

Renato Escudero

Winner of the 2008 John Steinbeck Short Story Award

Barrio Exorcism

My brother liked to fix things. He'd come home once a year to replace spark plugs in the old van, grout bathroom floor tiles, putty the half-chewed walls in the dog room. One year I helped him install a sprinkler system. He hunched over the edges of the front lawn, while I handed him plastic pipes. His brown shoulders crackled in his wife-beater as he screwed pipes together and laid them in the ditch. He had to check his work at least three times, saying that with a little application you can solve any problem yourself. He didn't ever break a sweat, though sometimes his cheeky face grew oily. After he buried the pipes and positioned the sprinkler heads, he got splashed from all angles – the timer went off before he'd got the chance to adjust the water pressure. As I stepped away from the line of fire, he looked up at me with a raised brow, his face scrunched up. He threw himself in the middle of the grass and started laughing, then chased me and brought me into the water. We danced and screamed, until Mamá came out in her slippers and turned off the water. “Ay Miguel, you're a real pro,” she said.

The last summer he was home –after crabbing in Alaska, or maybe it was the year he was selling water purifiers to Miami snowbirds – he yanked off the rotting door to the back porch and hung a new one on the hinges. It wasn't really new; he got it at an estate sale for ninety bucks and worked on it over Mama's grill and chaise lounge. Squatting, he scraped, sanded and polished, as I brought him Diet Cokes. He couldn't drink beer anymore because a belly didn't look good on the dance floor on Saturday nights. He was slim and animated and the girls danced with him, but they'd go home with men in boots and souped-up pickup trucks. When we first

hung the door, we discovered that it didn't fit. No problem, in a few hours the new door was sawed down and flush against the frame, swinging without a squeak.

I had to let him take the bottom bunk in our converted basement bedroom. Miguel didn't like to sleep on the top bunk on account of the gas that got trapped in his gut. "It'd a be a sin, Little Keeper, to let one rip with you trying to sleep below." He was a considerate brother. Also gave good advice: the worst time to let one out is when you're in bed with a new girlfriend—or parking in the Rambler somewhere. "Do you have a best girl over at that fancy prep school a yours?" he asked me. "You know me and Ma rationalized it best to give you a honest education, 'cuz when I was a young buck like you I got me into plenty a troubles at the public one over on E. 14th." He was referring to the troubles he'd had with a mean kid named Luis Velazquez before the Velazquezes moved up in the world to 35th. Miguel got his nose broke twice, but Luis ended up with three busted ribs.

"No, no girls for me," I said. Not how he meant it, at least not yet. Our neighbor's kid Mariana sometimes sneaked into the basement to spend the night with me. But not during the summer when my brother was home. She'd come in through the window, and the only witness was the dog. She made me listen to the Spice Girls but didn't mind sleeping on the top bunk.

"You'll see, Little Keeper," said my brother, "it's easy to be with a girl. You sit back and do the listening." I know now what he meant, but I've always been a talker myself, and Mariana's never had any problems with it. Miguel could talk too, but he was cautious about the people he chose to be listened by. I think I only heard him talk to me, Mamá and our aunts, and our cousins, and on the phone with his two best friends in México. Oh, and to Mariana (and her mother); he must have sensed I was in love with her long before I knew it.

On the night we finished the back porch door, Miguel and Mamá danced a two-step in the kitchen cheek-to-cheek. I'd danced with her before too, but recently I didn't even like to be hugged by her, and definitely not out in the barrio, where the vatos in baseball caps chewed tobacco and laughed at you. Only Mariana could hug me in public –that would usually get me a cheer. After Mamá and the dog went to bed, me and my brother had a fine pillow fight in the basement. I wasn't too old for that. I wouldn't be too old now either. We heard a knock on the window. In the daylight you could see the old dog's paws through it while he peed on the wall outside. Sometimes the pee'd seep into the basement's wall, and on hot nights it smelled, but Miguel said we couldn't do anything because Mamá was in love with that stupid dog, which was the last thing dad gave her before I arrived. Then dad took the Greyhound bus back to Alabama.

“Focus, Little Keeper, focus” said my brother, smothering my laughter with the pillow. I thought he was still playing, but years later I would learn to interpret the absent look in his eyes in that moment, and the urgency of his whisper. “Focus,” he said, gently tapping his finger on the tip of his nose. Then he sniffed at the window. His nose might have been flatter and darker than mine, and twice broke to boot, but he was better than a hound that way, could always smell the bad news –not that I can remember there ever being any trouble, especially since he'd been doing those jobs that took him far away from home. He'd tell me stories, but only about when he was just a kid. I saw him as a man, a hardworking provider. Whenever I asked Mamá about his history, she'd only tell me that he'd had a difficult childhood.

“That pinche Luis from 35th's lurking outside,” he whispered, pointing at the window with his nose. “He's supposed a go down to México come summertime. He must a seen my Rambler at the flea market.” That stinky piece of rust had been dad's car. Mariana says that's the only thing Miguel inherited from our father. Somehow he managed to keep it running. He cruised it

all over the country questing for the big bucks. “I know your mind’s always going a mile a minute, Little Keeper,” he said, “but I need you to pay attention, real close, and be brave. Luis doesn’t hold nothing against you.” Miguel pulled a crushed pack of Camels from under his mattress and lit a bent cigarette.

“When did you start smoking?” I demanded, as the knocking came back, this time louder.

He tapped an index finger on my moving lips. “Tell you what,” he said, “gonna make myself scarce. Open the window, if it’s him tell him I’m not coming home this year. He ask about the Rambler, tell him Mamá’s doing the driving, that I taught her how to drive stick.”

Never before had I seen my brother be a chicken shit over anything. He crawled into the pit below the basement like a rat, a ring of cigarette smoke following him down. I don’t hold it against him knowing what I know now. Luis from 35th wasn’t lean and dark like us. Someone had done a number on his genes: he was one tall Mexican, fat around the neck, with a bald pink head and red eyes, like an albino’s. Sometimes he’d catch up with me after school to tease me about Miguel. “When’s that sorry-ass bro of yours gonna show his hide ‘round these parts?”

I climbed on the milk crate and slid the window open a crack. I saw small feet in sandals and heard the password, “Keeper of my heart/guardian of my soul/do your part/don’t let me fall.”

“Ay Mariana, you know you can’t come down here now.”

“Ándale, I’m a messenger. Mami says Luis from 35th saw Miguel this morning.”

Mariana’s foot pried the window open, and down she came, legs and skirt first. She landed in my arms and kissed me. Girls. Looking back on it, those bright eyes must have been already plotting the wedding for some time.

Miguel heard her and emerged from the pit. He was so relieved it wasn't Luis from 35th that he didn't mention anything about her being in the basement so late at night. "Marianita," he said, checking my best girl out, "Toda una mujercita."

"I'm spoken for, Miguel." She blinked at my brother. "But thanks. Mira, Luis from 35th's looking for you. What you do to his Grandma? He says you're a maldito voodoo psycho, and he's going to kill you."

"Yeah, I know," said my brother.

I felt as if the breath had been knocked out of me. If Luis from 35th had been thirteen like me, then an "I'm gonna kill you" would be a natural thing to say in anger, like when getting beat at marbles. But he was a man, and men in the barrio don't use those words unless they're armed and aching to do it.

"All right," said Miguel. "You know I don't like to keep secrets from my Little Keeper and, Mariana, you're like family, so I'm gonna have to ask you both to grow up right quick." A muffler rioted in the distance. "Mierda, he must have kept the old Falcon for his night runs." For the first time I saw my brother's oily face break into a sweat. "The reason I usually come in the summer is because the Velazquezes are in México."

"Not this year," said Mariana. "Old Velazquez had a stroke or something, and the sons have to mind the market; they don't trust the manager anymore, someone said he's been stealing red tomatoes and jalapeños by the sack, and it's kinda true they don't pay him enough, but that doesn't give him the right to—"

"Marianita," my brother interrupted, "God knows I love you, but when you get a talking, you're worse than my bro. You guys listen to me." But he stayed quiet a long time.

Then he asked me to get one of his steno pads from the pit, so he could plot a strategy on fleeing the barrio unscathed. I didn't understand what he meant. And, why hadn't he brought a pad with him a minute ago? I didn't crowd him with questions though and, like a good Little Keeper, down to the pit I went. The water heater and Miguel's tools took over the center of the pit. The crawlspace at my head was full of the belongings of a father I never knew. On the other side, Mamá's old lampshades were dented by countless souvenirs from all the places Miguel had been to. His steno pads were in a cardboard box next to his mountain bike. All filled with his handwriting, cramped and hard to read. As I flipped through one of them, the only words I could decipher were "Institute," "report" and "session." At least two dozen pads filled the same way. "Weird," I whispered, and then I noticed a package of new pads in a corner. Maybe he'd meant one of them. He must have known I'd come across his box of mysterious notes. Perhaps that was his intention. I ripped the plastic off the new pack, and went back up the rungs of the ladder.

"The latest chisme is that you were the one who brought Santería to the barrio, Miguel," said Mariana.

"Pinches Velazquezes, liars all of them," I yelled.

Mariana advised me to breathe and take a pen for my brother's sake. We sat cross-legged on the top bunk and stared at Miguel, who had propped himself on the space heater across the room. His face was numb, frozen. That night, I took notes to help him keep his train of thought, and I haven't stopped taking notes since.

Mamá and Miguel never spoke of his past, his relationship with the Velazquezes, or all the lies:

"That Miguelito has the devil inside..."

"Es un brujo en training..."

His long absences had been explained on account of his having to go out in the world to earn money. I began to see a side of Miguel that had been obscured from me, pieces of him that were hidden deep down in the pit, which I hadn't ransacked before out of respect for my elders.

Over the years, Mariana and I have put the pieces of the puzzle together: the steno pads, the labyrinths of his speech that last night, Mamá's stories, and the pamphlets and edited reports from The Institute. Mariana has never taken a breather from the task, even with the babies and her nursing studies and the new house. Her blinking eyes always stay bright, even when she's sleepy, and she's good at interpreting the clues. We've finally uncovered the truth of my brother's life, and not even Luis from 35th or his horde of Velazquezes will ever again spread rumors of Miguel Cueva Cueva.

Institute of Psychic Regeneration

Sub.: Irma Aldrete H., 14
Parental Approval (if minor): Check.
SR: Miguel Cueva C.
Sup.: Jesus Fuentes A.

19 April 1979

We reached another pleasant memory. My hand moved fast a [sic] keep up with her lips.. I caught every word. (Full text on steno pad. Sorry about the chicken scratch).

MCC: What colors you see?

IAH: (Giggles). Pink and white balloons...Red wine.

MCC: What sounds you hear?

IAH: Mariachis...clinking glasses. Oh, and la tia crying.

MCC: Doing great, Irma. Now, I want you to taste something.

IAH: Okay...this is fun, Miguel.

MCC: I'm not there. Stay with your memory. Taste?

IAH: I reach for a wine glass...the table's tall... (Laughs)... Oops. It fell and crashed on the floor... Wait, some of it spilled on my shoe...(Bends over. Touches shoe. Licks finger)...oh, yuck...bitter.

She was responding awesome to all the standard triggers. Still no traumas though, even after ten years of memories. Irma had a happy life. Lucky her.

MCC: Now, I want you to go back even further; visit an event of distress.

IAH: (Holds her breath. Guttural moan. Squirms. Her face flushes).

MCC: What's happening, Irma? What colors you see?

IAH: (Gasps.) It's dark... (Flushes. Holds her breath. Fidgets).

This was my first Purification without my Sup. in the room. I was more excited than nervous, and totally calm, even with Irma's fit.

MCC: What's your name?

IAH: (Gasps.) I don't...(holds her breath).

MCC: What year is it?

IAH: (Frowns.). Now a bright light...(holds her breath). It's cold. (Gasps. Wails).

MCC: Irma, calm yourself. You can breathe normal. Tell me, where are you?

IAH: I'm floating...(Few short cries). No, someone is carrying me to another place.

MCC: Excellent. Now, I'm going to count a five, and you'll be back in the here and now super content, 'kay? One, two, stretch...three, four, breathe in, breathe out... five! Quick, what's your name?

IAH: Irma Aldrete Haas.

MCC: How old are you?

IAH: Fourteen.

MCC: Who's president of the United States?

IAH: Jimmy Carter.

MCC: Open your eyes. (She does. The crying stops). How you feel?

IAH: It was so cool, thank you Miguel.

Irma Aldrete Haas achieved Purification at 8:09 p.m. Total time: 03:52.

It wasn't until almost a year after Miguel had left us for good that Mamá began to talk. My best girl Mariana and I had just started high school, and for once we got to go to the same school.

According to Mamá, Miguel had been the only thirteen-year-old Secondary Regressionist at The

Institute, and he was on his way to join the ranks of the Primaries, the real hypnotists. The people that guided you through your past lives.

“You wouldn’t know your brother back then, m’hijo,” said Mamá, as Mariana and I sipped her chocolate atole in the stuffy kitchen. We had a pile of homework and textbooks on the table and another of Miguel’s documents. Mamá was frying a big steak with plantain and chipotle. I liked it just like my brother, with red onions, and cloves instead of cumin. After chopping a big onion, she wiped her hands on her apron, the floral one that my brother had brought from one of his trips. The white fabric had acquired a little tan. She instructed us to clear the table. As growing teenagers we had to have a decent meal in our bellies.

“But why wouldn’t he know Miguel, Ma?” Mariana asked her.

“Chula, mira how skinny you are. You’ll never bloom in the right places if you don’t fuel up. Los babies need a lot of protein.”

“Mamita,” I said, “por el amor de Dios, she’s barely fourteen. This is important.”

“I know it is, m’hijo, but I wish I could spare you the details. We must remember him—”

I jumped up from my seat and said firmly, “Ma, there’s a big family up on 35th that won’t stop spreading lies about my brother.” Mariana coaxed me back to my seat.

Mamá agreed to tell us everything she knew, every detail that had transpired nearly fifteen years before, but only if we ate the hearty steak she’d smacked with her own fist.

Minding her skillet, she started to talk, and the words fell onto the stove. “Miguel got infected with some crazy ideas after your father got his bones up on that bus. He felt responsible that your father left because of him, and he didn’t know how we’d manage once you were born. He saw this infomercial of this institute place on E. 14th that was supposed to help you through your harshest tragedies.”

“The old Spanish church that’s boarded up now?” Mariana asked.

“It was a Baptist church for a while before the institute moved in, m’hija. The neon signs looked very strange hanging from that squat tower.”

I guess it looked like a church. Just a corner building, made of brick and sloping rooftops and a little tower with no bell. We pretty much ignored it, like we ignored the other condemned buildings on E. 14th. We had to pass by it after school, because we hung out next door with Doña Alberta. She ran the Taquería del Quinto Sol, and her fried tortillas beat the taco shells from Taco Bell across the street any day. Her kids were spoiled little things that Mariana loved to order around. We called it “babysitting.” But we weren’t allowed to babysit after dark – rumor had it, the old church had become a night haven for vatos who were into “funny business.”

As my mother said, The Institute was there for a few years, and it was an equal opportunity subsidiary of some large corporation based in Florida – not that she believed in any of that stuff. When she was busy being pregnant with me, and her comadre next door was busy being pregnant with Mariana, Mamá didn’t give much thought to the consent form Miguel had brought in for her to sign. All he said was that the people were friendly and wanted to help the family any way they could. With a little training Miguel could get a job that didn’t involve breaking his back at construction sites, like dad had done before him.

On the night Luis from 35th had discovered my brother’s whereabouts, Miguel stuttered in the basement. I took notes, Mariana tried to comfort him. Even then she was undeniably maternal.

“Jesus Fuentes,” said my brother, “he recruited me. He told me he’d a been looking for a representative from the barrio. ‘But I’m just a kid,’ I said. ‘You’re much more than that,’ he told me. ‘You are Miguel Cueva Cueva, destined a perform more Purifications than anyone on

the planet. Think, we can save a lot of time by Purifying folk when they're young like you. What do you say guy, you feel up to a great challenge that will change lives?' Jesus Fuentes said they had a strong feeling 'bout me."

This local hero was ready and able to do community service, in addition to executing the agenda of the big boys in Pensacola. The late 1970s had been perfect for them to sprawl, since their bosses' boss had been granted a five-minute audience with the pope. I still wonder what Juan Pablo II must have thought about their enterprise. And to this day, Mariana and I don't understand how Jesus Fuentes convinced Miguel to get involved with all that mumbo jumbo. He trained my brother personally, got him through the Purification process in two sessions flat, and had my brother doing supervised Purifications within three weeks.

Miguel described him as a man of robust stature, with a bit of an eager hunchback from leaning over his clients all day long, and effusive hands that came in handy when he gave lectures on world affinity. He wore sequined suspenders to soothe the nerves of the hyperactive, and had comforting whiskers like Mario Moreno Cantinflas, México's own Charlie Chaplin. He usually drove his Volkswagen Rabbit to work, but on weekends he took out his Jag for a spin in the country.

For a while the regressions were a lot of fun, especially Sunday workshops in San Luis Obispo. Miguel was given the little anteroom to Jesus's Fuentes' own conference suite at The Institute. The masterful Jesus Fuentes handled group regressions for newcomers, while my brother attended to their children. Sometimes, Miguel disseminated pamphlets to the innocent in the lobby and referred the brave to life-management and soul-purging courses. But mostly, he was a promising Secondary who logged ten hours a day after school for a stipend of fifteen bucks. Free coffee and training though, and all the love he could handle.

Philanthropist Jesus Fuentes felt it was his mission from God to hire a local staff down to the maintenance crew, and this is where Luis from 35th's Grandma intersects with my brother's story. Before the second generation of Velazquezes acquired the fresh produce market in 1982, undocumented Doña Adela had to scrub floors on her knees for less than two bucks an hour. Jesus Fuentes hired her full time and gave her nearly minimum wage –of course her salary, like everyone else's, was contingent upon The Institute's weekly productivity.

After my best girl Mariana and I had finished our big steak with plantain and chipotle in the sultry kitchen, Mamá told us about the old cleaning lady, a person we never met. "Your brother was scared of her. Let's see...this was when Miguel and Luis were still classmates. The truth is that the woman never took care of herself, always in soiled wool skirts, and droopy red sweaters. You could see highways of varicose veins through her nude knee-highs." In essence, Doña Adela looked like a great dreidel, whose handle was a vaselined ponytail.

"She had to be already in her sixties," Mamá continued, "many times offered to come help out in the house, but I couldn't afford it. Good thing your father bought the house free and clear at the auction. He wasn't all that dimwitted for a half-breed. Whatever he was, he worked hard while he was around, and it rubbed off on you and your brother – look at you, cariño, sitting there with your beautiful secretary, working on this...this barrio exorcism all by yourselves."

I told Mamá that she was drifting again, and she said that Doña Adela was the only grandmother she'd ever known to openly declare at the dinner table that she had a favorite grandson. She had once been heard telling my brother, "Miguelito, why do you tease my Luisito so?" My brother informed us that it had been the other way around, that Luis from 35th was the one that took my brother's soccer cards and hid them for weeks. By the time they were both in

the eighth grade, and girls had entered the picture, fist fighting was the only way they could communicate effectively, and they shared black eyes and busted knuckles, while the older vatos downed Coronas and egged them on.

“Now you can understand why,” Miguel told us in the basement, “I was nervous when Doña Adela started working at the Institute. The old lady had a mouth on her, and I didn’t want to have nothing to do with her grandson.”

One day, when he was wrapping up a session, my brother saw her cleaning the hallway through the French doors of his anteroom. She wobbled up to Jesus Fuentes to cash in on her health benefits, and Miguel overheard their conversation.

“I want you to do me my Purification,” said Doña Adela, “to cure some of my aches.”

“We’re not doctors,” Jesus Fuentes replied.

“But, you told me one gets happier after getting Purified.”

“Got some workshops coming up, but I have the perfect man for the job.”

Later, when Miguel complained that she smelled of Lysol, the generous Jesus Fuentes preached, “This is community service, Miguel. You know prejudice is a myth we don’t subscribe to. Just remember, the sign of a true Primary is action without fear. He’s got to be able to jump into a person’s experience, at any stage, and pull them back to the here and now. You don’t want someone to get sucked into a stale memory and just freeze. This’ll be your test – think of all those traumas to process! You like seeing your name on the announcement board outside, don’t you? Imagine being on top with the other Primaries! Just slide the old lady through.”

The incentive was evident: if my brother became a Primary, he’d be able to get more money for the Cuevas. Some Primaries had been known to clear up to one thousand bucks per

session. Allegedly every year, a select group of them were sent down to Hollywood to do fieldwork with actors and divas. Mariana and I haven't been able to find any hard proof of this, but it isn't exactly unimaginable. We've been spending a lot of time in the den of the new house since the twins arrived. The other day, she looked up at me, her brown eyes brighter than ever, as she nursed Miguel II and said, "Keeper of my Heart, isn't this interesting! Why would Jesus Fuentes allow Miguel to regress the old lady when he suspected him of still being 'prejudiced'? Get that pamphlet over there and read the section on Purification again."

Mariana was right. I looked through the pamphlet and found the paragraph in question:

A Purified Individual has been guided by a licensed PR or SR through every stage of his present life, all the way back to Day One, thereby enervating all traumas. If your Purification has been Certified (PC) and you become triggered by an already processed crisis, you must contact your local Institute to get a Re-Purification at a reduced rate.

(Note to SRs: your mind and soul must be free and clear of all present life disturbances before you're cleared to perform Purifications. See your Sup. for detailed protocol).

"See the problem?" Mariana said, burping the baby. "Something was wrong from the beginning, and the silly Jesus Fuentes with the whiskers and retro-disco suspenders spread himself too thin. He was sloppy, my love. Nothing to do with your brother. No other possible explanation. Do us a favor and scan that paragraph for the scrapbook."

Institute of Psychic Regeneration

Sub.: Doña Adela Velazquez M., 63
Parental Approval (if minor): N/A
S. R.: Miguel Cueva C.
Sup.: Jesus Fuentes A.

6 May 1979

MCC: It's time to visit a *[sic]* incident of distress. What sounds you hear?

AVM: The nun bangs the gong. Girls screaming...spoons rattling on wood bowls.

MCC: Any smells?

AVM: Just the porridge of everyday. (Face tightens). No, Estela, no! She cut in front of me, I'm hungry. I was here first. (Bends over in pain). Ayyyyy!

MCC: What happened?

AVM: (Groans). Estela elbowed me in the gut. (Breathes). Real hard. (Frowns).

MCC: Tell me quickly, how old are you?

AVM: Ten.

MCC: No, how old are you in the here and now?

AVM: Oh. Sixty-three. (Relaxes).

MCC: Doing fine, Doña Adela. Now, let's go through the experience again, but this time you don't have to feel any pain. Step outside a the scene and watch the action. The trauma will wear itself out.

AVM: Okay. (Face tightens. Bends over. Struggles to breathe). Ay, ay, ay! (Begins to cry. Rubs eyes with curled fingers).

MCC: I want you to go back to the moment right before Estela hits you.

AVM: (Screaming): Who's Estela?!

Apparently we were somewhere else. I followed procedure totally and didn't force her back to the last scene.

MCC: Where are you now, Doña Adela?

AVM: Mamá's not here. (Sobs).

MCC: What's your name?

AVM: Ady.

MCC: Where are you now, Ady?

AVM: Hospital. (Whimpers. Nose runs).

MCC: What colors you see?

AVM: No, no, no...(Jumps up. Falls on knees. Says rosaries in Spanish).

MCC: What sounds you hear, Ady?

AVM: (In Spanish): Papi says...Jesu-Cristo's taking Indira...to Heaven. (Rises. Walks to far end of room, holding her arms out. Still crying). Indira...Indira...

I followed without crowding her but ready to stop her in case she decided to go out the door. I stayed cool. It was difficult to write standing up. She kept on speaking Spanish for the rest of the session, but that's okay.

MCC: Who's Indira?

AVM: Papi, please let me see her. (Whimpers). Tell the man in the nightgown to let me hold her! She's in there with the other babies, Papi!

MCC: Quickly, how old are you?

AVM: six, she's four.

MCC: No, how old are you in the here and now, Doña Adela?

AVM: Mamá's not here. The man in the nightgown took her...away!

MCC: Who's the president of the United States?

AVM: (Frowns. Screaming): Papi, no, no... what's that man doing? I don't want to go to Heaven too. (Hyperventilates. Stomps around. Blows nose in bare hand).

I couldn't stop my hands from shaking. I had to write the rest of the report later from memory. Her voice was hoarse from all the screaming. Whenever she looked at me, I felt like she wanted to accuse me of something. I couldn't see as many wrinkles on her face as normal –must have been all the crying.

MCC: What year is it?

AVM: (Stuttering): 1922. Indira! Indira!

MCC: No, what year is it in the here and now?

AVM: 1922, I told you. It's hot. (She stomped around some more and rocked back and forth. She saw someone else in my eyes. She threw herself at my feet and cried).

Papi, let me see her! (My Sup. should have been here by now. Or any Sup.) Indira!!!

MCC: I'm going to count a five, and when...

AVM: (Screaming): No, no, no!

She jumped up, and her old bones didn't slow her down one bit. We struggled. She bit my wrist. I remember her panting to the door, pushing it open. One of the glass panels shattered on the wall, and I just watched.

My brother had tried to tell us as much as he could that night in the basement. I will always remember our last conversation, even if he was distracted, listening for rumbling mufflers and

screeching tires out the window. Luis from 35th was keeping us all tense. My best girl Mariana had moved from comforting him to comforting me.

“Little Keeper,” said Miguel, “I need a go away again, keep the money a coming in.”

Obviously that wasn't the reason. Mariana and I have this theory that he felt responsible for what happened to Doña Adela. We didn't understand it at the time, but we've had years to get the story straight. For Miguel's sake, for his pride. The facts do point culpability, fairly conclusively, towards the mediocre Jesus Fuentes. He had no business laying a woman with sixty-three years of anguish on a teenager. He should have handled her himself. She was never seen out in the streets after the regression. Mamá says that they've kept her locked-up somewhere ever since. If that's true, she's already in her nineties. Luis from 35th wouldn't tell us anything about her, and Mariana doesn't think he'd actually kill Miguel –me, I'm not so sure. When he was looking for my brother –and he kept coming around the house for years– he'd say he wanted to take Miguel over to see his Grandma, to witness “the ordeal” he'd put the Velazquezes through. Miguel didn't want to face her, too much trauma would get triggered within him, things he couldn't change, things he couldn't fix. This wasn't about replacing a door, sanding it, polishing it, hanging it on its hinges airtight. Doña Adela would need much more than a tune-up or a fine grouting; she would need the kind of therapy no Secondary Regressionist could administer.

When Doña Adela had blustered out of my brother's regression anteroom in 1979, she was no longer a knee-scraping cleaning lady, or the proud grandmother of a favorite grandson. She was a six-year-old girl, who had just lost her baby sister in a rundown hospital in rural México. For her the year was 1922 and always would be. She ran down the hallway, the rubber soles on her shoes shrieking. When she got to the bathroom at the end of the hall, she bumped

her head on the doorframe and fell to her knees. Her arms went up, and she said in Spanish, “Jesu-Cristo, take me to Heaven, too.” After that, the bathroom door was slapped shut, the old lady inside.

Two PRs came out of their rooms to check out the disturbance –for Ady was in a fury, banging and screaming in the bathroom– but the absent Jesus Fuentes was not one of them. All my brother could do was catch his breath and nurse his bitten wrist. One of the PRs grimaced at him and swiftly went into his anteroom. He proceeded to the adjacent conference room to retrieve the meek Jesus Fuentes, who had been in the midst of a Primal Group Workshop. The only literature Mariana and I have found on the matter says that this is a highly specialized process, in which the facilitator becomes “psychically transparent in order to achieve complete empathic prowess.” But decoding that rubbish is not our concern. The PR gently guided Jesus Fuentes through the anteroom, as he would a blind man. Jesus Fuentes was drenched and suspenderless. His eyeballs were misty and white, irises rolled up deep inside his skull. Apparently he’d become so “empathic” that he’d regressed himself into one of his client’s nightmares. The PR whispered, “You’re Chief Primary Jesus Fuentes. The Institute needs you in the here and now.”

When the PR snapped his fingers, Jesus Fuentes was jerked to awareness, the irises returning to his eyes. The PR pushed Miguel out of the way, as they cleared the threshold of the anteroom, and they walked briskly down the hall to the bathroom. The Chief Primary repeated the mantra, “Jesus Fuentes, 1979.”