



The Call of El Cadejos

PD Collar
Art: Luna Montero

From the Collection:

Costa Gothika



Jairo Escalante Sandoval could stand the barking no longer and tore the sheet off to storm from his bedroom down the staircase and out the front door and into the street. He kicked open the Herrera's gate and strode up to the chained animal that cowered at his approach. Ignoring the hopeful little wag of Sandino's miserable tail, he snatched the creature up from the ground and dug his thumbs into its throat and quivered with rage,

his knuckles white, as the neighbors' beloved pet convulsed violently before him until gradually stilling under death's sudden embrace, his fury yet unsated. He would never get back to sleep now and wanted only to be able to kill Sandino all over again, perhaps a bit more violently this time.

"Jairo, that's enough!" his mother stamped her foot just inside the threshold of his bedroom. "Get out of bed this instant!"

He jerked awake to a terrible taste in his mouth, his sheet moist with sweat, the still air stuffy and hot. The light around the curtains had the feel of early afternoon to it. He sat up and rubbed his eyes and stared at his mother. She pursed her lips and turned on her heel to stamp down the hallway and staircase. He listened to the sounds of her footsteps fading across the granite-tiled foyer to the kitchen, where she held court.

The sting of the cold shower washed away his dream, and despite his best effort could not for the life of him remember coming home, or anything at all for that matter beyond the serenade at the Cinco Esquinas police station by his merry band of raging drunks. The only song they all knew other than Christmas carols was the national anthem, and a few cops came out of the *Delegación* to join in for the last two verses. He brushed his teeth and paired Calvin Klein jeans with a Polo button-down and Dockers with argyle socks. Hugh Boss said 12:30, so he had an hour and a half before his Conflicting Values class, which unlike most of his other courses that semester, he nearly always attended. He retrieved his billfold from yesterday's crumpled jeans to find he had blown through fifty thousand *colones* last night. He was down to vapors in his bank account and would need to butter Mom up pretty thick to monetize tonight's extra-curriculars.

He had a last-look in the mirror, trying on his best mom-vanquishing smile, and took the steps of the grand staircase two at a time and skipped across the immaculate foray to plant himself on the padded stool and rest his forearms on marble bar as she slid him a steaming cup of *iodo* and pushed the sugar bowl just forcefully enough to reveal the passive aggression to which she was under stress sometimes prone. Magda, prim in her little black and white uniform, closed the dishwasher and retreated with a prim nod to Jairo to another part of the house to give her Mistress the privacy she needed to dress her son down for his snowballing miscreancy.

"Mmm," he sniffed appreciatively, taking a cautious sip. He peaked up from the rim of the cup to gage the degree of his mother's pique. She had avoided his eyes so far, but when he caught her examining him reproachfully, she did not look away, and he shrugged his shoulders a bit and sure enough her glare softened.

"With Sandino barking like that," he explained, "I just couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned all night long!"

"What all night? You dragged in an hour short of dawn, and the Herreras are gone for the week to Guanacaste, and they took the dog with them!"

It had been a great relief to discover that he had not actually strangled the poor creature in real life, but he was pretty sure about the barking. It was not a dream, the barking part, though the dream part had also seemed very real at the time. Not just barking, but also the sound of the animal's chain as it walked the length of the dog run, back and forth. Still, now that he thought about it, the Herreras did not chain Sandino, and there was no dog run on their grounds.

"Really?" he shrugged at length. "I dreamt I could not sleep, but I was sure that the barking was real. Dreams, these days . . ."

"Jairo, baby, what are we going to do with you?" Her eyes swelled. "Mami, what do you mean by that? Why would you do anything with me?"

"You just can't go on like this, Cupcake" she said softly. "Last night it was four in the morning when you dragged yourself home. You don't remember because you were blind drunk. Two nights last week you did not come home at all; not once in the past month have you stumbled home before midnight."

"Oh mother," he smiled. "Look at me; I'm fine. Of course I remember coming home last night! Why I even remember seeing it was four o'clock! And is it so bad if I sometimes spend the night elsewhere? After all," he grinned. "It's your fault I'm so handsome. I can't be expected to resist all the overtures I get, can I, Ma?"

"Hm," she sneered. "Next you will turn up with a venereal disease. We'll have to send you to a doctor across town to evade the shame!"

"Oh no, mother," he chuckled. "I am un-persuadable by anything but stunning babes from the top strata of this nation's uppermost crust. You wait and see. Your grandchildren will be cabinet ministers, pop stars, and titans of industry."

"At the rate you are going there will be no grandchildren, Jairo. You have a problem, baby, a real problem, and you have to face it down. You have to!"

It was not a problem, though Jairo was not up to the challenge of convincing Mom of this. He preferred less intimate lines of conversation, frankly, but it couldn't always be just about him . . . Lying so easily to his mother came with its pang of regret, but they were noble lies, all right and proper. He had awakened one of her mornings, after all, on a sidewalk in Barrio Mexico, his pockets picked clean, the other morning on a bench at the Morazán rotunda to the prodding of a policeman's nightstick and the taste of vomit. How could he possibly do right by confessing such misadventures to his own mother? Some lies were simply mandatory, anything less an incursion on basic human decency and act, surely, of filial betrayal. It was not her fault or the old man's that they were not attuned to the method to his madness; far be it for him to punish them with the truth that what he did was not incidental but choices that he made consciously. Not only did he recognize the consequences of those choices but indeed reveled in them. It was not something you could explain to people that cared about you.

"How you get up every day so chipper and nonchalant is beyond me," she continued. "God made hangovers to punish and instruct the drunken. But He seems to not deem you worthy of such reproach. I often wonder why that is!"

"Obviously, Mother, I don't have hangovers because I drink only in moderation and responsibly," he grinned.

"Oh my foot, you have become a common drunk, baby. Your car is littered with empty bottles, and in case you think we are oblivious, your father and I know that you do not attend your classes. You spend your time drinking and carousing instead. We are on pins and needles waiting for news any moment of your expulsion from university or worse . . ."

For most students there was indeed an empirical relation between class attendance and academic success. But Jairo was an outlier. He was on solid footing and knew it when he replied. "Straight A's, Mom, a B once in a blue moon; you know it's true. Is that the measure of a common drunk? Or of poor attendance for that matter?"

"Your father had your car driven off this morning," she changed the subject. "And had it placed in storage. You're going to wreck in a drunken stupor and kill some innocent—yourself as well—and we will no longer abide. You'd better hurry up if you're going to make it on time for your three o'clock."

"What? He's taken *Selina* from me? How am I to get back and forth to school? How am I to live without a car?"

"Many people do," she said. "You can take buses."

"Well," he slurped his joe. "I appreciate you looking out for me. I know you worry. So, all I can reasonably do is you and Pops in your decision; it was surely a tough call. Tough but fair."

The least he could do was throw a fit, but her son appeared resigned to not make this any easier. He was, after all, 24 years old, a grown man, and it was hardly their right to take back from him the car freely given last year, a car in his own name. Technically, that was theft.

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“But buses, Ma? Must I take buses all the way to San Pedro and back?”

“Well, taxis may not be out of the question . . . but the point is you must change your behavior and take control of your life.”

“Mami,” he said softly, after thinking this over, “would you and the *tata* prefer I get my own place so you don’t have to worry so much?”

“Your father wonders why you have not done so already.”

“Well, I have considered it,” he said. “But it would not make much sense for me. Think about it; you know. If I were to move out who would wash my clothes and keep my room clean? With no one to cook for me I would surely grow tired of eating out all the time. Mother,” he glanced down mischievously into his no-longer steaming cup. “I might have to learn how to make coffee for myself, even . . .”

Finally she conceded the chuckle he needed for the next act.

“I will if you want me to,” he faced up to his duty. “But it’s really very comfortable here, and it would be difficult on my own as a young man starting out to replicate this. Just trying would surely cost you and Pops an arm and a leg in capital and operations. But here there’s no rent, power bill, no capital investment for furnishings and accents, no need for a new *doméstica*. Those things would add up, Ma, you know they would. If you look at it my staying home with you and Pa is an act of sacrificial responsibility on my part.” He looked up doe-eyed and did his shoulder-shrug thing. “You know how I am with money.”

“Jairito, sweetheart,” she leaned into the bar across from him to take his hands in hers. “I would give twice that, ten times as much, to have the old you back. But it is not one of those things that money can buy. Only you can make it happen, Cupcake. Until you do I would rather suffer your demons here than have you endure them alone somewhere else.” She squeezed his hands and retreated with his empty cup to the sink.

“So what do I gotta do to get the car back?” “You’ll have to talk with your father about that.”

“Mom, I gotta run, but I’m flat broke. Can you do a wayward son a straight and slip him a few *rojos*, a little advance on my allowance?”

She did not rejoin the allowance lecture and suppressed a grimace to fish out two tens from her fetched up purse.

“Twenty *rojos*, Mami?” He winced. “Taxis these days don’t come cheap.” He melted in smiling adoration at the production of a third puma and hopped up and skipped around the bar to kiss his mom. “Thanks, Mami, you’re the very Rock of Gibraltar!”

Thirty *mil* in his pocket anaesthetized well the wound of Selina’s impoundment. He slipped into the back seat and coursed down the Calle 128 descent to the city beneath delightful breezes washing in from the window over him. He lapsed quickly into the REM that eluded him last night. No dogs or dragging chains here, and he captained a boat on the open Pacific Ocean, rising and descending through crests and troughs as he

gripped the wheel and watched the anchored constancy of the curvilinear horizon. He woke refreshed and vibrant as the cab pulled up on the Humanities Building of the UCR campus and paid the driver the 3500 marked on the *maría* and a five-*teja* tip for good measure. Yes, he thought, bounding up the stair steps two minutes shy of the bell, no new parking adventure racing in his head: this whole car thing had an upside alright!

Doctor Martínez's lecture on Karl Jung's psychiatric apotheosis to Sigmund Freud was pedestrian, not her best by far, but certainly worth Jairo's effort to attend. Jairo was sure Freud had changed his name as a young man from Fraud to further his social designs. Indeed the Great Doctor's writing reflected through his casual dissection of the motives of his Viennese high-society patients a stunning un- unawareness of self. How self-congratulatory he must have felt in the early days, all hopped up on cocaine hydrochloride, his new miracle cure for everything. Why, Charles Bukowski was a better psychologist than Sigmund Freud, and Bukowski was just an itinerant poet! Jung, on the other hand: Jairo was not as dismissive of the pretension in the title of his opus as he felt impelled to be. What was a soul, after all? And what, for that matter, was modern man? Still it was true; we were all in search, even good ole Jairo. That said, Doctora Sultría Martínez Ortiz, licensed in humanities, was about his mother's age and dripped erotic suggestion through that sensual and permissive Argentinian accent and the looseness of her gesticulations at the podium, and he sat a woody for a spell, imagining all that Jungian enthusiasm through the smoky prism of a dimly-lit left-bank *budoir*, absolutely certain that beneath her clothes she was assuredly naked. And in that intellectual digression Jairo was forced to concede that perhaps the stuffy Doctor Freud may have had a glimmer of a clue about some of it, after all, though it took a man like DH Lawrence to actually paint the full picture in all its chromatic glory.

Despite a ravenous hankering for a *chifrijo*, Jairo trundled promptly over to the Math building at the class's conclusion and conferred with Hugh Boss to find himself a few minutes early. The normally taciturn and scowling Doctor Detérmino Velásquez was preternaturally cheerful at Jairo's entry and had the make-up test readied on the corner of his desk and pushed it with a single finger in Jairo's direction and motioned toward the table in the near-side of his office.

"Did you remember to bring your pencil, Señor Escalante," he beamed through his muddy Venezuelan accent.

"Oh yes sir; I sure did, sir, though thank you for thinking of me. Sometimes the little things they trip me up. But you already know that."

"Bigger fish to fry, Escalante, in your modest universe?"

"I try to not judge, sir. And I'm conflicted over the relativity of magnitude and merit both. All things, I think, have orbs of greatness. Comparison tends toward a dangerous temptation, wouldn't you agree, Sir? One best avoided lest it segue into tendency?"

"I could not agree more," the Professor smiled. "So have at it then. I'll give you ninety minutes."

Jairo liked that in Mathematics there was no subjectivity involved, at least beneath the theoretical level. An answer was either right or wrong. Perhaps in wrong-ness lay subjective degrees of measure. But there was no such thing with right-ness. Nothing surpassed perfection, and when he turned in the paper after a half hour, he was pretty confident.

"Given up, Escalante? Should I just give you a big fat F without even taking a look?"

"You probably oughtta at least give it a look, Sir; I might have gotten one or two right. And thanks, again, for the chance to make up the test. Won't happen again, Sir, skipping a test of yours like that again. I am so sorry about that; just one of those things . . ."

Jairo was pre-law, and after much jumping around majors in the past few years was within a year of a double major in history and political science. Differential Equations was an elective course rarely chosen by his curricular peers. His academic advisor heaped scorn on this choice as a vanity that could never help him in his chosen field and possible evidence of a tragic flaw in Escalante's very fiber, of a lurking megalomania that could spell his ruin. Perhaps, but Jairo had aced Cal I, II and III before changing the chemical engineering major to a field more attuned to his ambition. So Pepe Figueres had been a hydroelectric engineer; he had arrived at his pinnacle in history through revolution as much as political persuasion and family ties. Jairo fancied himself as a crucible of change from the inside rather than the out and lived in a time where the humanities and liberal arts were required, engineering and science for the technocrats of his Cabinet. But since he had, after all, muscled through those 13 credits of calculus foreplay, he'd be damned if he was not going to reward himself with Differential Equations. It was, after all, the calculus money shot!

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His professional diligences disposed, Jairo found his hunger chemicals overpowered by his chemical ones and stepped loosely into the magnificent twilight tones to buy two *pachas* of *guaro* at the closest *licorera* and drink the first in two fiery draughts on the sidewalk outside. He pocketed the other and in a new wrinkle to his pattern walked to Mall San Pedro to let the *pacha* catch up with him in the cool dusk. There he would hail a cab to his little Barrio Mexico dive.

Beyond intelligence, good looks, and people skills, Jairo Escalante Sandoval was in possession of another quality that others generally did not have that distinguished him in an important way in the community of men and women. A self-realization he kept private, our hero had the unusual metabolic capacity to oxidize alcohol completely. The intermediate aldehyde and ketone metabolites that cause hangovers in others did not build up in him. When Jairo first became aware of this it was clear that this was a

strength—a superpower nearly—something that other people did not have that he must learn to use to his advantage. But lately it was made clear it was a weakness. Though immune to hangovers, he was not immune to drunkenness nor the friendly fire of the lifestyle's consequences. As a young man comfortable being born to greatness and the expectations steeped in him, drunkenness was simply not a compatible quality, and he knew that he must end this fling, however lovely and fulminating it was to indulge. It was not yet time to have that talk with himself, though, and he was engaged at this stage of the debate mostly with the bargaining over the biggest boundary of them all, the fact that he liked it.

Because the truth of it was this—and he felt the paperback copy of tonight's reading, *Candide*, wedged between his designer jeans and the small of his back—the booze transported him to a magical place where his native powers and talent multiplied tenfold. It was simply a great and important place to be, no matter what the many nay-sayers would be expected to opine. *Notes from Underground* was next on his list, and after working through de Sade's *Justine* and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, how low could Dostoevsky's minor tome lay him? He always had his thumb-worn copy of *Don Quixote* handy in his daypack just in case, and even in moments of blackest literary revelation by one of the dark masters could immediately retreat to Sancho Pansa's fantabulous "island" for instant comedic reprieve, an antivenin to toxic seriousness. It was simply indisputable, all that notwithstanding, that drinking massive amounts of hard liquor was critically important to his comprehensive development, a fundamental rite of passage. Yet howsoever critical and vital it truly was, he would never convince anyone of the truth of it, and it wasn't even worth trying. It was a thing to go alone. And that's where Jairo Escalante Sandoval found himself at that particular life's juncture.

Mildly buzzed he admired the phalanx of taxis and sat to watch people as the greying tones of twilight darkened to night. From a cab came an Elvis, that song with the quixotic title. . . In that movie from his childhood, it was sung by the Raichos Brothers. *Unchained Melody*! That was it. Old Patrick and Demi finally get to see each other through death's great divide for a last good-bye scene as the ghost goes to heaven, red-eyed black demons calling sinners home, the diva on to a messy personal life in the public lens. Jairo wiped away a tear from the moment's fulminating wholeness and pulled out his book to read several chapters as his target cab inched forward in the queue, his wormhole out of this joint, eighteen remaining *rojos* burning a hole in his pocket. He tipped the driver a *mil* and was light and breezy when he bellied up to the bar.

He pulled out Voltaire. "A usual, Bolívar," he said, beginning tonight's reading in earnest.

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"Jairo, Papi," when you gonna spread the wealth a bit," teased Jimena, gussied up in fish nets, a tiny mini and see-through halter. He put his book down and stood to kiss her

on the cheek and smile broadly. "Hey good looking," he winked. "How you been doing? I haven't seen you in a few nights. Hey so introduce me to your friend."

"This is Josie; she's from Limón." Jimena grabbed him by the belt buckle and pulled him over to a booth, where Jairo shook Josie's unusually large hand, laughing as she replied "the pleasure is all mine" in a deep baritone and winked.

"Bolívar," he jabbed the air with his finger to wave at the table's emptiness, "a couple *cubas* for the ladies and a usual for me."

"A little slow in Amón tonight?" Jairo turned to make small talk.

"Same old same old," she sighed. "I cut out early tonight to come over with my home-girl to check out the end of the *Clásico*."

The crowd was lively, the flat screen large and the center of everyone's attention but Jairo's. He looked up and saw from the screen that there was a ball game on in the second half, the score tied, 1-1. No wonder it had been so loud in here tonight! "Into football?" he managed.

"Josie was a striker for Limon FC," Jimenez gushed.

"*La Tromba del Caribe*," Jairo replied, liking the way it rolled off his tongue. "You are a professional athlete?"

"Oh hush now, *Mami*," she chided Jimena; "quit telling my little secrets."

"So who's going to win," Jairo jerked his thumb at the screen. "Should I have any money on this game?" "The Liga, of course," she harrumphed. "How could it be any other way?"

"When pigs fly," declaimed Jimena, just as the bar erupted in building suspense as a play broke quickly open, the ball advancing down an open field. "Sapriisa all the way!" Just as she said it the crowd erupted and the broadcaster launched into the requisite peal of "Gooooooooooooooooooooool."

"See," Jimena said. "Told you so!"

"The Liga is just sucking them in," Josie dismissed the new lead, "priming their over-confidence." She turned to Jairo to lay her hand on Candida. "Nonsense bullshit all of it," she said, tapping its cover around a swallow of her *cubalibre*.

"Towering nevertheless," Jairo countered, channeling his foil of choice to fence with this creature. "One of the 100 greatest works of Western literature."

"What kind of person reads towering works of Western literature in a seedy Barrio Mexico bar on a late week-day night, Señor Escalante? You're not some kind of intellectual are you? A Communist agitator, perhaps? An anarchist even?"

"Around the old man," Jairo allowed. "It makes him apoplectic when I go on about Old Vlad. It's often fun to get him worked up. Lenin, of course, not the Impaler . . ."

"Funny," Josie replied; "I had you more in the Trotsky camp."

"Don Jairo is better than an anarchist," Jimena broke into the conversation's duopoly, casting a sidelong glance at her street-savvy high-society pal. "Better even than a biological androgyne," she regaled her tranny gal pal. "He's a celibate. Imagine that! Aren't you Jairito, baby?"

Jairo took a long pull from his pocket rocket and washed it down from the fresh double-Johnny-on-the-rocks as Josie cocked her head to cipher this intelligence.

"It is not enough to be celibate to not have sex with other people," she declaimed. "It's not?" Jimena turned credulously. "What do you gotta do?"

"You must also not have sex with yourself," Jonie said. "That is the measure of a textbook celibate. Otherwise you are more likely probably an onanist." Josie looked at Jairo to find the truth of it. "So what are you, Don Jairo, a true celibate or more of an onanist?"

"Surely you must at least masturbate," Jimena turned to him. "It is only natural."

"Only to fantasies of you," Jairo replied gamely, "though after tonight surely Josie will invade my erotic imaginarium as well."

Jonie clucked her doubt, and Jimena pushed the nickel bag across the table. "You're starting to slur your words, Don Jairo." She winked. "You might oughtta step up your game a bit."

She was right. He waved up another round and pushed a *tucán* across the table and repaired to the men's room.

The cacophony settled inside the dirty stall and stilled altogether when he pulled open the plastic to unmask an absolute silence around him that at first Jairo did not even notice. It was not a drug that melded natively with his particular chemistry, but at this stage of drunkenness was one that gave him the staying power that he needed to get to the tipping point with the drug that *did* meld natively with his chemistry. Without it he would pretty soon just pass out, but with just a little blow, just this little *punta*, he could easily knock back another *pacha*, maybe two, and hit what Graham Greene called "his measure," of which every man was in unique possession and which in Jairo's case was enough to render an average similarly built man comatose.

Sitting on the pot after sniffing the drug off the ignition key that no longer started his beloved *Selina*, he started at the sound of a dragging chain. He looked up to see it came from the small window, hinged and frosted, high on the grimy wall of the toilet stall. *That is the sound*, he told himself, his heart racing, *of a chain being dragged along the sidewalk. . . Why would they drag a chain at night along the sidewalk?*

He shuddered at the chill that passed through him. Behind the chain there was no sound whatsoever, the raucous noise from the bar stilled to silence, and he deduced this to be physically impossible. He listened harder to capture some sound, some indication that he was alive and not dreaming again, and the sound of the dragged chain came back from the direction it had gone and stopped outside his wall, supplanted with the low growl of a mean dog. He flushed the toilet for good measure and opened the stall door to the sound of the bar returned as thundering reggaeton pushed the end of the ball game out of the air, the après-match party now underway, the right team having clearly won. He pushed out of the bathroom and in the throbbing hallway felt in his gut's quivering vibration the chain being pulled across the sidewalk outside that he could no longer hear. The girls were gone, their *roqueros* drained, the table now occupied by a new group waiting on a waitress, and Hugh Boss said he had lost forty five minutes or so, a shame since he was having such a splendid time in this clean, well-lighted place that was neither clean nor well-lighted. "Javier," he called out. "Another!" He pulled out *Don Quixote* and read the haunted inn section and laughed out loud for a good half hour as many patrons looked over to vicariously appraise the spectacle of a silly drunken kid in the full throes of hilarity.

The truth, if you want to know it, was that Candide and Justine were twin strands of a rope tied into a perfect Gordian knot in which the hero and heroine were each more natively suited to the other's narrative, and he imagined Justine paying the world back by throwing her cherished virtue out the window to throw Candide down on a bale of hay to let her hair down for once and sit on his face. *Bullshit, all of it*, Josie had judged, and he wondered if she meant that Voltaire's irony was bullshit or if she misunderstood the satire and had read the text at face value or whether "pure bullshit" was just a stock line anytime any book came into view to serve as a foil for the essential small talk demanded by the nuances of her trade.

The tail-lights outside the door in the street were impossibly close to one another, and Jairo imagined that it must be some super compact, like those tiny new electric cars that had begun to appear around town. But when they moved while watching him he realized that they were not taillights on a car but the red eyes of a beast that apparently only he saw, that was there in the street looking into the bar at him only because he was here in the bar looking out at it. Whatever it was, this nemesis was out there in the *Chepe* night and not fully of this world, no longer being coy in its overtures, and glared in on Jairo from beneath the saloon-style swinging doors.

Jairo waved up a usual *zarpe* and dissolved the apparition in time-tested fiction and delighted in Velasquez's consternation grading his way through the ten problems and

solutions and what about poor Sandino and last night's epochal apocryphal dream? It wasn't that he killed the cute little helpless creature, the neurotic pet of neighbors that did not qualify to raise pets of any kind, far less progeny, and it wasn't that he had strangled the loveable mutt viciously and craved nothing more at the dream's climax than to do it all over again. That was dark enough but still not all the way to the deep end of the pool. The scary part was that in his dream he was enraged. Whatever his faults were, sleeping in, entitlement, irresponsibility, dissipation, his people skills were considerable, and this came in part from an even keel in which rage was notable only in its complete absence in the core of his being. He was wild, admittedly, a crazy, danger-seeking extremely serious drunk, but he was not angry, much less mean. Yet dreams were ignored at your own peril—poor Sandino—and he looked up to find the beast's red eyes gone, replaced with light pedestrian late-night traffic, an occasional passing car, and he began the bargaining with himself about the night's ending. He was down to twelve *mil*, and figured his tab alone to be somewhere north of twenty-five.

"So," Jairo leaned across the bar into Bolívar's confidence, "I seem to have exceeded my wallet's reserves tonight. Any chance I can run a tab and pay you tomorrow?"

"For you, Don Jairo," the bartender replied, "no problem whatsoever."

Bolívar served him up a usual on the house and Jairo saw in a flash something he had surely seen before but never fully recognized, probably because it was a false equivalence. Of course he would pay his tab; his honor depended upon it. But Bolívar didn't know that, and in Bolívar's uncertainty he had no choice but to be magnanimous, lest his patron settle on another bar tomorrow in lieu of coughing up dough for the party already had. All his dad's pals and his dad himself carried lines of credit; that was just a part of being wealthy. But perhaps there was an undertone to that and not simply a convenience. He stepped onto the sidewalk and walked through the windmill section and burst out laughing as the jousting was joined. Jairo made a beeline for the next bar a block away across the street.

He needed to hold five *rojos* for the ride home. The afternoon's meter clocked 3500 *colones*, but in the night you learned to budget for its particular exigencies, always and by their very nature more costly than the diurnal equivalent. One thing was for damned sure: he was not going to awaken tomorrow on a park bench or sidewalk somewhere. Whatever dreams might intrude, he was better off sleeping in his own bed than anywhere else and was set out to make sure that would be a likely outcome of tonight's continuing adventures. He declined the overtures of the hookers and bought a half liter of Passport scotch that brought him down to his five thousand reserve and took a nice long pull before stepping out again into the night.

It would be nice to walk in the cool vibrant night. But that was risky. This was after all Barrio Mexico after midnight, with half of San Jose's outlaws and thugs probably within a radius of five It would not be smart to disappoint a committed and strung-out stick-up guy with a miserable five *rojos*; that was for sure. People were shot and stabbed and

stomped to death for lots less in this world, and when a taxi flashed its headlights at him he waved it over and hopped into the back seat.

“Escazú, if you would be so kind,” he told the driver, taking a long pull on the bottle. “Be sure to put on the *maria* as I am on a budget here.”

“Of course,” the driver replied gruffly. “It’s the law; what do you think I’m going to roll you?”

“No, no, not at all, so sorry,” Jairo backpedaled. “Just trying to be responsible, my error, no offense, cousin. Promise.” The car turned south and the urbanity progressed in tenor. They turned west onto Paseo Colon and past the Mercedes building and the upscale old-style homes and all the fast-food joints decently closed at this hour and the boulevard’s kitsch. The street was empty and Hugh Boss said 1:30, and he had another drink, proud that he would be home before two in the morning, something for the parental units to chatter hopefully about in the morning . . .

As they came up on *Banco Nacional*, the driver threw on the brakes and cursed loudly. Jairo felt two bumps and held his breath at the gruesome sound of bones breaking and flesh being crushed.

“Street dogs,” grimaced the driver. “They got no one to chain them up. Look how it ends for them.”

“Let me out,” Jairo said. “How much do I owe you?”

There was still a good third of the bottle left, and he stumbled across the boulevard and chatted up the night guard at the bank and put away the bottle with its final good swallow for his pillow’s swan’s song. He leaned against the chain that closed off the parking after hours.

“My taxi just hit a dog,” Jairo confided. “Killed him.” “Why didn’t you have him stop immediately?”

“I did.”

“You got out right there,” the guard said. “I saw you.” The man was Nica, his muddled diction clipped with that country’s phonetic stridency.

“Yeah,” Jairo agreed. “That’s right.” “Ain’t no dead dog I see.”

And there weren’t in fact any dead dogs to be seen on the roadway, not even a wet spot where a dead dog may have lain up before dragging itself off to die elsewhere. Despite being one of the city’s main intersections, it was very late and few cars passed, and in the quiet envelope between cars as Jairo passed the time with the guard the only sound that intruded was that of a chain dragged along the sidewalk. He was loath to comment

about the awful sound from the trepidation that the man might not hear it at all, that it might be a sound peculiar to Jairo's ears alone, but at last he could contain his curiosity no longer and stepped onto the new bridge whose hypothetical existence did not mean it had to be crossed right then.

"Do you hear that?" Jairo thrust the right side of his head up into the night air to simulate listening. "Hear what?" the guard replied.

The drunken well-mannered young man replied "nothing, nothing at all," and withdrew to the sidewalk to hail a passing cab and disappear into the night. The guard, newly alone, mulled the hypothetically run-over dog and the sounds he could not hear and the curious consequences of working the night shift.

*

"You thought you were rid of me, Jairo Escalante."

Impossibly in the back seat of the cab sat his ex-fiancée, Marielos Ybarrez Estremada, and she gloated at his captive deliverance into her taloned clutches. Wasn't it she, he recalled, that had ridded herself of him and not the other way around?

"Mari, baby," he managed awkwardly, "What a delightful surprise! Why the sunglasses?"

"Look what I have," she whispered, whipping out a liter of Patron tequila. She cracked the seal and twisted the top off and took a long drink and handed it to him. "*Salud*," she smiled.

"But you don't drink," he frowned at her, taking the bottle.

"You were right," she admitted. "I was childish to let this come between us. Clearly it is a vital avenue toward the greatness to which you were born. Drink."

He took a sip. "I'm not that crazy about tequila," he owned up. Seriously Marielos, what's up with the sunglasses?"

She took them off to reveal blazing red eyes and lifted her eyebrows to mewl up a little growl. "Driver, pull over and let me out!"

That turned out to be a bad idea but a lot less bad than staying in the cab with red-eyed Marielos. He planted a couple *rojos* in the driver's palm and stepped onto the dark sidewalk of an abandoned stretch of the southern boundary of Sabana Park that stretched in front and behind him blackly as far as he could see. The motor's retreat was echoed by growls that rose from the trees and bushes where hundreds of pairs of red eyes appeared to glare at him through the underbrush, the symphonic pitch of their growls an orchestration of menace and rising hatred.

It was all in his mind of course. He laughed into the din and goaded the wild pack of red-eyed demons to come out and give him their best shot. But they cowed before him and eased back into the dark, stilling their growls, their blazing eyes vanishing until he was left alone in the pleasant breeze beneath a half moon, nothing but the sound of the wind that whipped through the boughs and a chain dragging along the sidewalk behind him.

He whorled and the chain stopped making noise, and he stood face to face with a giant black dog that sniffed the air a meter away and glared at him through red eyes and kept a low rumbling growl rolling forth. "You're not there," Jairo wagged his finger at the creature.

It growled at him.

"You're in here," he tapped his temple. "So fuck you!" He moved forward to kick the creature but hesitated at the lip-curved snarl this evoked from the now crouching beast that readied itself to pounce.

"Nice doggy," Jairo mumbled, conjuring up a whistle, offering his outstretched palm.

The creature stood and inched its giant head forward, the chain sounding in tinkles of solitary links set in motions by the creature's gradual overcoming of caution, and sniffed Jairo's hand and sat down on the sidewalk to glare at him and growl.

"Okay," Jairo relented. "You win." He turned on his heels and began walking west, waiting for the blow of the beast's paws against his back to knock him to the ground, the smell of its fetid breath as it wrapped its slobbering maw around his throat. Instead it was the sound of chains behind him that he heard, the growl now lower, almost incidental, and he looked back to see that, sure enough, the apparition was following him a few steps back and stopped whenever he stopped.

"I have a new pet," he exclaimed to the night. "This is my lucky day!"

He turned to the animal. "What shall I call you? You're not exactly a Rin Tin Tin or a Lassie, that's for sure. "Cujo?"

The creature stopped and growled louder and curled its lip a bit into a newly building snarl.

Jairo fished out the bottle for the final swallow and the animal charged him and pawed at the ground and curled its lip back nearly to its scalp to reveal long sharp teeth through its most blood-curling snarl yet.

"You don't like this," Jairo realized, offering the animal the bottle. "Okay," he tossed the bottle into the bushes. "We'll do it your way."

Jairo turned and picked up his pace. He was so blindly drunk that there was no way he would remember all this in the morning, and this was some shit that he could not afford to forget. It was four-fifteen by the time he made it to the gate, sweating heavily and practically sober, his new buddy walking alongside him the entire way, waking whole neighborhoods in their passage from the noise of the awful chain. But the thing quit growling once he tossed the bottle and stayed pretty well-behaved the long walk home. The animal stopped short of the *cul de sac* entrance and sat on the corner, leaving the last 75 meters to Jairo alone. Inside the house he felt a twinge of regret and missed his new friend but decided against returning to the street to encourage him into the yard to spend the night. Mom would surely approve.

Laying down after showering as he began to yawn beneath the ceiling fan that tonight he remembered to turn on, he remembered the taxi driver.

“Street dogs,” he had said, “They got no one to chain them up. Look how it ends for them.”