that she should go with but all she said was yuck, no way.'

'Who was it?' Roland wanted to know.

'She didn't tell me that', said Josefa, but maybe she was lying, Roland thought.

'So Henrietta jumps right up and says she's going to go right over there to room 12 C and knock on the door and if she has to she'll just jump the guy because god knows she was horny enough and sick to death of Henry. Pepita didn't stop her. In fact, she thought she'd take her over there, pretending she had to clean some rooms in that direction anyway, but mostly she wanted to see what happened. Her plan was if the girl really went inside then she would go next door into 13 C which nobody was at so she could listen in.'

'Turns out she didn't have to, because right then Paul Barclay comes in from the street into the lobby, so Pepita just has to point and say, that's him but I don't know his

name. Henrietta walks right over to him and says, 'I'm Henrietta and I'm your destiny.'

'She said that', Roland cracked up. 'She really said that shit?'

'Just like that', Josefa nodded, 'I'm your freaking destiny. Paul Barclay looks her up and down - he's a tall guy you know, so mostly he looked her down - and then he says, I could use a little destiny about now'

'So we can't go to my room', she says. 'because my husband might be coming any minute.'

'Didn't think my destiny would be married when it finally showed up', Barclay said, 'but what the hell. My room's free'

'I swear', Josefa said, 'that was all that there was to it. You ever seen a thing like that?'

'Only when money changes hands', said Roland.

'Well, they didn't get the chance right then', Josefa said. 'Pepita popped up and gave Henrietta a little tap and pointed out the front window. There was Henry Swallow roaring in on his Harley Davidson. Fuck, says Henrietta, and says, I'll find us a way. Wait for my signal, ok? And Barclay just nods and Henrietta tells him he'd better get moving along, her husband is here and he's a bad motherfucker. So Barclay gives her this little half salute, like he's some kind of soldier or something. Pepita said he looked stupid. That was her main thing about him. That Barclay's about eleven steps back of the band, she said, but he cleared the lobby just at the moment that Swallow came in. He took one look at his wife and he said, what the fuck are you doing out here? Didn't I tell you to stay in our room? And she said something about waiting to see him and how she got

lonely and bored, and he yelled at her to watch some TV or something but do what he says, and Pepita really thought he was going to smack her. He raised up his hand, but he must have thought twice about damaging that really quite perfect little skull. Business is business, you know.'

Salvador

'Of course, Pepita wasn't going to let it go at that', said Josefa. 'She really had something going on. The more I think about, the more it seems that she was the one behind all the trouble in the first place.'

'But which trouble?' asked Roland. 'Seems like there's been a lot of trouble going around.'

'Well, the thing I didn't tell you', Josefa said, 'because of what you told me, because of Pepita, well ...'

'Oh just because I kind of like her doesn't mean a whole lot', said Roland. 'After all, I'm getting on, I know what's what. It's not like I'm living in a dream, you know.'

'Oh good', she replied, 'so okay. I might as well tell you the rest of it, then. You see, Pepita, she's not working solo. Those girls almost never do.'

'She's got a pimp', Roland said.

'Exactly, what you call it, a pimp', said Josefa. 'It's Salvador. There, I said it.'

'That the same Salvador ...' Roland began

'Same one. He's always on the lookout for, you know, those crazy things and when Pepita saw Henrietta for the first time she just noticed right away, that head, that skeletal body, the works. She knows her man and she knows what he would say so she even took a picture, did I tell you? She sneaked a photo and she rushed it off to Salvador the other day and ever since he's been itching to get his hands on her. And Salvador, he doesn't care how, happy, sad, alive

or dead. He saw that skull and he wanted it. So he was telling Pepita what to do and she was working it. She used the LeMaster thing'

'About 12-C'

'About 12-C, exactly. She figured she gets Henry Swallow mad enough, he'll do just about anything, and Salvador, Henry already deals with him and you know he'd go right to him, like it's happened before.'

'Henry's a killer?'

'Maybe so', said Josefa. 'We don't know. There've been other girls before.'

'Yeah, sure', said Roland, 'but that doesn't mean ... '

'I know, I know', said Josefa, 'but you get crazy thoughts when you know about Salvador.'

'Did I ever see him?' Roland wondered. 'What's he like?'

'You'd remember him for sure', she said, 'his head's all shaved and tattooed all around, all over his head and neck and everywhere I know of. According to Pepita that means everywhere, completely. He's not so tall but he's strong. He'd scare anyone half to death to look at him. That's why Pepita's with him. Total security, she says. No one's ever gonna fuck with me, she says, not after they see Salvie which is what she calls him.'

'So she was hooking up Henrietta with this Barclay so that Henry Swallow'd get all mad and do her in?'

'Or just get her out in the open', Josefa said, 'kind of flush her out. And it's exactly how it happened. Pepita heard the

Swallows going in their room and once inside as usual she just sweet-talked him out of his rage and did whatever she had to do to calm him down and get him to go to sleep. Then she went tiptoe out into the hall and found Pepita and asked her where could she go, where could she and Barclay go'

'Just what Pepita wanted', Roland said.

'Just what Salvador wanted', corrected Josefa. 'Pepita likes a little fun, but it's serious business to her Salvie. He told her, get them to go to Morales.'

'No shit', said Roland. 'So that's what happened.'

'Yeah, right', Josefa continued. 'Pepita told Henrietta about the Morales house, but not about Eugenia, or anything like that, just that it was not occupied, but clean and safe, that no one would ever think to find them there, and she, that is Pepita, she'd arrange for Barclay to meet up with Henrietta there. They set the time for the next day - yesterday now.'

'Don't I know it', Roland said. 'I was there, you know.'

'You where there? At Morales?'

'I was right there when they got there, but what I really need to know is, who told Henry Swallow? No, let me guess. Pepita.'

'Pepita', Josefa agreed.

'God damn', said Roland. 'God fucking damn.'

Rendezvous

'I was going back to Morales house anyway', said Roland, 'to check up on Sharad and see if there was anything I could do to help. When I got there I heard some talking in the kitchen way in the back of the house. Sharad came rushing up to me with his finger over his lips so I should be quiet, and then he led me up the stairs to one of the bedrooms and started whispering a mile a minute. God dammit, he said, you wouldn't fucking believe what's going on around here. Do you remember that irritating little redhead from the motel? Henrietta? She's here! And she's here with the guy from 12-C. Barclay. She's telling him that I said she belongs with him and he's like, what? Somebody, I'd bet anything it's that little whore Pepita, told her what I said. I knew I should've kept my mouth shut. What's the matter with me? Why can't I just keep it to myself? God dammit. I told him to slow down, take it easy, but then he was all upset about something else. It's that Barclay guy, he said. Do you know who he is? He's the heir to Barclay-Hudson Terminology Incorporated. Those bastards. They were the ones who took over the official languages of the world, remember? They decided what all the meanings were going to be. Like, for example, the word 'theory' suddenly went from being a proven law of nature to somebody's wild-ass guess. And they took the word 'family' and turned it into a white man and a white woman with two kids and a dog and a church. And they took the word 'freedom' and turned it into occupying invasion force. They ruined the whole damn thing and then you know what they did? They cashed out at the height of the market. First they fucked up the language then they took the money and run, and this little creep, this Barclay guy, he's just a trustafarian out to make a buck out of other people's gullibility. Now he's a magic potion dealer, can you believe it? Magic fucking potions!'

'I told him I had heard about that from Ricardo Jimenez himself and then Sharad told me something else I didn't know., Turns out that Barclay signed a deal with Salvador to deliver the Henrietta head himself!'

'No way!', gasped Josefa.

'Yeah, so even without Pepita's intervention, he was already planning a way to get ahold of her. Sharad thinks he was just going to steal her outright, kidnapping. But now he's got her where he wants her. She's all ready to fuck him and he's just playing for time. Sharad thinks that Salvador might get here any minute, and that would be really super bad because Salvador and Eugenia do not see eye to eye. Fact is, Salvador talks shit about Eugenia all the time.'

'It's true', Josefa said, 'they were never that close, even when she was alive. Salvador wanted to take over the business, but he never had what she had. He never had any followers. You know why? He's a mean son of a bitch and a scary one too. No charisma. No charm. Just a bully with bluster and muscles.'

'So Sharad is saying I'd better watch out, even better, he said I should leave. It was bad enough he was there but then he said the funniest thing. He said that Barclay and the girl could not even see him. He was right there in the kitchen with them, and Sugar was in the living room, watching TV, and they walked right on past them without even noticing. Sharad was really freaked out. tell me, he said, Roland, tell me. Am I dead? Am I just a ghost?'

'Oh my god', said Josefa, 'Is it true?'

'No, no', Roland said, 'and I told him. They're probably just too busy with their own little things.'

'Barclay walked right through my body, said Sharad. He walked right through. I tried to calm him down because he was really pretty jumpy. It only seemed that way, I reassured him. People don't walk through people, you know that. But Sharad was trembling and really freaked out, so how could I leave? I was talking to him calmly, trying to put him at ease, and then suddenly we heard the front door bang shut and some shouting.'

'Where's the fucking asshole Charade', the voice yelled. 'I know you're in here motherfucker. I saw your Lexus outside. Who the fuck told you to give away my wife?'

'God dammit, said Sharad, now who told this guy? Pepita, I swear if it's her I'll get Joe Junior to fire her bony ass.'

'She doesn't have a bony ass', said Josefa.

'Just an expression, I guess', agreed Roland, 'so me and Sharad we just stayed upstairs and kept quiet. We could hear Henry Swallow, because that's who it was, stomping around all downstairs. And that's when he ran into Barclay. Right there, in the kitchen, pants down, with the alleged Mrs. Swallow on her knees.'

Battle

'Then it got quiet. Real quiet. Sharad and I looked at each other and thought, we got to go down and see this!'

'Weren't you scared?'

'I was scared, so was he, but come on. We had to go see. We crept down the stairs and peered around the corner. We could see Sugar quite clearly, laying on the couch, and behind him, in the kitchen, was Barclay, pulling his pants up, and Swallow his back to us and his fist in the air.

We'll settle this my way, said Swallow, and Barclay said, any way you want. I was surprised to see Barclay standing up for himself. I always pegged him for a loser. I think it was that super pale skin got me fooled. I never thought highly of people with freckles.'

'Funny you say that', Josefa put in. 'I have the same thing myself, and especially that Barclay. He looked like the coward to me.'

'But he wasn't. Swallow backed out to the living room, and Barclay followed, Henrietta close behind. He told her get out of the way and she did. She sat on the couch next to Sugar, who merely glanced up for a moment then returned to his show. Sharad and me were still at the stairs and then I saw outside - a cop car pulled in to the driveway. Oh shit, I thought to myself. It's Detective Mike. Sure enough. How he got there, I don't know.'

'He was sleeping with Pepita', Josefa remarked.

'Oh, that explains that', Roland said. 'Is there anyone she isn't fucking? I don't want to know.'

'Joe Junior's a fag', said Josefa.

'I know. Nerver mind', returned Roland.

'So Detective Mike came in and arrested them all?' asked Josefa.

'Not a chance', Roland said. 'He came in all right, and you know what is weird? He didn't even notice Sharad. He said Hi to me, and I was standing right there, right next to Sharad, and the next thing Mike says is, do I know where he could find LeMaster? I shook my head. I was confused, then I pointed into the living room where the battle was about to begin. Mike opened his mouth but said nothing. It was Barclay who went first with the duel.

'Here's one that'll make your dog smell bad', Barclay said, and he flung a small vial of potion. It smashed on the floor by Henry Swallow's feet, and a purplish smoke puff came out. Swallow was not impressed. He just smirked. Oh yeah, he said, well this one will hide those grease stains on your shirt pockets, and he flipped open a tiny red matchbox. Barclay smiled as the stains disappeared. I should thank you for that, Barclay said. Saves me on laundry, you fraud. Just for that, here's a little something for you. This will make everything you eat from now on taste like donuts. At this, I saw Sugar perk up. He looked around anxiously, expecting to see donuts I guess. Henry spit out the taste and then, I don't know how he knew, but he said, this one's to keep that fat cop over there from messing with out business. He turned and threw what looked like a pink streamer right at us, and Detective Mike fell into a trance right away. Next thing I knew he was bent on one knee inspecting his shoes.

Good one, said Barclay, but still, the girl's mine.

'She's mine', Swallow said, 'I married the bitch.'

'Yeah well the guru guy said she was mine'

'Fuck the guru', said Swallow. 'That guy's dead if I ever come across him again. As for you, here's a trick that'll keep your shoelaces from ever wearing out.'

'Give it to the cop', taunted Barclay. 'He needs it much more than me'. Sure enough, Mike was studying his laces, and worrying about them fraying.

'Forget about fraying', said Swallow. 'What you need is praying', and he flipped out a card that turned into a flock of these tiny green flying rhinos that were singing all the latest pop tunes together at the same time. These rhino-things were all over Barclay, singing around his ears, singing in his eyes, trying to sing up his nose. Barclay was flailing away with his hands trying to get rid of the pests. All he managed to fling back was a potion that would keep your fingernails from breaking. Henrietta chipped in, I could use some of that, but Swallow responded with a potion that restores the foreskin on a circumcised penis. That did the trick. Aside from the rhinos, Barclay was now grabbing at his crotch, at the painfully stretching red skin. It looked like the battle was over.

'But then Salvador ran in the door, pushed right by Henry and ran to the couch. He picked Henrietta up by the waist and flung her over his shoulders. Salvador started charging back toward the door but Henry was blocking his way, yelling at him to put my wife down, and Salvador shouting, you better watch out Swallow-tail. But Salvador couldn't get past him. Mike Gramm was still there by the door, and Henry, and me and Sharad. Salvador was turning every which way, with Henrietta screeching and trying to scratch at his head. He got so fed up he just dropped her down on

a heap on the floor, then he whipped out his knife. Get out of my way, he yelled, I'll rip open you all.

Eugenia

'Nobody moved. The house got totally quiet. All I could hear was the laugh track on the show that Sugar was watching. Then slowly, the whole house started to rumble and shake. It got cold. It got dark. It got windy. A whistling started up from the basement. We could hear it get closer, climb up from the stairs, then rattling against the locked basement door. The whatever it was started pounding. The door started quaking. Salvador whispered 'Eugenia'.

'Everyone stop', said a calm voice behind us. We all turned around and there was the kid, the shaggy and dirty, long-haired twelve year old Antonio, standing on the top step with his skateboard held at his side.

'She is mine', it was Salvador talking.

'No, she's not', Antonio said. 'And how many times do I have to tell you, never come into my house'. And with that, the boy pointed his finger at Salvador's knife and it melted like butter and dripped from his hand. Salvador shouted and jumped. The boy stepped aside.

'Out now', the boy said.

Salvador bowed his head and muttered something that sound like siento'

'I'm sorry', said Josefa.

'Right', Roland said', 'lo siento. And Salvador took a deep breath and walked right out the door. I watched him go straight out the driveway. I remember I was thinking, holy shit. I was so fucking scared of that man, and this small little boy, without raising his voice.'

'Antonio', Josefa nodded.

'Then after that, he took each of us, one at a time. Detective Mike first. Mike Gramm, he said, you'll be glad to know that you will never remember a moment of this, and the cop just walked out, walked back to his car, got in, turned it on and drove off.

'Henry Swallow, he said, I'm counting to ten and then turning you into a cricket. Henry ran just as fast as he could, but Antonio kept counting, and before Henry Swallow could get to the road, he was gone. Probably still out there chirping.'

Roland paused to remember the scene. Josefa waited quietly for him to continue.

'Mr. Barclay', Antonio continued, 'Since you know the value of words, your family and all, the proper meaning for you now is "gone", and poof, just like that, he was gone. Henrietta was still on the floor and she cried out, 'oh no. I was supposed to be going with him!'

'Not anymore', Antonio said. 'Now you belong with Sharad. And that's final. For you, Mister Master, it's time you had some of your own medicine. And for you, Henrietta, just be glad that you still have your head.'

'Sharad?' Henrietta looked up and suddenly she saw LeMaster, for the first time that day. 'When did you get here?' she asked, but he didn't get to reply because right then Eugenia screamed. I had never before heard her voice. She was saying NO IT'S NOT FAIR IT'S NOT FAIR HE IS MINE! MINE! MINE! ALL MINE! HE IS MINE!

Antonio stamped his foot on the floor and said, quietly but

firmly, "Mother, enough. You made your own bed. Now go to your room or behave!

Eugenia whimpered a bit. I think I heard her mention a hamster. Antonio said 'mom' and that was the last that we heard of Eugenia. Sharad and Henrietta left together. They got into his Lexus and the last thing I heard was Henrietta saying I don't want to go North, it's too cold up there, I don't like being cold, and Sharad I heard saying 'god dammit'.

Antonio beckoned to Sugar and said, 'Mr Beauregard Sweet, it is time and you know it'. Sugar just sheepishly nodded. He got up and walked over to Antonio, who opened up a small bottle and just like that, poured the ghost right into it. He put on the twist top and tightened it, and then turned to me and said, 'Roland, give this to your cousin, he'll know what to do. Now go' and I didn't want to ask any questions. After all that I'd seen I was ready to get the hell out of there.

'Goodness', said Josefa. 'Oh my god'.

'So', Roland said, as he opened his jacket and pulled out Antonio's bottle, 'that's why I wondered what you knew about David Morales.'

'It isn't!', said Josefa, 'It couldn't be'

'Homeward bound', Roland said, returning the bottle to his pocket. 'But now it's getting late'

'And still there's work to do', Josefa mumbled.

'Let it wait. I'll finish cleaning up around here', said Roland, gathering up the tea cups and dessert plates.

'I don't mind if you do', Josefa replied, and got up to leave

the room. 'There's just one thing', she added.

'Oh?' Roland turned around.

'It's just that', Josefa began.

'Yes?' he asked.

'Well, it's just that, if you wouldn't tell, you know, Ricardo Jimenez, about the lemons in the trunk?'

'Of course', Roland laughed. 'I wouldn't dream of it'.

'Good night', Josefa said.

'Good night', he replied, and reached up to switch back on his little radio, and finished doing the dishes.

