



The Fortunate Accident

"Down here, we all pan for gold in a sea of human misery."



Francine Rodriguez



Alberto is a charismatic and crafty immigrant who has developed a thriving business selling non-existent legal services to immigrants at exorbitant prices. He handpicks lawyers who are incompetent, unsuccessful or of questionable character to maintain his facade, as well as those who have become indebted to him for their survival. As the law closes in on him for his professional and personal misconduct, he orchestrates another desperate scheme to survive with fatal consequences.

The Fortunate Accident

by

Francine Rodriguez

Order the complete book from the publisher

[Booklocker.com](http://booklocker.com)

<http://booklocker.com/books/8088.html>

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.

YOUR FREE EXCERPT APPEARS BELOW. ENJOY!

The Fortunate Accident

Francine Rodriguez

Francine Rodriguez

Copyright © 2015 Francine Rodriguez

ISBN: 978-1-63490-437-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2015

First Edition

The Fortunate Accident

This story is dedicated to those who live, love, and struggle to stay afloat in the sea of human misery.

ONE

Wednesday-Radio Day

At precisely 7:15 A.M. he turned the key in the lock and pushed open the fifth floor office door. He carefully set down the two plastic shopping bags filled with rolls of toilet paper, a Kleenex dispenser, plastic bottles of shampoo and mouthwash, and rolled up white bath towels, all marked with the embroidered green "H" from the downtown Holiday Inn.

Stepping slowly, he felt his way along the wall, turning on the inner office lights as he moved forward. At the end of the corridor he stopped and turned into the last office. He moved carefully around the narrow snaking trail of empty floor space, his shopping bags touching the tops of the stacked green immigration files covering the grimy wall space, and lined up along the floor reaching to the desk. The files partially covered the window space by his desk, blocking a smoggy backdrop of glass and concrete buildings emerging dutifully from the wet gray haze as they did every morning in downtown Los Angeles

He pushed aside the moldy paper plates covered with dried food, the plastic cups still half full of fermenting mango juice, and the dried rolled tortillas clinging to the inside of dirty paper napkins like thin dried slabs of grayish glue.

Easing slowly onto the scarred metal chair facing the laminated wood desk, he reached into his pocket and closed his fist around a solid handful of folded checks and money orders obtained from the clients of the law office.

Methodically he straightened out each check, placing it carefully one on top of the other, and then arranging the money orders in a straight line next to them. Last came the bills, crumbled, torn, some washed; the denominations were arranged from low to high. Yesterday had been particularly profitable; there was at least \$4000 in cash that he wouldn't deposit in the office account. The girls could wait to get paid.

He tucked the \$4000 into his new yellow alligator billfold, a present from Yolanda, one of the new tenants in the building that he spent a night or two with some months ago. She was slim and coffee-colored, a little too dark for his taste, but okay with the lights out. He didn't plan to see her again even though she kept calling on the cell phone. The decision had been an easy one to make since after spending the night with her he'd coincidentally been served two days later with a second child support complaint from another woman he barely remembered.

That second demand for child support from the DA had killed some of his usual urge and made him decide to be more careful. He was actually surprised when he opened the letter from the DA because he'd paid that *puta* almost \$200 every month since the baby was born.

Of course Yolanda, so infatuated and eager to please, didn't seem the type to claim she was pregnant by him. Still you couldn't be too sure. They all eventually ended up on welfare and then started naming the fathers.

Anyway, he still had Lupe whenever he wanted. He'd just moved her into his house recently. Luckily he had also put her to work part time in the office. She waited patiently, night and day; anxious to fetch and carry, concerned with his every need. Stupid, the way he liked them, and willing to lean over and brush the overload from her low cut sweaters in the face of the male clients, making it even easier to talk them out of a few more dollars.

Lupe wanted to get pregnant by him. He was more than certain of that. Anyway, he figured if he could still do it; why not? She was fair-skinned, and this was his first and most important requirement.

Nearly all of his other women had children by him. He knew of at least fifteen, and he'd stuck around for some of them, for at least a little while. The women never seemed to understand that the children would never hold him for long. There were just too many new women out here eager to meet him.

He hesitated, then pulled several more bills from the stack and added them to his wallet. He needed as much as he could possibly take, and this business was better than a cash register with an open

drawer. He'd never worked at a real job, the kind where you got a check every two weeks for the same amount of money. Chump change, with no possibility of any extra money that you could get your hands on. That was for losers, like the ones who worked for him. If they had any sense they wouldn't need someone like him around.

As it stood, no matter how much cash he could get his hands on he could barely keep the child support payments straight, or the children themselves. There were the two from his last relationship that ended when their mother returned to Central America. They now stayed with his ex-long-time live-in girlfriend.

Hilda was some twenty years too old for his taste, slack-skinned, with a round defined stomach outlined by the clinging sheer nylon dresses she wore as a uniform in the laundry where she worked. He noticed the last time he saw her that she had the beginning of gray hair that frizzing around her plump face. She was the mother of four of his older children now in their twenties.

She was also the caretaker of his four younger ones, two, by a slender light skinned, somewhat serious woman, who had worked as a receptionist in a doctor's office. She was still one of his fondest memories and sometimes he thought he saw her face when he awoke late at night in some strange hotel room.

Her life ended a little after her twenty-fifth birthday when the owner's son killed her in a liquor store shooting. She was paying for a few bottles of his favorite beer which he planned to give to a client, while he waited in the car. The *Times* printed a small article in the paper and he cut it out and saved it for their children, but Lupe discovered it when she was going through his things and tore it up.

Then there were the remaining two younger children from *La Negrita* whom he had moved to Alabama, where rents were cheaper. He still paid her rent although he had never really been too sure what he was doing with her in the first place. She was still in love with him and she had taken in two more of his children conceived with another woman while he was living with her. The children's mother had run off somewhere. Nobody had heard from her in years.

The monthly checks went out somewhat irregularly to Alabama to carry those four, and *La Negrita* called with calculated and irritating frequency. The girls in the office knew enough to tell her that he wasn't in. She was always receptive to a good listener and more than willing to discuss his many faults and irresponsibility with whomever picked up the phone. She called regularly on the hour, beginning around the first of every month, although she usually stopped calling after the first week if he didn't answer her calls by mistake. She was smart enough to know that if he didn't send a child support payment by then there was no money left for anyone living far away in Alabama.

He squeezed some Windex onto a section of the sticky glass tabletop and wiped it off with a paper napkin. The snapshot framed under the glass was already beginning to fade in the florescent light, but it was still clear enough to show his dark grinning face, punctuated by two rows of perfect gleaming white teeth sitting with an outstretched arm circling Lupe. He admired the contrast, Lupe so thin and white, gazing up in complete awe. Such worship came at a high price, but he was sure he saw the envy in male faces. How could a man like himself, dark-skinned, short in stature, not so young, with an expanding belly that struggled to escape his too-tight beige polyester pants, have a woman like this one?

Lupe had lived with him now for several months, bringing in tow her two miserable kids whom he often thought about killing. He'd taken over the lease on the spacious house in the South Bay, not far from the beach, and moved in the big-screen television. She wanted new furniture, leather of course, and pink carpeting. Her two kids wanted the pool filled by summer, and she wanted a new tile job in the bathroom, something bright with purple in it. Thinking about the tile made him pause and he quickly skimmed two more of the money orders off of the top of the pile.

Cashing checks and money orders made out to someone else had never been a problem. All you needed to do was hand out a few dollars here and there to interested bank tellers and clerks at check cashing places. He sought them out carefully in the local banks that specialized in Latino business trade. They all knew him, welcoming

him eagerly on sight. Clearly he was a “*Don*,” an important man who wore a suit and tie and carried an alligator wallet stuffed with bills that he carelessly peeled away, and generously distributed with a flash of white teeth and a wink.

When a signature was needed, he gladly paid \$20.00 to any anonymous *mojado* to sign on the back. For \$20.00 extra they even provided a fingerprint. Of course that print didn’t match any other recorded print, and would never be traced to him. By the time the person who was actually supposed to receive the check discovered that it had already been cashed it was too late. On a good day he cashed out hundreds of dollars in checks made out to other people.

Still, in all, you could never have too much money he reflected. A couple of years ago he’d run into an old *compadre*, Miguel. Miguel had his own special operation back in the day. He brought hundreds of people across the border but not to work, to be drivers and passengers in the many auto accidents that were set up every day in Los Angeles. Miguel controlled the whole thing from selecting the vehicle occupants, to setting up the accidents, and then selling the passenger’s claims to an attorney for a hefty price. Alberto recalled how Miguel had explained it all very carefully to him, and he in turn explained it to Lupe.

The later effort was not because he wanted Lupe to have any insight into his business, but because he was certain that he could use her to make anything he did more lucrative. Of course there was a price, and a steep one at that should he want to begin this enterprise in today’s economy; each case would cost him nearly four thousand dollars up front for the occupants of the car. But eventually they would settle those cases and make that money back, plus more, Miguel had assured him a number of years ago that it worked perfectly. Still there should be a way to start this operation up and involve Lupe. Maybe he could use her to get some cases for free now if only she wasn’t so lazy.

It was almost seven thirty; time for the radio broadcast. Every Wednesday, without fail, he spoke on the morning Spanish-speaking variety show. They gave him a full twenty minutes for ten thousand a month and some extra favors. Twenty minutes to promote the law

office and any new reform in immigration law, or any other law that he could dream up for the week. His audience listened eagerly for those words of hope. How could they qualify to have the right forms filed; the ones that would make them legal here? All they needed was a few thousand dollars and the *Don* was gracious enough to allow them to make payments to him. Before he finished speaking they would begin calling the office. The girls would give them the office address and offer a few halting pointers to help find the office usually compromised by their ignorance of street names and directions in general.

The brave seekers would then navigate the five-story parking lot without understanding that they would later need fifteen dollars to exit, and follow the yellow painted line on the unwashed lobby floor to the mirrored elevator, whose glass was cracked in hundreds of pieces and scarred with carved initials.

They came to sit in hopeful anticipation on scraped metal folding chairs lining the tiny waiting room and spilling out to the hall corridor. Some sat for hours waiting for their *consulta*. He spoke with them all personally, in Spanish, the only language they knew, as they sat facing him across the desk. The *consulta* was his special talent and he still felt a giddy rush when he looked in their eyes shining with trust and respect.

He offered them “the way to stay here,” and watched as relief flooded their faces. There was no situation that could not be handled by his intervention, by a few words personally directed by him. There were no promises that he would not make.

He had a solution to keep them from being deported, to keep them from going to jail, to keep them from paying child support, or making their car payment, or being divorced by their spouse, whatever need they had, he had his hands on all of the buttons.

They were all so grateful, and in addition to money, they brought gifts of fruit, and home cooked food; *chile*, *carne asada*, *flan*, bags of husked corn and nuts. Many times they brought stolen jewelry or clothes. He was a gracious man and accepted it all.

Sometimes the clients were young woman, pretty, and broke, struggling alone with small children, but so wanting. He helped them

sure. There was a price, but not one that surprised or revolted them. He liked to think they were honored that someone like him, a man who spoke every week on the radio, would notice them above the others.

At precisely 7:30 the radio station called and he was announced over the airways. The announcer never actually said he was a lawyer. He wasn't; just a man whose education began and ended with most of the alphabet committed to memory, at the direction of a stinging leather strap, while he sat on the dirt floor of a rural schoolhouse in Mexico. Each day without fail the sun pierced the sheet metal rooftop of the small hastily erected building, and left the cross-legged children squatting on the dirt floor of the windowless room bathed in sweat, their stomachs gnawing and clenching by ten o'clock in the morning.

And yet here he was all these years later in Los Angeles. Cleaning parking lots and bathrooms was only a very faded memory. He had started simply, and at that time honestly, referring cases to lawyers in the buildings he cleaned; the referrals mostly being his criminal friends. The lawyers scrounging, as they were to pay the rent on their cheap offices, gratefully greased his palm with part of their retainer fee. Later he branched out, and began making deals with other lawyers even more down on their luck. He rented out his first office, and the lawyer that went with it, an aging alcoholic, who was more than eager to rent his license in exchange for a couple of thousand dollars automatically transferred to his bank account every month, while he slept till noon recovering from the previous night's bender.

Now he owned this office, and everything in it, including the new lawyer working for him, and the one he planned to hire. They were all hand-picked, chosen from the ranks of those with suspended licenses, and threadbare suits, battles lost to alcohol and drugs, lack of paying clients, endless alimony and child support payments and plain burn-out. None too bright, they were however greedy for the easy money that he paid them to use their license, and the way he saw it, remarkably lazy. Lazy enough not to care how he personated their names but concerned only with their weekly checks and

increasing the amount of time that they spent away from the office. He had managed this way for at least ten years now having passed through more than seven lawyers, now disbarred. He was on his eighth, with one newly hired. Just in case.

He spoke rapidly into the phone, clutching it to his ear, words firing into the receiver like a spray of machine gun bullets. Excitement and spittle punctuated each syllable. After five minutes his wrist ached, but he hung on, clutching the phone with large misshapen fingers partially covered with gold and diamond bands. The message had to get out and the phone's speaker system mystified him. Besides he could never remember how to turn it on without hanging up.

He was the first to bring them the news. There was a new law! Now everyone could apply for something called "Labor Certification." It was the easiest way to go, and your employer could sponsor you in the job that you now held! Your boss only had to sign a few papers and he could legalize your status while you worked for him; eventually you could become a citizen. In his deepest and most persuasive voice, he urged them to come today and bring a thousand dollars to start the paper work. The beeper sounded in his ear. Time to stop talking and start taking calls. He settled back loosening his belt, gulping mango juice in large swallows from a Styrofoam cup. They loved what they heard! Those calls were going to keep coming all day. At \$1000 a head, he would be able to furnish the house in the South Bay, and pay the back rent on the house in Alabama. The lights were going on throughout the office. The girls had arrived.

TWO

Lupe turned in front of the mirror one last time, arching her back and pointing the toe of her impossibly small foot, made thinner and even smaller by the five inch stiletto heel. Shoes! How she loved them. Alberto had bought her at least eight pairs just this month; shoes that came from the department stores in the mall where the prices started at two hundred dollars. No more *chanclas* from the *La Noventa y Nueve*. And then there were the clothes. He picked most of them and he favored red, gold, or black dresses tight, low cut, and short.

It was a pity about her legs. They were so thin and bowed. Alberto said they looked like chicken legs, but it was okay since he'd agreed to pay for the breast implants. They'd argued about those, just a little. But in fact they were his idea. Alberto wanted the largest size and had to be convinced that on Lupe's tiny hipless frame the larger ones appeared ready to topple over at any second, dragging Lupe with them. In the end they'd settled for a smaller size. Alberto was so proud of them, the first pair he had ever bought for anyone. He reminded her of this often, not telling her of course, (in an unusual gesture of kindness), that the others didn't need implants of any sort. It was a small price to pay he said. Lupe always nodded, not sure what he meant, but knowing that it made him happy and proud.

She locked the front door and stood on the porch for a moment, amazed at how much had happened in this short year. Now she lived in this fine house with a swimming pool that Alberto promised to fill this summer, on a clean street with trees, and "white people," who watered their lawns and walked their dog everyday just the way they did on those television shows that her kids watched.

It was so long ago now, but sometimes she remembered how it felt at thirteen when the boys started coming around. In those days she had been in it for a candy bar, and maybe a Pepsi if they were willing to spend the money on her afterward. When she looked back, she had come a long way.

Lupe started to climb into the Escalade, stopping as she remembered Chi Chi, still perched in her cage in the garage

suspended above the dryer. The bright blue and yellow Amazon parrot, belonging to Alberto, had an appointment at the veterinarian that morning. Unfortunately Alberto had instructed her to take her. The stupid bird actually got shots on a schedule! Something she had never even done for her children. Alberto loved that bird, but Lupe and Chi Chi had never reached an understanding. She knew the bird hated her, flapping its wings when she came near, shrieking and lunging in her direction, hoping for just one bite with its wicked curved beak. She made sure the cage was locked, taping the door shut with packing tape, before she slung the cage with deliberate carelessness into the back of the escalade. Lupe smiled as the bird squawked in pain or protest as he bounced against the bars of the metal cage.

If she had her way that bird would disappear one day. Her cage would open and she desperately hoped that somehow a large cat would appear and rip Chi Chi to bits. She had considered starving the bird, but Alberto fed him every day anyway and always made sure that the miserable creature had water.

The Escalade was hers to use whenever she wanted. Alberto had paid off the note from the dealer with money he had taken from the joint account he had with that hag he used to live with. That stupid bitch still had not discovered that the money was missing. This had all happened during the first week they met. He was so in love that he immediately moved her out of the tiny airless apartment that she'd shared with the father of her two children before he'd left.

She gladly left the graffiti covered stucco building with the broken boarded up windows, and the crumbling concrete stairs, where the front yard housed rusted auto frames leaning crazily propped up on cement blocks, long since retired from the roadway. The parking lot had served as a central gathering place for those selling and buying crack who were unable to navigate their trade in parts of town where English was spoken.

Lupe met Alberto at a WIC store where she helped the Korean owner translate baby food orders for the Spanish-speaking mothers. It wasn't a real job exactly. She'd never actually had one of those. The social worker insisted that she report to the WIC office and make

herself useful four days every week so that her food stamps and AFDC check would keep coming monthly. Her first child had been born before she turned fifteen and the second by the time she was almost sixteen. The children were unfortunately dark-skinned like their fathers, not being lucky enough to inherit her prized pallor that she carefully preserved just the way her mother had instructed, under thick layers of make-up, never exposed to sunlight. It was, she understood, the thing of value, which held her above almost all of the women she knew.

Lupe's mother had no room in her crowded apartment for Lupe who wasn't working at that time, since she was pregnant again with both fathers not paying child support. She was struggling herself to house and feed Lupe's six other brothers and sisters. Lupe was relegated to a small second floor single apartment down the street that she could share with another young mother with three children of her own, a cousin of her mother's best friend, who showed her how to answer the pages of questions in the welfare application.

Things were looking gloomy for sixteen year old Lupe, with one child one year old and the other fast on its way when her older brother, Jorge, one of the up and coming members of *Mara Trucha*, put enough fear into the father of her second child so that he agreed to marry her one hot August day, two months before her second child was born. They were married in the stamp-sized back yard of his grandfather's small frame house in East Los Angeles surrounded by dry weeds and oily car parts.

She was a beautiful bride; everyone said so. Her hair was colored the palest of blonde and scrunched in curls around her face, and her eyes were perfectly lined in stark black. Her dress was long and heavy, sticking to her pale clammy skin and stretched tight over her stomach, while the train dragged in the oil-stained driveway as she made her march down the path from the kitchen to the garage, and accepted the small bouquet of slightly wilted daises purchased from Rite Aid. Afterwards everyone ate *barbacoa* and danced. Lupe was more than a little relieved, her new husband, whom she knew only slightly, worked as a plumber's helper and earned almost thirteen dollars an hour. This in addition to the welfare payments

would make things very comfortable. Most importantly, he was a United States citizen and could petition for her green card.

Things however didn't work out that way. Lupe's husband slept with her a few times after the baby was born and then lost interest. He brought home just two paychecks, and then demanded most of the money back so he could go out and drink with his friends. Although she kept urging at her mother's request, he would never agree to fill out the immigration forms and help her get her green card. When the baby was two months old he stopped coming back to the apartment unless he was drunk and needed to sleep it off.

Then he stopped giving her money for the baby, telling her that she was "nothing but a whore." When he finally returned to take his clothes and move out Lupe, furious, grabbed the gray shirt that she had bought him for the wedding and ripped it across the back. He rewarded her with several swift punches that knocked her against the refrigerator and blackened both her eyes. Then he snatched up his few clothes packed in a trash bag and slammed the door. She hadn't heard from him since.

Lupe turned her Escalade into the wide driveway, bordered on each side with slightly wilted palm trees. The asphalt was fresh and still sticky, giving off an acrid rubbery smell. She yanked Chi Chi's cage from the rear of the truck and gave the door a vicious slam just to scare the hell out of that damn bird. She was duly rewarded, Chi Chi shrieked in both fear and pain, since part of her back tail feather remained caught in the doorframe where she had forcefully slammed the door. Good! She was glad. Alberto cared far too much for that bird. More she supposed than all of his children and his women, with the exception of herself.

With growing resentment, Lupe pulled her tight gold dress over her hips and strolled purposely across the parking lot toward the veterinarian hospital swinging the metal cage and enjoying Chi Chi's protesting shrieks. She swayed her hips from side to side, balancing precariously on the thinnest and highest of heels. She had once asked Alberto if she could wear flatter shoes. They had some very stylish ones these days. He wouldn't hear of it! Women who wore shoes like that were lesbians and not real women. Besides he wanted to be

proud of her. People noticed him when Lupe stood tall in her heels he always told her.

She crossed the parking lot, heading toward the animal hospital where Chi Chi had her appointment. Two doors down men loitered in groups in front of the hardware store, directly in front of the alley where the building supplies were sold. The men, she noticed looked sad. If she had known the word she would have called their sadness resignation. Their faces were dirty and they wore old worn mismatched clothes of undeterminable faded colors.

A few wore well-creased western hats. She noticed those right away. The men she knew who wore these hats were somehow stronger, and quieter than the rest. They never smiled or called out to her like the others, but she was sure they always realized her worth and were waiting to approach her when they could make it worth her while.

It was already ten o'clock and the sun beat down directly on the asphalt making the air smell acrid and sticky. Chances were that this group of men would not be selected by anyone looking for workers today. Those looking for day workers had come and gone. No work meant that the remaining men would go back to their airless single room apartments shared with others like themselves, and wait for tomorrow. No work that day meant that some of them wouldn't be able to eat tonight. Maybe if they were lucky, others who had worked would be willing to share a few miserable tortillas and some beans if they had them.

They had come to far these men; their spirits were still not stifled while looking for a better life. They would return again tomorrow and the day after, watching and waiting as vehicles cruised the parking lot, driving by slowly, looking for cheap help to dig holes, to paint walls, to tear away what no longer was useful and to haul and dump endless canisters of trash containing goods that had once represented worth and status. These men, and sometimes women, in their SUV's and their mini vans, drove slowly through the parking lot, appraising the group of men squatting in the shade of the outdoor display patio framed by hanging pots of geraniums. They considered and ultimately selected one or more of the men, the way they picked

their produce; “That one looked clean, and strong too.” “Do the lighter ones speak English?” “It would be helpful if they could understand me.”

Lupe reflected that these men were the unlucky ones; so far from home, with nothing and no one to count on. It was an accident of birth she decided that had made her a woman, and so beautiful; beautiful enough to stand out from the others. Beautiful enough for Alberto to notice and want.

Sometimes although she would never have admitted it to anyone; when she watched television giving her undivided attention to the young actors on the *novelas*, she thought about Alberto’s dark skin, and his sagging belly. She could see him chewing his tortillas with his mouth half open, stopping to burp loudly and swig his beer, and she remembered the way he sometimes cursed at her when she wasn’t able to persuade a male client to pay more money up front, no matter how she brushed her breasts in his face or touched his thigh with a lingering hand.

Alberto was angry then. He called her ‘*puta*,’ and other words that she did not care to remember. “For what do I have you around then?” He always demanded. “I’ll bring another one and replace you. Just you wait.” Lupe would blink back the tears, but she knew better than to answer him back. Alberto would not tolerate anyone talking back to him. Not anyone. Not ever.

Still and all, Alberto usually came around after he had stuffed a wad of bills and checks into his pocket, his mood softened then, and once again she was still the most beautiful woman in the world. He never apologized of course, just offered to buy her something, a necklace, a ring, or one of the designer purses that she so loved from one of the big department stores in the mall.

All and all, life was good, and one had to sacrifice one way or another. That’s what the older women always told her. She liked to think of it that way sometimes when he clutched at her, moaning his love. “All this was for her future,” even though she couldn’t honestly say she thought of her future very much. At least now she knew what she would be doing today and tomorrow, because Alberto always told her what he expected. Not like before when she made life up as

she went along. Lupe smiled to herself. Alberto didn't know yet, but she had already missed her period. Alberto would be so proud; proud enough to marry her she was certain.

She paused and waited for the line of automobiles entering the parking lot, several feet away from the corner where the men leaned against the display patio awning, clinging to the thin strip of shade provided by the canvas. Chi Chi had stopped shrieking. Was she dead? No. Her head was cocked to one side and he was listening intently. Someone was singing. Lupe followed the sound. It was a melody she did not recognize. Not a song from one of the Mexican radio stations that she listened to constantly. From the *Bandas* to the *Nortenas*, she knew them all.

It was almost like being in Mexico, although in reality she really couldn't remember much of Mexico, having left when she was eight years old. Still nobody could say that she had taken on the *gabacho* ways, careful to speak as little English as possible, keep her radio and television tuned only to the Spanish-speaking stations, and avoid associating with anyone who didn't want to speak only in Spanish. She had decided that her life was nearly the same as if she lived in Mexico. Of course that was before Alberto. Now it was still like Mexico, just with lots of money.

FIVE

The stooped gray-haired man wearing coveralls slung the last bundle of daily papers onto the curb, and slammed the trunk of his car shut, pausing to stare as the little man crossed the street carefully maneuvering his bicycle just slightly away from the other pedestrians.

If he felt the focus of eyes upon him Ignacio was determined not to notice. Over the years he had grown accustomed to being stared at not just by these people who spoke only English, and dressed in suits and carried briefcases to work every day, but by everybody else as well, including the other *mojados* who laughed and pointed at him openly.

He looked straight ahead and pretended not to see any of them. Father Cruz had promised him that they would all burn in Hell. He just had to keep waiting because someday he would get to look down from heaven and watch their ashes scatter and blow back in the streets where they always made him cry.

Ignacio peered out from beneath his football helmet and checked the street sign. Good it was the right corner. Now he could turn left and walk his bike up the back way into the garage of the building. Even though he went to the building six days a week, Ignacio could not always remember where to turn into the parking lot behind the garage. Sometimes he walked almost to Western Avenue before he remembered what the building looked like. The sudden remembrance was comforting and stopped his heart from pounding in his chest the way it always did when he realized he was lost. It had taken him nearly a year to memorize the route from the bus stop to the building. He knew which way to go when the bus driver helped him unload his bicycle from the Freeway Flier and point it west on Wilshire Boulevard. The problem was where to stop walking.

Today he remembered. Alberto would not yell at him. Ignacio cringed when Alberto swore at him, calling him *pinche puto*. It was almost as bad as the stares of the people in the street when he wanted to disappear inside his helmet. Ignacio pulled his bike into the corner of the garage and leaned it against the wall carefully lining it up with

the large *placa*, “MS 13” He could never remember what the letters were called, but he knew what they looked like, and it made it easier to find his bicycle as the sun began dropping in the early evening when Alberto told him to go home.

Ignacio carefully tucked his lunch pail under his right arm so nothing would spill, and quickly stroked the pink rabbit’s foot in his rear pocket. Socorro, when she remembered, packed two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, an apple and a bottle of water. If she didn’t remember it was a very long day, and there usually wasn’t anything to eat at home either.

Ignacio knew Socorro had learned how to make the sandwiches from her job at the “white girl’s school,” where she cleaned the bathrooms. He had ridden with her one day to pick up her check and sat waiting patiently in the car until she came back from the office with the familiar green envelope tucked into the front of her dress.

Slouched down in the front seat his eyes partially hidden by the plastic yellow football helmet he always wore, Ignacio had watched in amazement as a never ending parade of tall, slim, blonde girls with long shinning hair strolled by the car in twos, and threes, swinging their hips, and twirling their back packs, their long legs tanned, and sturdy, bare to mid-thigh.

They looked out at the world through dark designer sunglasses, and flicked their cigarettes in the wind, stopping to talk while they climbed into the driver seats of their late model cars.

He had never seen such a sight, and so he sat up straight in the seat and turned his head following each car pulling away from the curb with wide attentive eyes.

“Now what are you looking at?” Socorro slammed the door of the substantially battered Ford Fiesta twice to make sure it shut. She followed his eyes, and shook her head grinding the accelerator, and pounding down on the gas so that the car seemed to catch its breath and spring forward recalling how it used to accelerate when it was much newer.

“*Putas, todas.*” Socorro gestured with the middle finger extended at the backs of the goddesses as they pulled into traffic. “You don’t know how much I hate them. More than Juan even.”

Ignacio looked back surprised. Socorro still hated her ex-boyfriend, Juan, more than anything, even if she hadn't seen him in ten years.

"Why?" Ignacio was interested. He understood a few things about hate. Alberto hated the men who made him pay bills. Lupe said she hated it when her fingernails broke. Socorro hated her daughter because she had left her to raise Carlos and Omar alone since she went to jail.

Carlos and Omar hated other boys in different gangs. On occasion they found their way to the garage where Ignacio lived. They sat on his bed, wrinkling it, and saying dirty things about girls, knowing it made him feel terrible and turn red. Sometimes they threw the pillows on top of his head and punched him until his ears rang. They said they hated him because he was retarded.

Ignacio understood it was a bad thing to hate. Socorro told him anybody with any sense learned that in church and Ignacio had been to church before. He remembered mostly that the room was too warm and crowded and smelled like sweet flowers and sweat. People told him that they thought it was a good thing he was in the church because Jesus would help him heal and make him be able to think like other people. Ignacio remembered falling asleep somewhere in the beginning when the priest began to speak, and Socorro pinching his ears to wake him up.

"You idiot! You embarrass me!" She hissed in a loud whisper. "I take care of you, let you live with me, and you shame me like this!"

Socorro was upset now and Ignacio knew he better keep quiet, "Those girls, they're stupid and useless. Couldn't do any work if their lives depended on it. You should see how those filthy pigs leave the bathroom." Socorro clicked her tongue, thinking about the used condoms, cigarette butts, and other assorted trash she cleaned up from the bathroom floors.

Ignacio nodded in agreement but he kept thinking that the blonde girls were beautiful anyway, no matter what Socorro said. Besides, Ignacio couldn't understand why Socorro got so upset about their trash especially since she told him that they paid her to clean it up. Ignacio didn't mind picking up trash. He had sorted through trash

from the dump in Mexico when he was a little boy before they brought him here, so long ago, he couldn't remember exactly how it had happened.

The trash was a hiding place for all sorts of strange and shiny things. He filled his dirty plastic bag with the broken and discarded objects anxious for the adults to empty his bag and give their approval. Some of his finds even sold for a few centavos and so he learned to return every day.

"Move out of the way, you stupid idiot!" The car swerved, skidding to the opposite side of the garage. Ignacio's heart jolted and he remembered where he was, walking into the oncoming traffic lane in the garage. He tightened his football helmet, and jogged quickly to the other side. Socorro said it was a miracle he hadn't been killed yet by "*Los Chinos*," because he never paid attention to where he was going. The Asian driver in the car leaned toward him talking very fast and shaking his finger, his other hand holding a cell phone to his ear but Ignacio couldn't hear him because his window was rolled up.

Ignacio walked quickly toward the elevator, sidestepping the broken bottles, and paper wrappings littering the garage floor. The littered garage smelled like cat pee, just like the smell from Socorro's cat, Diablo, a large black refugee from the alley who shared Ignacio's bed in the garage. The trash made him angry. He wanted to sweep it up and clean the floor with ammonia the way he did at home, but Alberto said it wasn't allowed.

Ignacio remembered to straighten his sweat pants and brush off his clean white tee-shirt, laundered by Socorro, in exchange for cleaning the house and the yard, and turning over his wages every Friday. Socorro put the wages in "an account," so that Ignacio wouldn't be bothered with trying to figure out how to handle the money, and gave him back ten dollars a week to take the bus to work. Ignacio sometimes thought that this was just another one of the nice things that his aunt did for him, and he was sorry that he could never remember any of the important things that he needed to know, like his address, and phone number, and what street to turn on after he got off the bus.

Once in the building Ignacio stopped in front of the creaking elevator and studied the panel. He knew the numbers from one to ten by sight, but he was always relieved when he recognized the “3,” and quickly pushed the button before he forgot where he was supposed to go. The interior of the elevator was mirrored and dimly lit. Ignacio stared at the reflection of the squat little man with worn sweatpants tied at the waist wearing a battered white football helmet.

Sometimes he pretended he was someone else, somebody important, whom everybody admired. Today he didn't feel like pretending that he was someone else watching the reflection in the mirror. Today he already felt sad and tired. The days were growing shorter Socorro had told him. Summer was over. That meant that he would leave for work in the dark of early morning, and finally arrive home again in the dark, in time to feed his hamsters, eat a cold meal standing in the kitchen, and go back to the garage to sleep.

Another summer had passed in his life and Ignacio, as always, watched the people as they hurried through their days and the easy way they talked and laughed with each other. More than anything he wished he had a friend; someone to share stories about the office, and his hamsters, someone who could drive, and wanted to drive to the beach. Ignacio had not seen the beach since leaving Mexico. It was a long ride away by bus, and besides Socorro said he would get too confused, and most likely lost. The police would have to be called and he would get locked up. He didn't want that, did he? She had promised to take him one day in the car. Somehow that day never came, but he waited each summer.

The elevator door opened and Ignacio stepped out peering furtively at the other passengers. The last few months had been warm and the women wore soft light colored dresses and skirts, and sandals. Ignacio thought that this made some of them look so pretty.

For the most part though, the women getting off the elevator were large, pierced and tattooed. Many of them wore baggy trousers, sloppy oversize men's shirts, and basketball shoes. Their voices were loud and shrill. They shrieked at each other, and slapped hands. It seemed to Ignacio that they spent their day going up and down in the elevator, returning to the third floor with cups of coffee, bags of

potato chips, sodas, and warm greasy French fries in white paper plates.

He heard that they worked at a job where they called people all over the country on the telephone and tried to sell them new cell phones. Ignacio could not imagine that being anyone's job but Socorro had said that it was really someone's job.

Ignacio asked her for a cell phone once, but she said that he had no one to call except her. It was true. Besides what would happen when he lost the phone? She would make him pay her back, and he would never be able to save the money.

Still, Ignacio liked to look inside the display window on the third floor at the colored shiny rectangular boxes and imagine that one of them belonged to him.

After removing his helmet, he paused a minute as usual, and stared into the display case. The face looking back at him was wide and flat, the brown of his skin was no longer ruddy, and there was a faint yellow pallor where the color had subsided during the last several years spent under the glare of the florescent lights. Ignacio's eyes were close together and slightly squinty, making it appear that he was looking down at his squashed and flattened nose spread generously across his face, balanced oddly by thin slightly off-center lips that curved downward.

Ignacio's hair, when released from the confines of his helmet, lay sweaty and plastered across his large misshaped triangular head. The hair itself was a mixture of faded brown and dull gray, and hung in varying lengths.

At one time he remembered going to a real barber, sitting in a chair swathed by warm towels, and having his head sprayed with a sweet-smelling, tangy, stinging liquid that the barber said "conditioned and styled," his hair. After that Socorro said there was no money for haircuts. Ignacio solved the problem by cutting the hair that stuck out below his helmet by himself. He snipped doggedly with dull scissors, trying to keep the hair hidden. The result was off kilter, almost punkish, with strands of varying lengths hanging limply against his sweaty neck.

Ignacio preferred to wear the helmet except when sleeping. He'd begun wearing it more than ten years ago when Socorro explained that the reason he was so simple-minded was due to the fact that his mother's shawl had loosened when she crossed the river carrying him, and he had fallen in hitting his head on a large black rock.

"Don't let anything touch your head. It's too soft. Pretty soon your brains will turn to jelly and you won't be able to think at all," she reminded him several times daily when she saw him, and assuring that this was the most important reason not to go to a barber. It was more important than the fact that going to the barber was just wasting money anyway.

Ignacio considered the warning, and paid it high reverence. Never comfortable being touched, he held his head back in an arc when anyone stepped too close, grateful for the plastic that separated him from the leering faces, and dulling the sound of their laughter when they pointed at him.

Ignacio pulled open the office door carefully and peeked inside. He hoped as usual that Alberto hadn't arrived but the sound of the familiar voice made him stop and take another look back into the hall before stepping inside. It would be a long time before he could go home to feed his hamsters. Thinking about their soft fur made tears fill his eyes. He wiped them with the sleeve of his jacket, and closed the door behind him.

"You're late again. Did you forget where to get off?" Leticia stood up behind the large metal reception desk, and sprayed Windex on the back panel of the computer. Ignacio could see that she had polished the computer to a high glow, and cleaned the plastic flowers in the red vase that sat on top as well.

Ignacio ducked his head, feeling his face get hot. Leticia was speaking to him!

He shook his head, "No." and quickly stepped to her side to find his timecard carefully marked with his name in red ink. He was usually so proud of this card, lingering a little longer to look at his printed name before carefully placing the large thickly cut rectangular card into the machine and watching it print out the date

and the time. Today he moved as quickly as possible. Leticia was staring at his sweaty face, and his untidy sweatpants, stained with something he could not remember.

“Don’t you ever take a bath?”

Ignacio shook his head again, confused. He thought that he’d had a bath this week but he wasn’t really sure. Sometimes he just didn’t want to go inside the house for a few days, and waited until Socorro was asleep to eat whatever leftovers he could find in the refrigerator. When Socorro told him that they hadn’t seen him all week he remembered that he had not taken his bath during that time. Maybe it had had happened again.

Leticia pulled his timecard out of his hand with her thin white fingers. Ignacio could see the blue veins through her pale translucent paper skin that looked as if it were stretched to breaking. Leticia was going to have a baby, and her stomach jutted out far from her small frame making it impossible for her to sit at the front desk. Alberto was not the father. This much Ignacio was sure of, having heard all the discussions regularly for the last few months.

As it turned out, the baby’s father was either one of two men whom Leticia said had left her recently. “Alberto,” she said; “had left her more than a year ago for Lupe.” The same thing she said ruefully had happened with her other three children, but two of them were in something called foster care.

Ignacio snuck a quick look at Leticia from behind the greasy strands of hair that fell across his face. She was so beautiful! Her hair was colored a bright red, and she painted her eyebrows the same color. Her mouth was a bright scarlet slash when she smiled, but she was not smiling now.

“*Chuco*, even your timecard is dirty.” Leticia shook her head and sprayed some Windex in his direction. Ignacio coughed and wondered again how people became fathers and mothers. Socorro had laughed when he asked her and told him to watch the hamsters. He’d watched until he finally fell asleep but all they did was eat and poop. Ignacio figured he must have fallen asleep at the wrong time because Socorro said that they were having babies again too, and if she saw the babies she was going to drown the parents also. His eyes

filled at the thought and he knew he must try to catch the babies and hide them before Socorro saw them.

Leticia took out a small mirror, and stood it on the desk. Ignacio watched as she applied red color to her cheeks and drew circles around her eyes with a black pencil.

“Please put my timecard back. Okay, Please.”

Sometimes the girls here were just plain mean to him. They would lose his timecard, which meant that Albert wouldn't pay him or else they hid his lunch, or sometimes when he was careless, and forgot to put his rabbit's foot back in his pocket, they hid that too. That was the worst. Reliving the memory Ignacio fondled the small, hard sticky object in the back pocket of his sweatpants. It was still there. Socorro assured him that it was the “last remaining piece of Coco,” left over from the time long ago when Socorro without warning, had removed all of the rabbits, including Coco and her new babies, from under his bed in the garage. She had taken them to a friend who had cut them up for stew meat.

Ignacio cried all of that day, and most of the night. His fingers stretched out, reaching to feel their silky fur and twitching ears. He hid their plush stuffed toys, purchased from the Goodwill far back under the bed so that Socorro wouldn't get rid of them too. By the next morning he couldn't remember the rabbits very well, and it seemed that they had belonged to someone else, a long time ago. From time to time he dragged the stuffed toys out from under the bed. They still made him sad, but he couldn't really remember why.

Socorro had brought him the first two hamsters almost a year later, one Sunday evening when he sat alone in the garage, waiting for her visitors to leave the house. Socorro didn't like him to be in the house when she had company. She said that they were uncomfortable looking at him. Ignacio had questioned whether it was because he wasn't wearing his football helmet, and Socorro assured him that hit didn't matter at all what he was wearing or not wearing. So he sat there in the garage patiently, stomach growling, waiting to go into the kitchen, hopeful that some of their evening's meal still remained.

He must have fallen asleep because it was quite dark when Socorro came in. She woke him up and told him there was nothing left to eat, but she had something better. She told him that these little creatures could probably stay here forever since nobody had wanted to buy them at the swap meet and they didn't have enough meat on them to make butchering worthwhile. Ignacio had covered the hamsters with kisses clutching them tight against his dirty tee-shirt. Ignoring the warning not to squeeze them too hard, he had corralled them to his bed and slept deeply the way he had before the rabbits were taken away.

Now when he returned home every day, he ran straight to the garage to hold the small creatures, and feed them scraps from the kitchen. It was the best part of his day. Even though it made Socorro mad he hoped they would have a million babies. He would hide all of them, and nobody would find them!

"Here stupid." Leticia stuck the time card in his face, and he quickly returned it to the rack. Ignacio decided that he didn't like her anymore. She used to be nicer before she had that big stomach. Now she was almost as mean as Lupe who always told Alberto to send him out of the room when she was there. Lupe said that his ugly face would cause her future babies to be born deformed. Socorro had thrown back her head, swallowed her beer, and choked with laughter when he told her about Lupe's concern.

"You just tell her they'll come out looking like their fathers, and if she forgets who the father is, tell her to just step out on the street and stop the first man she sees."

Ignacio walked to the rear of the office and set his lunch on the back shelf, glancing quickly at Alberto. Alberto was yelling into the telephone, "I already paid you, you fucking moron. Don't call here again."

One of the other girls wearing a tight shiny yellow dress was patting Alberto's face with a tissue, and another was feeding him small bites of mango from a large red bowl, a job usually reserved for Lupe. Ignacio looked around and checked. Lupe was nowhere in sight.

Sighing Ignacio tied a dirty canvas apron around him, wrapping it twice, and began picking up the dirty plates and cups strewn across Alberto's credenza and stacked behind his chair. He carried these to the kitchen and then returned to collect the other dirty dishes that the girls left around the office.

Angie handed Ignacio two sticky cups ringed with sugared coffee that had hardened into a slack brown paste. Ignacio considered the cups carefully, tilting them from side to side to watch the thickened brown liquid ooze and spread. No matter what they told him Ignacio believed that magic must be the reason for the change in the left over drinks lying around the office.

"Did somebody cut your hair again?" Angie reached over and tugged at a few of the slick loose strands.

Ignacio pushed her hand away, tucked the strands quickly back into the collar of his shirt, and shook his head.

"I told you. Tell me the next time you want to cut it and I'll help you. You'll look more normal with a real haircut."

Ignacio nodded, his face growing flushed the way it did when one of the girls talked to him. When they looked at him too closely he felt embarrassed and ashamed. Now he moved quickly into the kitchen, bumping into *El Chino*, coming around the corner.

EIGHT

Promptly at nine o'clock Ivan opened the front door, straightened his tie, and stepped into the office. The waiting room was already filling up. People sat on all of the metal folding chairs and stood in a straggling line outside the door. Children either sat at their parent's feet or ran screaming through the narrow hall, slamming the bathroom door behind them trailing rolls of toilet paper as they ran. A few younger children sat chastised at their parent's feet looking longingly into the corridor, wishing they could get up and run too.

Leticia spotted him first and stood up quickly bumping the desk with her round belly. Ivan watched her eyes running up and down, appraising him. Leticia ushered him to a seat and yelled over her shoulder, "*Ignacio, café, por favor.*"

Ignacio came running carrying a cup of black coffee, a cup of milk, and a handful of sugar packets. Ivan stared up at the small hunched-over man in the stained sweatpants. His hair looked as if it had been chopped piece-by-piece, and plastered closely to his head where it peeked out of the strange-looking helmet he wore. He kept his head low and Ivan caught only a glimpse of the pitted skin on the left side of his face.

"*Pobrecito.*" Leticia shrugged her white shoulders set off by her strapless sheer dress and spread a napkin on top of her desk lining up the two cups in front of Ivan. Ivan reached forward for his cup of black coffee pushing aside the sugar and milk, and stared at her stomach, she was very pregnant. He took a few gulps and looked around at the crowded rooms stacked with files spilling out from the top of cabinets and leaning in piles against the walls.

Slowly the occupants of the office came forward passing in front of the front desk for a better look. He noted at least five other women all heavily made up, and dressed in short tight dresses with high spike heels. Two of the other women were also pregnant. Ivan stared at them, swallowing hard and abruptly turned away. He had never told anyone else before, but the sight of women with distended, drooping, bloated bellies and swollen breasts nauseated him. He tried to look away, but imagined he could see an engorged balloon shifting

within, pulsing with the flow of blood, swelling and contracting, and the pink tissue stretched thin, bursting forth with a bloody charge.

Hearing Ivan's voice, Alberto jumped up and waddled out from his front office. "Welcome. Welcome. Right on time." He patted Ivan fussily on his shoulder, and clapped his small hands together excitedly, as if Ivan were a long-lost relative. "Don't stand up. Yes, as a matter of fact, get up! Take your coffee, and let's go into my office."

Ivan stood up, and extended his hand but Alberto had already stepped back inside yelling over his shoulder, "Leticia, tell Ms. Paz to come in."

Ivan stepped gingerly into the crowded front office. Files lined the walls, stacked shoulder high in some spaces. Everywhere he looked there were file boxes filled with piles of folded letters and stacks of typewritten, addressed, envelopes.

Alberto followed Ivan's gaze. "Outgoing mail" he gestured proudly. "We thank all our new clients for choosing our office. Pretty soon you'll be famous."

"That many clients huh?" Ivan picked up one of the letters out of the nearest box, and unfolded it. The letter was written in Spanish. He ran his eyes down the page recalling the rudimentary Spanish that he barely remembered. Each of the letters concluded by demanding money. "Is this how you thank them?" he laughed.

Alberto chuckled. "Well if you want to know, we put them on a payment plan, a pretty low one. When they sign the retainer we tell them it's around \$100 per month. Then we send them the thank you letter just like this one. It tells them that if they don't send at least \$500 immediately we won't file any papers and they'll get in trouble with immigration. They're scared shitless, you know."

Ivan was surprised. "So do they send the money?"

"Of course, and then we send them another letter just like that one the next month, and the next. Works pretty well."

"What happens when you don't have any more papers to file?"

"Got that covered too." Alberto assured Ivan.

"I never file any papers till they pay everything." He studied Ivan's face. "Sometimes their balance just keeps growing." He

pointed at the boxes stacked on both sides of the wall. "I sure save on filing fees. Filing fees are as much as a thousand a head these days."

Ivan nodded again and took another sip of his coffee. The coffee was cooler than he liked.

"Warm up?" Alberto shifted his bulk, and yelled out the door. "*Ignacio, mas café.*"

The little man appeared in seconds and followed Alberto's pointed finger. His head and most of his face were hidden by the helmet, and the lank pieces of greasy hair stuck out of the sides. Ivan held his cup steady and watched the brown stream fill his cup. The little man never looked up. When he was done pouring, he turned and walked away, head still bent.

"Took him almost a year to learn how to make the coffee in that glass pot they use now. He can do it though." Alberto circled his thumb and forefinger to assure Ivan that this in fact was true.

"Where did you ever find him?" Ivan sat back, enjoying the show. What would happen next?

"Ignacio?" His aunt had him downtown selling candies, gum, stuff like that. He was real skinny not like now." Alberto sat up a little straighter in his chair. "I gave him an opportunity just like I do for all of them out there. Yes that's what I do. He loves me." Alberto assured Ivan. "So grateful you know."

"What's wrong with him exactly?" Ivan was surprised at his own curiosity. Other people's problems never drew his attention.

"He's a little slow. Kinda like a little kid. They said his mother dropped him down some stairs before he could walk. Could be drugs though. They said she liked to inhale that paint in spray cans. Maybe he did too when he was younger."

Ivan shook his head. "He looks retarded. He's no drug addict. What's with the helmet?"

"His aunt told him to keep it on to protect his head. He doesn't take it off much as I can tell." Alberto considered. "Tried to fix him up with one of my women. He's old enough. Older than he looks. He's not interested in woman. Scared I think. I'd have to pay to get him laid. Clean him up first too." Alberto patted the front of his too-

tight polyester vest, and wondered why they were talking about Ignacio.

“So now you’re here. Still want in?”

Ivan laughed. “Depends on the money. You told me you’d let me know what my salary was when I started. Here I am.”

Alberto picked up a sheet of white paper and tore it in half. Frowning, he scribbled a number on one of the halves and pushed it across the table toward Ivan.

Ivan cupped the paper studying it. \$48,000. A little over a lousy thousand a week. Nothing. Nothing at all. Even Ivan knew that lawyers just coming out of school didn’t work for that little. He swallowed and circled the scrap of paper with his thumb and forefinger. His face felt damp. It was time for a drink. He usually had one by this time of morning if he was awake.

“Why so little?”

Alberto sat back in the swivel chair, and regarded Ivan seriously. “How much are you making now?”

“Well, like I said the other day, I haven’t worked for a while.”

“Years.” Alberto answered, sitting up straighter as if he had recited the winning answer in some national competition.

“What?”

“It’s been years. I checked, and you got suspended straight away, right after you got your license. Four months the first time. Right?”

“That’s all taken care of now.” Ivan cut him off. “Anyway I just handled it badly. That’s all.”

“What was it? You took some money and didn’t do the work they paid you for. That was the first time. Second time you forgot to pay some client the money she had coming on her settlement. Right?”

“Like I said, I handled it badly. When they investigated it I mean. Now I’d know what to say. It could have been different” Ivan put down his coffee cup. He felt nauseated and dizzy. This guy had actually investigated him. He didn’t even look like he could read English or use a computer. What had gone wrong in his life? Why was he trying to explain himself to some stupid greaser so he could work for chump change? He could see Liz’s pained face watching him.

Counting on him.

“Look, Alberto said, pointing to the scrap of paper now wadded into a tiny ball, we start here, and see how it goes. If things go the way I like, you’ll make out too. I’ll cut you in for a little piece of everything. Four thousand a month is better than nothing. Am I right?”

Ivan felt his face burning, and he turned and stared out the window. Below on Wilshire Boulevard, a thin Asian man, his spiked hair streaked a bright metallic blue, dressed in ripped jeans, and a leather jacket, helped a tiny stick-like woman with a bandaged face into a wheel chair, and carefully pushed the chair toward an SUV parked at the curb. Ivan remembered that they had a plastic surgery clinic on the first floor. Liz’s dream was new breast implants, and a face-lift from Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills.

“So?” Alberto was beginning to get impatient.

Ivan turned back from the window. “When do I get an increase?”

Alberto laughed. “Let’s say in six months I’ll up it another five hundred.”

“How about another thousand?”

“Can’t do that and I don’t want to. All I have to do is run the ad again. All kinds of responses. Times are hard. Too many lawyers, but I like the way you look. Don’t forget there are other benefits I can offer.”

Ivan swung his chair around and picked up his coffee cup. It was uncomfortably chilled. “You said at over the phone that you don’t give health benefits.”

“I don’t. But there are other things you can have,” Alberto shrugged and gestured toward the open door. Mara wiggled past, her stomach heaving, and another woman in a short tight skirt hiked up to reveal pudgy white legs followed her. “After all they are all mine and you can have your choice. No problem.”

Ivan shook his head stunned. “Those are the benefits?”

“You’re complaining?” Alberto was incredulous.

“I really need health insurance. That’s what I call benefits.” Ivan struggled to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. This couldn’t be real.

These women looked worse than the hookers that worked Santa Monica Boulevard decades ago.

“Well maybe with the money you get on the side.” Alberto suggested. “There’s going to be plenty. Everybody knows me, and I help everybody. I’m more than happy to throw a little your way. Think about it like this, you’re free most of the time. Just a few appearances in court for me. Talk to a few clients once in a while just to make things look okay. Not bad for that kind of money.”

Alberto leaned forward, “I’ve got another guy, a *Chino* to do the real shit work. I’m not even putting the bank accounts in your name. Not yet.”

Ivan sat up when he heard “bank accounts”. Now there were possibilities coming to light. When you had bank accounts in your name anything was possible. He knew that to be a fact. “So you’re already planning to put bank accounts in my name?”

“Well yes. Eventually if you want, your name will be on everything. Just like it’s yours. All of this.” He swiveled in his chair pointing through the open door to the office. “I’m just like your manager but you’ll be the owner everybody knows. Advertising in your name; this office in your name. We’ll be good partners. I’ll lease you a car. What kind do you like?”

Ivan nodded slowly his mind reeling at the possibilities. He was the intelligent one in this partnership. To prove it all you had to do was look across the table. How long could it take to ease Alberto out once everything was in his name? He’d be an idiot not to take advantage of this.

“I need to think, to talk to my wife.” What a lie. Liz would kill him if he turned this down.

“Till tomorrow then. Stay put now. You can see your first client before you go.” Alberto was smug in his generosity. There were other tests for Ivan to pass. He rose slowly from the vinyl chair his pants sticking to his thighs, and carefully eased his bulk into a standing position. He snapped his fingers rapidly in the direction of the front desk. “Send in what’s her name, Ms. Paz?”

A small birdlike woman that Ivan guessed to be in her sixties, wearing a black frayed apron wrapped around her bent and boney

frame, and thin black knee socks that covered stick-like legs, also deeply bowed, was ushered in by yet another female in tight yellow pants, shiny red lips, and arched pencil-thin eyebrows.

The old woman's bright black eyes were lost in the folds of brown leathery skin stretched tight across her face. She smiled in excitement when she saw Alberto, her thick long gray braid swinging from side to side. "I heard you on the radio, but I never thought I'd see you."

Ivan stared. The woman was serious. She was watching Alberto as if he were a movie star miraculously dropped from the heavens to stand in her presence. "I always listen to you on the radio. You are such a smart lawyer." Her English was labored, but the message was clear. Ivan waited for Alberto to clarify that he wasn't a lawyer, but it didn't happen. With a great show of formality, Alberto gestured toward a chair, motioning the woman to sit down. He in turn, pulled his chair in closer toward her, turning his back to Ivan. The woman's eyes never left Alberto's face.

"So what is your problem?" Alberto inquired gently.

The woman lapsed into Spanish, and Ivan struggled to understand, his high school Spanish classes now just a vague memory. It seemed the woman had been working cleaning houses for more than twenty-five years using a phony Social Security number she had bought near the park downtown. She was sixty-seven years old, and wanted to stop working and collect her Social Security. People had told her that she wasn't eligible because the Social Security number she used wasn't any good. She was sure they were lying to her and there was a way to collect since she was the right age. Alberto was certain that there was a way also.

"You came to the right place." He assured her. After all this was the United States and everyone who worked here was entitled to Social Security. Alberto explained that she only needed to pay five thousand dollars, and he would file the right form to collect her money. It was really such a small sum to pay for the services he assured, especially since she would be making such a large recovery having worked all of these years. Ivan stared in shock. He was pretty sure that you couldn't charge someone up front to collect their Social

Security. Something to do with administrative law and statutory provisions. Besides this woman was not entitled to Social Security anyway, she was clearly illegal and had no number!

Alberto kept talking, staring intently at the stooped woman, and occasionally touching her bony knee. He called her "*Mi Reina*," "My Queen," and Ms. Paz ducked her head and blushed at the attention from this radio celebrity. She sat up straighter in the metal folding chair and pulled the faded black cloth apron modestly over her boney knees.

After a lengthy discourse by Alberto the final offer was made, the office would graciously extend their services. In exchange Ms. Paz would pay Alberto five thousand dollars, and he would file the necessary papers with the government to collect her Social Security earnings. The entire sum of five thousand dollars was required as a down payment.

The woman was shocked at the cost, and claimed she didn't have any money. She brought no money with her; the radio ad said the consultation was free. Alberto jumped up dramatically clutching his chest. He was hurt and insulted. Was he not a famous radio personality, and able to perform near miracles for his followers? Was this woman not privileged to be in his presence, and to be sitting inside this famous law office, a thing unheard of in the *rancho* where she was from?

Alberto wiped his eyes with the back of his hand turning ever so slightly to watch Ivan staring at both of them.

Ms. Paz stopped blushing and protesting. She twisted the corners of the black apron tighter, and looked past them out the window. Tears were beginning to pool in her eyes.

"Do you know what will happen if you don't collect your Social Security now" Ms. Paz shook her head, and lowered her eyes.

"They'll find out you're illegal and lock you up. That's what will happen. Your family will never see you again. Is that what you want? You would be a stupid woman not to avoid all that."

Ivan watched Ms. Paz begin to tremble. Her skinny shoulders sagged, and she crossed herself with her small square brown hands. She wished it was Sunday, her only day off, and she was sitting in

the third row of her church listening to Father Raymundo. The church was where you ended up after your sons died in gang shootings, or were spending the next twenty years in prison, and their father had grown tired of beating you.

Alberto was adamant. "If you don't trust me, go somewhere else. See how they treat you. Believe me, they won't have your best interest at heart. Not like I do." Alberto's martyred voice was testament to the pain she was causing.

Ivan waited. Any minute this Ms. Paz would get up and run for the door. She was old, not as old as his mother, but old and fragile just the same. He couldn't imagine his mother who still mall-shopped with enthusiasm in such a situation.

"Why are you saving your money? Your last years should be your best. Eat well. Buy yourself something. You can do that with Social Security."

Ms. Paz finally looked up from her lap. Her voice was low, every other syllable a sob. "I have only my savings in the bank in my daughter's name. Just four thousand dollars. That's all. It took years for us to save it. I wanted to leave it to my daughter. She works so hard, and she has those four kids by herself since Manuel left." Ms. Paz's voice trailed off as she wiped the tears that now ran freely.

"Four thousand?" Alberto questioned the words in disdain. "That's nothing compared to the money you'll be getting with your Social Security every month. Look, I'm giving you a break since you only have four thousand; I'll take that now, and you can pay me the rest in say two weeks."

Alberto folded his arms across his chest and stared at Ms. Paz intently.

The old woman shook her head. Her eyes were wide and fearful. "Will they really put me in jail?"

Alberto snorted at the idiocy of the question. "Of course it happens to all people who do not collect their Social Security benefits. The government will think there is something wrong. They'll come to your apartment in the middle of the night and take you away. Nobody will ever know where. You know they have these

prisons for people like you. Do you want to leave your family alone?”

Ms. Paz shook her head thinking of her four grandchildren huddled around the television in their small apartment on the fifth floor waiting for her to return on the bus and prepare them something to eat.

“It’s a good thing you came to me today. Imagine if you didn’t know what could happen to you!” Seeing her weakening, Alberto softened his tone. He picked up his phone with the faceplate missing and dialed the front desk. “Is Lupe here? Tell her to come in right now.”

Alberto turned back to Ms. Paz. “Which bank did you say you use?”

“Bank of America.” Her response was not more than a whisper.

“Now you said that both you and your daughter are on the account, right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s just wonderful!” Alberto was exuberant. “We won’t have to bother your daughter at all. Do you have the passbook?”

“It’s at home.” Ms. Paz looked slightly dazed at the turn of events.

“You don’t even have to tell your daughter. You can surprise her when you start to collect your money. How does that sound?”

Ms. Paz’s face contorted with worry. “My daughter will be really upset if she finds that I’ve used the money. When do you think I’ll get my Social Security?”

Alberto was controlled, his voice soothing. “Very soon *Mi Reina*. As soon as you pay this office I’ll be able to buy the forms from the government to fill out and then we’ll send them to collect your money. How does that sound?”

Ivan turned away from the woman who sat on the edge of her chair her small drab world teetering in Alberto’s hands. The weeks of her life measured out in long days spent on her knees scrubbing the floors of some white woman, and the evenings measured out in longer bus rides back across town to face a cracked plastic plate covered with a few spoons of beans and an extra rolled tortilla.

So this was how Alberto made his money. No need for the slightest ability to read or write. In less than ten minutes he had almost finished convincing this woman to turn over her measly savings. Five thousand dollars just like that! How many more were out there? Somehow it seemed more wrong than stealing from his parents. Why? Because she was a poor ignorant Mexican? Or because his parents were wealthy and you always stole from those who had more than you?

His stomach tightened. He should stop this lie; tell this woman that the whole thing was bullshit. She was never going to collect Social Security, not for five thousand dollars, not for any amount. Most likely she would end with a free ride back across the border and a threat of imprisonment if she ever returned.

Their eyes met for one moment, his narrowed and knowing, and hers streaming tears that ran into the deep wrinkles on the sides of her hollow cheeks. Ivan stood up quickly and walked over to the window.

An old Black man dressed in torn and filthy trousers and a stained and ripped tee-shirt, more hole than cloth, trudged slowly up the slight incline of Wilshire Boulevard. With some difficulty he pushed his loaded shopping cart filled with a jumbled blend of rags and bottles ahead of him.

His strides were slow and he stepped stiffly, stopping every few feet, leaning to the side to massage his lower leg. Tied to the side of the cart with a length of dirty rope was an old medium size dog of uncertain origin, his muzzle and ears mostly gray, and most of the fur was missing from his right side. Ivan watched as the dog walked along the side of the cart, his stride matching the old man. His coat had once been white, but what was left of the curly white fur was now black and matted. He too stepped stiffly; bravely facing whatever was ahead on the street, confident in his master, his back legs dragging.

Ivan looked from one to the other. They're both old and probably have arthritis he thought amused. The old man stopped and pulled the cart over to the side of the street by the building. He eased himself down on the cement blockade that kept the cars from driving too

close to the building and patted the space next to him. The dog dutifully sat down next to him watching expectantly; panting. The man reached into the lower rung of the shopping cart and pulled out a plastic bottle and a large cup covered in Dodger decals. Carefully he poured some of the liquid from the bottle into the large cup and drank deeply. Then he poured again and placed the cup on the ground gesturing for the dog to drink. The dog lapped up the contents of the cup and looked up again at the old man who poured some more. They sat together watching the traffic pass.

Occasionally the old man leaned into the seated dog and gestured in the direction of the pedestrians. Two friends sharing the single thought of one, as the bright sun burned off the smoggy morning haze. After a few minutes the man gestured at the dog, and they both rose slowly and painfully. The old man looked up toward the sky facing the inner office window. For a moment it seemed that he was looking directly at Ivan. His dark black face was tinged a reddish bronze from the sun and wind and his lips pulled tight over toothless gums.

He leaned down, patted the dog and then tied the thick length of rope around the dog's neck to the side of the shopping cart. Then slowly dragging their legs, the two ambled up the hill away from the side of the building, while pedestrians stepped downwind away from their march and the few Mexican housemaids waiting for the bus moved closer to curb.

Ivan turned back to the woman shaking his head. They really should have animal control round up any dogs walking along a main street like Wilshire, and why didn't they do something about moving the homeless away from the public where everybody could see them? That old man was a disgusting sight.

Alberto was still talking. "I'm going to do something really special just because I like you. My lady will be coming soon. She'll give you a ride to the bank in her new car, and she will bring you right back here, isn't that nice?"

Ms. Paz had stopped sniffing. She stood up awkwardly, and Ivan noticed that one of her legs was wrapped in elastic bandages. Whatever age she was she had suffered a lifetime, and knew how to

endure. But who would determine whose suffering was greater? Ivan looked down at his hands and pulled at a hangnail. She was used to suffering. It was her lot in life. Pious and defeated. People like her; so different from himself.

But then he considered, time had run out for him. Opportunities were not unfolding, not the way they had promised. By this time he should have made his mark. Somehow he'd pissed the last ten years away, and his pedigree meant absolutely nothing to anybody in this city. What was left? Liz's accusing eyes. He was a failure before he ever started, not even able to pay for his own liquor or a little coke now and then.

Ivan reached out, smiled deeply displaying his two prize dimples, and leaned toward Ms. Paz placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. He lowered his voice and looked directly into her eyes. Ms. Paz, "I'll be the attorney handling your case here, and I want to make sure that we get you everything you need. I can assure you this is the best choice for you. You'll come back and thank me when you receive your first check." He sat back and stared at her intensely.

Alberto's eyes widened at the sudden and unsolicited support. Maybe he had Ivan figured wrong. He translated rapidly into Spanish, not wanting to miss the moment. The effect was instantly received. Ms. Paz regarded Ivan's intense gaze with somber trust. This tall American man with gray eyes agreed with Alberto, his eyes never leaving her face. Her cheeks grew hot and she shook her head, "yes."

Ivan leaned over, and took both of her wrinkled hands in his own. The skeletal fingers so like the brittle bones of an old decimated animal. He hesitated, looked away, and brought the crooked fingers to his lips sealing the understanding as the inner office door creaked open.

"You're calling me?" Lupe stepped into the room, and leaned over Alberto's chair so that he could look comfortably down the front of her low-cut gold dress. Alberto immediately obliged by reaching around and cupping her skinny buttocks in one of his meaty brown hands. "My woman." He boasted to Ivan, "Lupe."

Lupe assessed Ivan carefully, running her eyes over his body, lowering her head when he looked back to meet her stare. She widened her red glistening mouth into a smile and thrust out her hip.

“Hello, You’re the new lawyer right? Alberto’s so jealous. He never told me you look good too.” She turned to Alberto. “How come Lover?” Alberto frowned at the question drawing the wrinkles together across his forehead and making his smallish eyes squint. Lupe straightened her body now draped across Alberto and stared at Ivan certain that she had interested him. She had, just not in the way she was accustomed to.

Ivan ran his eyes over the cheap low-cut dress, the spiked shoes, and the tattoo. Maybe if she scraped off some of that goop on her face she wouldn’t look so much like the low rent transvestites that frequented the only bars where he was still served in East Hollywood; the ones who purchased their polyester clothes exclusively from the outdoor swap meets.

He noticed that Lupe was thin and small boned, with unusually large and rounded fake boobs struggling for space in the cheap fabric of her dress. Ivan decided that when he got to know her better, he would tell her that she should lose the boobs and the make-up too. Then maybe she would just be plain-faced and fashionably skinny like all of the other whores he saw every day.

Alberto’s tone had grown impatient. “Get going now. Take Senora Paz to the bank, she needs to get some money for me. Then bring her right back. You’re driving the Escalade right?” He reached into the pocket of his beige pants stretched tight across his hips, and extracted several twenty-dollar bills.

“Don’t forget to put gas in the tank. By the way where have you been driving lately? I’m not covering my eyes for anyone; I know how much gas that truck uses, *Putá*. Don’t forget or you’ll be walking just like this *mujer estúpida*.” He pointed at Ms. Paz who looked bewildered at the exchange and Alberto’s sudden tone.

With a sweeping gesture, Alberto half pushed Senora Paz out of the office and Lupe followed still wiggling, but her head now slightly lowered from Alberto’s scolding.

Alberto turned back to Ivan. ‘Well that’s how it goes my man. Not harder than that. These are my people you know. So what do you think?’

Ivan shook his head not sure of how to answer. Now that Senora Paz had left the room it really didn’t seem that bad. Just a few tense moments and she had made her decision. He wondered if this was how you got started selling used cars. Nothing like the practice of law that his father believed held such high esteem, but then nobody was asking him to be a lawyer of any kind anyway. ‘So what happens when she doesn’t get to collect?’

‘Collect what?’ Alberto looked up distracted.

‘Her Social Security. That’s what she’s paying for. What happens when she doesn’t get it?’

‘Oh that.’ Alberto dismissed the question as nonsense. ‘There are no guarantees in life you know. I’ll explain it to her.’

Ivan couldn’t quite let it go. ‘Won’t she end up in trouble, through immigration or something for making that claim?’

‘What for? We’re not going to try and collect anything. She’s not entitled to any benefits you know. She’s illegal. She can’t get anything. You should know that.’

Ivan shook his head. ‘Yes I know that. I just wondered about later. Whatever.’ He shrugged.

‘Well then you should look a little happier my friend. We just made ourselves four thousand dollars, and it’s not even ten o’clock! Make yourself at home. The office across the hall is yours. Congratulations you passed the test.’

Ivan looked up for an explanation, but Alberto was already out the door on his way to the bank just like every morning.

Ivan wandered across the hall and set down his briefcase on top of the small faux-wood desk that looked as if it had survived a closeout sale at K-Mart. He pulled open the blinds and stared into the blinding sun. The desk held an older model computer and a broken printer. There were a few pieces of water-stained letterhead with the name of the former attorney at the top.

He eased himself carefully into a torn swivel chair with one arm missing and regarded the computer with some trepidation. Only

recently had he begun to use it, and only to view the Internet and send out a few resumes at Liz's instance. He'd never learned to type, and had no idea of his way around the keyboard. He dialed up the Internet. Then he took off his coat being careful to keep his arms at his sides to hide the two huge perspiration stains. He waited for the familiar ESPN icon, and then moved forward in his seat settling down. Free Internet. He could do this all day.



Alberto is a charismatic and crafty immigrant who has developed a thriving business selling non-existent legal services to immigrants at exorbitant prices. He handpicks lawyers who are incompetent, unsuccessful or of questionable character to maintain his facade, as well as those who have become indebted to him for their survival. As the law closes in on him for his professional and personal misconduct, he orchestrates another desperate scheme to survive with fatal consequences.

The Fortunate Accident

by

Francine Rodriguez

Order the complete book from the publisher

[Booklocker.com](http://booklocker.com)

<http://booklocker.com/books/8088.html>

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.

