

SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA

SIGNAL TO NOISE



'A magically manifold Mexican mix tape of a novel – Signal to Noise will stay lodged in your brain and haunt you for days afterwards like the best kind of tune.'

Lavie Tidhar, award winning author of *Osama* and *A Man Lies Dreaming*

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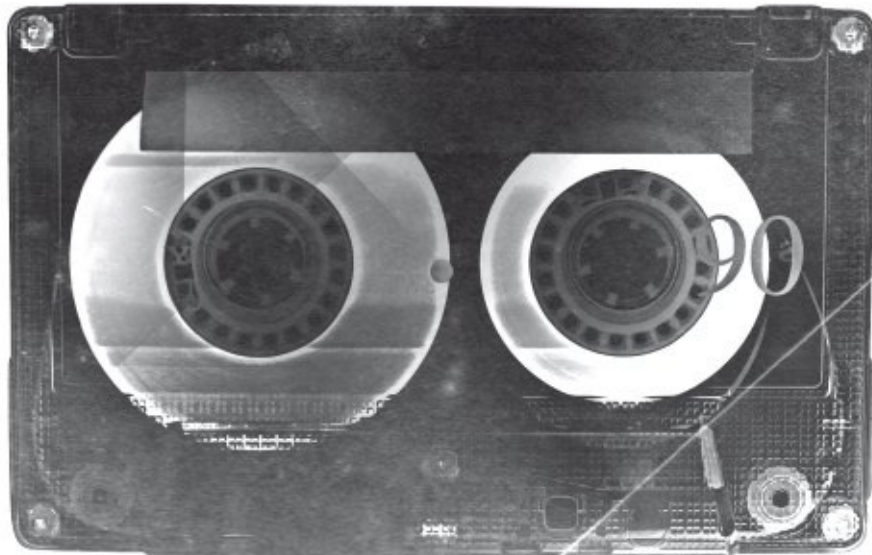
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SIGNAL TO NOISE



Mexico City, 2009

MECHE FOLDED THE magazine and finally decided to look out the window. The Federal District lay below, a great beast with no beginning and no end, towers and buildings rising and dotting the valley. The roads were twisted snakes criss-crossing its surface, the cars tiny ants racing to their anthill. Twenty million people all gathered together—smashed against each other in the subway, crammed into the buses—with the Angel of Independence saluting them from above its pedestal.

It was eighteen years since she'd seen the city. Twenty since she'd last seen her father.

Now he was dead.

He had been pickling his liver for three decades and smoking since he turned twelve, but she'd thought him immortal.

Meche rubbed the bridge of her nose.

She didn't even have a black dress. She knew her dad would have said to wear whatever the hell she wanted: dead is dead. But her mother would expect black. The whole nine days of mourning. The food they'd feed the guests. The nightly prayers.

If it had been up to Meche she would have cremated him and tossed his ashes in the Gulf of California, like he wanted. But her mother had insisted on the casket, the funeral, the prayers to follow.

She collected her bags and pulled the luggage, trying to find the familiar face among the sea of strangers.

"Meche!"

Her cousin Jimena stepped forward, giving her a big hug and a kiss on each cheek. Jimena's hair was dyed a fake-looking red. She wore a lot more makeup than Meche remembered. Jimena's lipstick was so dark it looked purple and Meche could feel the greasy traces of it on her face.

"Girl, how was your trip?"

"Alright," Meche said, rubbing off the smudges of lipstick with her hand. "I thought my mom was picking me up."

"She's too busy. Your dad didn't make any arrangements."

"Ah."

That sounded like him. Inconsiderate until the end. He was probably chuckling from beyond the grave thinking of how, even in death, he could screw everyone over. Because that was her father.

Jimena's car was very small and there were plush toys sitting on the back seat of it. A Garfield was stuck on a window, grinning. It had been there since the 80s.

Jimena turned the key and the car sputtered into life. Meche could not see a CD player. Just the old cassette deck.

"I heard you're working with computers now," Jimena said. "Do you build them?"

Her cousin switched on the radio and ear-cringing pop music filled the car. Clearly Jimena's taste had not improved with time.

"I do software programming."

"Well, you sure had the brains for it. We were all drinking beer on the weekends and you were doing your math homework. You were such a nerd."

"I remember."

"Do you make much money? You must if you can fly your mom over to Oslo for Christmas every year."

“The benefits of being a nerd,” Meche said with a shrug.

“Do you remember what you used to wear? Oh, my God. I remember that dress you had on at Tita’s party.”

“I remember you were hot,” Meche shot back.

Jimena did not seem to catch the pointed use of the past tense and smiled, very proud of herself.

“Yes. Absolutely. Hey, do you remember...”

Meche looked at the little kid juggling balls while the traffic light glowed red. The yellow and red balls flew up and down in the air. He took a bow, then walked by the cars, cap in hand. Meche rolled down the window and gave him a bill.

Jimena frowned.

“You shouldn’t do that,” Jimena told her.

“What?”

“Give money to the street kids.”

She shouldn’t be in Mexico City either, breathing the sticky, grey air of the city and filling her lungs with pollution, but she was.

Jimena took out a pack of cigarettes, pulled one out and lit it.

Meche disliked smoke and smokers. They reminded her of her father. It had never mattered that he made his living through his voice and that cigarettes could—would—one day ruin it. He never quit. He chain-smoked and he even did it inside the radio studio, even though it was forbidden.

“Do you want one?”

“No,” Meche said sternly. She rolled the window down.

It wasn’t any better with the window rolled down, but it was a symbolic gesture. She pulled out her music player and picked a playlist, pressing the earbuds into place.

“I’m going to close my eyes,” she told Jimena.

She did and pumped the volume up, listening to Nina Simone. Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood. The Animals covered it and Santa Esmeralda made it famous, but Nina sang it like it was nobody’s business. Powerful blues and a voice that just punched you in the gut.

She let Nina sing to her, watching the city fly by. The old neighbourhood began revealing itself. Buildings had come down. The pharmacy had been replaced by condos. The bakery was gone, in its place a bank. The park seemed intact, still shitty and desolate, with its concrete benches and its sad trees. The teenagers used to make out there, by the bushes, but not Meche.

The cantina remained and she turned her head to stare at the men standing by the entrance, almost expecting her father to be there, waving back to her after drinking a dozen *reposados*.

Jimena touched her shoulder and Meche took out the earbuds.

“I said you’ll never believe who I saw the other day.”

Meche did not know and frankly did not care, but she understood she should bite her tongue and try to be congenial.

“Who?” she asked.

“Okay. Tall. Dark hair. He used to play with you when you were a kid.”

“I have no idea.”

“You’re not even trying!”

Meche was not in the mood for trying. The drawers of her memory were shut tight, and with good reason. She had hated the neighbourhood and everyone living in it. If she’d had a can of gasoline when she was about fifteen, she would have organized the biggest bonfire and laughed like Nero while it burned.

She had promised herself nothing would drag her back to that ugly web of streets and peeling paint, stray dogs and factory workers leaning against the walls of the corner store, back to the circle of hell

from which she had escaped.

“I’ll give you another clue,” Jimena said. ~~“He used to draw on his shoes with markers.”~~

Meche had grown to become a person of a certain composure. Things took place inside her head and heart, but she did not let people take a peek, preferring to show them only the smallest ripples of herself. Jimena’s words, however, had the capacity to make her forget about her cool exterior and she turned her head whip-quick, staring at Jimena with wide eyes.

“Sebastian?”

“That’s the one,” Jimena said chuckling.

“I figured he moved.”

God, she didn’t want to see him again. If he was living with his mother she would probably run into him.

“He did. But his mom’s been sick and he’s come back; been looking over her.”

“She still lives in the area?”

“Same apartment.”

Three blocks from Meche. Past the *tortilleria*. Fourth floor. Blue curtains with sunflowers. Knock three times. That was the code.

“He has a fancy car. He got hot,” Jimena said.

Meche laughed.

“No, really. He was such a dweeb. Who would have thought?”

He had never been ugly, but Jimena wouldn’t have noticed back then. His skin had been too dark, his hair too black, for Jimena to fancy him. Like all the girls in the neighbourhood, Meche included, Jimena would have gone for the blond, hazel-eyed Constantino.

“I was the dweeb,” Meche muttered. “He was the freak.”

“I always figured you two would end up together,” Jimena said.

“In a parallel universe where I didn’t want to rip out his asshole, maybe.”

“I never got that. You guys were sewn together at the hip and one day you just stopped talking.”

“Childhood friendships don’t last.”

Jimena laughed loudly, her painted mouth open wide.

“He used to have that stupid motorcycle and you guys used to ride it all around the block. Oh, my God, it was so old! It used to make so much noise! It was falling apart and you’d jump on it together and think you were so cool!”

They had been cool. Sebastian had been gangly and greasy-haired, Meche as developed as an eleven-year old boy with pimples dotting her face. They’d both dressed in atrocious clothes and the company they kept—sickly, chubby little Daniela, with the stash of Twinkies and Chocotorros under her bed—didn’t help.

But they *had* been cool. For a little while. When magic was real.

And she had cared the world for him.

And he’d said, once, “Let’s run away.” On the old motorcycle, of all things. Like it would even make it to the outskirts of the city, never mind to the highway. “Let’s just run away from this fucking place, this fucking city, this fucking everything.”

And Meche, staring at the maps on his wall.

The map of France and the map of Spain. The Arctic circle.

Because they were going to take over the world.

Together.

Fucking Sebastian. Fucking, fucking Sebastian.

Daniela, too.

No, childhood friendships will never last. No friendship will ever last.

“You know, I don’t remember that,” Meche said, lying with a flat voice. “I don’t remember any of that.”

“Really?”

“I remember you looked like a marshmallow in your *quinceañera* dress.”

“Oh, well. It was a while back.”

Meche put her earbuds back in and pressed play, hoping that was the last bit of chatter she would have to endure. She tried to stare ahead and focus on Nina’s voice, but despite her attempt not to look she craned her head and glanced at Sebastian’s building as they drove past it.

She wanted to know if the curtains were blue.

They were green.

This made her feel relieved. Like the building was saying, “Hey Meche, it’s not 1988. You are here. In the present. Relax.”

There was movement by the curtain and, for a moment, Meche thought Sebastian was about to pop up, in the window, and she’d be looking straight at him. The prospect of seeing him there, framed by the old window, caused her to panic, as though it wasn’t just some guy she’d known as a teenager, but the damn shark from *Jaws*.

Nobody looked out the window and Meche let out her breath slowly.

Three blocks later Jimena parked the car. Meche pulled her luggage from the trunk while Jimena looked for the keys to the building, which were sitting somewhere in the abysmal depths of her huge purse. After a small eternity, Jimena pulled out her key chain and pushed the heavy front door open.

Meche dragged her bags into the hallway, stopping to glance at the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe sitting on its niche with the plastic flowers and the bare light bulb.

The long, dark hallway led towards a wide staircase. Meche rested a hand on the bannister. This building looked the same. The changes that had dotted the neighbourhood had not reached inside. Stepping up would mean stepping into a replica of her past. She was afraid of bumping into the ghost of her dad and slipping into bitter memories.

But hadn’t she done that already?

Jimena went past her, up the steps and turned to look at her.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Meche said, hauling her suitcase.

What the hell. She was here.

Mexico City, 1988

MECHE DID NOT do sports. She resented the uniform they had to wear each Tuesday and Thursday: short white shorts and white shirt. As though they were trapped in the 1950s. Had no one heard of pants and sweatshirts in the intervening decades? Besides, she had no desire to chase after a ball, like an eager puppy.

As a result, Meche tried to spend as much time as she could evading gym class. When she was forced to participate in some group activity, she stood at the back, listened to her Walkman. Her classmates knew not to pass her the ball. A tacit understanding—Meche was invisible—took place.

When the students gathered in the central patio of the school and put up the nets Meche grabbed a cassette and began listening to Serú Girán singing *Canción de Alicia en el País*, about the dictatorship in Argentina. She had reached the part where the walrus has vanished when a ball hit her smack in the face.

Meche pressed her hands against her nose and heard the unmistakable, loud laughter of Teofilo spreading across the play yard.

Squinting, feeling her face tingling with pain, Meche stared at the boy.

Meche had a lot of little hates nestled in her heart, but she reserved the biggest for Teofilo, the bully of the class. He was tall, fat and liked to slap the asses of all the girls in his class. When he tried to slap Meche's ass, she told him to go to hell and he had made it his mission that fall to get back at her.

One day she found her Math book had been defaced with a big red marker. The pages had been marked with UGLY WHORE. Someone stole her sweater and dumped it in a puddle. She earned herself a new nickname: Unibrow. Meche had no proof this was the work of Teofilo, but she knew. The evidence was in his smug grin.

She knew perfectly well that Teofilo had done this on purpose and she knew perfectly well there was nothing she could do to get back at him.

"Are you alright?" Daniela asked.

Meche nodded. "Yeah."

Meche wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She tasted copper and rage.

MECHE SLAMMED THE door to her room and fell back on the bed, the cool compress pressed against her face. She tried for serenity because there was no benefit in reliving the whole episode. But her stomach was an ugly black pit which had to be filled with something.

She filled it with music.

Meche put her dad's copy of The Doors' debut album on the portable record player. The cymbals clanged and *Break on Through* bounced against the walls as she stared at the ceiling thinking about Teofilo. Thinking how much she hated him. Thinking how much she wished she could hurt him.

But really, what could she do?

Meche could not appeal to a higher power. She could not seek assistance from the teachers or her parents or the other kids.

Meche didn't have anything except the record sleeves strewn around her bed as she pictured that big bully.

Teofilo had to be stopped.

In a corner of her room, the thumb-tacked poster of Jim Morrison agreed.

So she played the record and she tried to believe. Tried to hold on to that slim thread of hope that something was going to happen soon. Something good. Because, damn it, something *had* to happen.

Jim Morrison yelled “break on through” and she pictured Teofilo breaking, shattering like a piece of glass. She imagined her foot slamming on his arm and the arm crumbling like a sugar cookie.

When the song finished playing she got up, moved the tone-arm and began playing it again. She turned the volume up and the room vibrated. She felt very tired all of a sudden, as though this great weight had descended upon her, crushing her chest. Meche closed her eyes.

MONDAY. HOMEWORK DONE. Heavy textbooks stuffed inside the backpack. White socks—which looked yellow—on. Meche kissed her grandma goodbye—her mother had already left for the pharmacy, her dad was sleeping after a late night of drinking—and headed to school.

She took a short cut instead of her usual route because she did not feel like talking to Sebastian. She did not feel like talking to anyone. There was still a bitterness in her stomach and she felt like nursing her wounds alone, to the tune of her cassettes. She was tired and irritated, dark circles around her eyes, a quiet testimony to her unpleasant weekend.

So she walked to school by herself, feet shuffling slowly towards their destination.

Around eleven, she encountered Teofilo on the school’s main staircase. She was coming down and he was going up.

He didn’t see her. He was busy chatting with his friends. Meche felt like slamming his head against the wall and beating him senseless. She gripped her Walkman and flipped the cassette.

And then, just then, Teofilo slipped. There was no reason why he should slip: no obstacle, nothing at all. But his feet stumbled, as if hitting an invisible barrier. It was just as she had been picturing it all weekend: he simply tumbled down the stairs. Bam! Slipped, fell at a weird angle and suddenly he was splayed on the floor, whining like a baby. A big asshole like that, just bawling his eyes out.

She watched him, crumpled at the bottom of the stairs, his notebooks lying all around him on the floor, and realized he had broken his arm.

His friends tried to help him up.

Meche stomped over one of the open notebooks, leaving her footprint upon Teofilo’s homework.

She chuckled. A few minutes later as she was walking to Arts and Crafts, she realized it had not been a coincidence. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

It was the record’s fault.

MECHE RUSHED DOWN the hallway, her notebook pressed against her chest. She went into the bathroom and leaned close to a mirror, staring at her reflection, trying to see if there was a visible change. Did magic change you?

The mirror was old and had a thin crack near the bottom. It reflected the pea-green sink which matched the tiles. It revealed a teenager, long hair neatly pulled back in a ponytail and smeared in place with a generous amount of lemon juice and hair gel. It showed her slightly rumpled navy school uniform with the gold buttons. It did not, however, provide proof of any great psychic or magical powers.

She had not sprouted an extra finger or changed her eye colour. She was Meche. The same Meche who had walked the one dozen blocks between home and school that morning, plaid skirt hitting her below the knee, an egg *torta* tucked in her knapsack for lunch, three yellow pencils and a blue pen tucked in a pencil case.

Meche stared at her reflection for a long time, ignoring the bell which indicated a change of classes

Three girls walked into the bathroom, chatting and giggling together. Isadora Galván and her two hierophants. They gave her a weird look, like it was some bizarre occurrence to run into her even though they were all in the same grade. School girls went to the bathroom in packs. Meche only had Daniela and Sebastian, and she couldn't giggle outside the stalls while Sebastian peed, so her pack was immediately nonexistent.

Which reminded her that she needed to find Daniela.

She walked out and headed to the second floor, trying to poke her head through the window and see if Daniela was in Typing.

Daniela was sitting at the other end of the room. The machines went ding-ding clang-clang as the girls bent over the keys. Old Miss Viridiana sat half-asleep behind her desk, her hands folded over her tummy.

Meche waved to her. Daniela did not see her.

"Dani. Psst."

Daniela was busy looking at what she was typing.

Meche ripped a piece of paper from her notebook, balled it up and tossed it at Daniela. It hit her on the head. Daniela turned around.

"Hey," Meche said.

Daniela moved towards the window, glancing at Miss Viridiana to make sure she was still half-asleep.

"Why aren't you in class?" she asked.

"Teofilo just broke his arm."

"How?"

"He fell down the stairs."

"Is he with the nurse? Is he alright?"

"Who cares?" Meche said. "I think I just discovered something cool."

"What?"

"Magic."

Real magic, the kind grandmother talked about. Her father did not believe grandma's wild tales of shape-changing witches and amulets which could heal the sick. Meche, however, was fascinated by this stuff.

"Are you and Sebastian talking about weird stuff again?" Daniela asked, wrinkling her nose.

"No. This doesn't have anything to do with that."

"I don't like it when you talk about that devil-worshipper."

"Oh, my god, Aleister Crowley was not a devil-worshipper."

"Mercedes Vega."

Shit. Meche turned, trying to don her most innocent expression.

Principal Estrada was a thin, unpleasant woman. She dyed her hair blonde and wore a grey, buttoned-up sweater every day of the week. She enjoyed patrolling the hallways, ordering the girls who had folded their skirt in order to show more leg to pull the skirts down, ordering others to wipe the lipstick from their faces, telling the boys to tuck their shirts and cut their hair. When she couldn't catch you committing an infraction, she'd make one up. Like, "Don't stare at me so oddly, Vega," or, "Why are you walking funny, Vega?"

Sebastian called her Frankenstrada behind her back and she did kind of have a resemblance to Boris Karloff, what with the square-shaped head and the general stiffness.

Estrada glared at Meche, her thin eyebrows arched with contempt.

"What class are you supposed to be in?"

"Arts and Crafts."

“And why aren’t you in Arts and Crafts?”

“I had to pee.”

“What, do you have the bladder of a two-year-old? You were hanging out by the bathrooms an hour ago.”

Meche did not understand how Estrada knew the comings and goings of all students but she did. An indeed, Meche had been hanging out by the bathrooms just an hour ago.

“Get yourself to your classroom this instant.”

“Yes, Miss Estrada,” she muttered.

It was not like anything exciting was going to happen in Arts and Crafts. They were supposedly making papier-mâché sculptures that week—*alebrijes*, bizarre creatures from Mexican folklore, part bird, part lizard and part whatever you wanted—but Professor Ortega liked to drone on about Art and quickly lost his train of thought, which meant they did precious few crafts. At least it wasn’t Home Economy.

Meche went down the stairs, crossing the patio. Like any decent Mexican school, Queen Victoria had an interior square where the students could gather for recess. Most of the classrooms were located on the north side of this square in a structure that resembled a big box of Kleenex with holes, which some idiot with a desire to create prisons had built in the 70s. To the east there were the great metal double doors which allowed access to the school and Don Fermin—the school guard who made sure nobody left the premises—sleeping on his stool. There was really very little need for Fermin. If any students wanted to escape the school they could follow the wall towards the west side and climb it at an angle hidden by a clump of trees, which passed as their version of nature among the cement.

Also to the west was another, smaller gate which connected the junior high and high school to the primary school.

To the south was what had once been the original Queen Victoria in the 1940s: a great, old Mexican house, three stories high. It had housed an all-girls contingent before mixed education became fashionable among the middle class. Now it was where the school’s offices sat. This was also where the Arts and English classes took place.

Meche trotted up the stairs and slipped in the back, sitting next to Sebastian. He was drawing a skull on his desk, carefully decorating the teeth with his black marker. The teacher had begun to talk about form and meaning, which meant they could whisper in peace for at least another fifteen minutes.

“I thought you weren’t coming.”

“Did I miss something?”

“No,” Sebastian said, snorting.

“I had a close encounter with Frankenstrada,” Meche said. “She thinks I shouldn’t pee.”

“How are you supposed to do that?”

“I don’t know. Carry a bottle around with me and just go in there?”

“She told me I have to cut my hair again this morning or she’ll cut it for me.”

Sebastian had a pseudo-punk aesthetic going and he liked to style his black hair with an obscene amount of hairspray. It was still pretty tame compared to what real, hardcore punks did with their hair but then again the Queen Victoria didn’t smile too kindly on any of that stuff so you really couldn’t try a mohawk. Plus, punk was a bit lame.

Rich Mexican kids who could visit the USA and England imported this wild aesthetic, but it was all show and no substance. Sure, some good bands had emerged from that primordial ooze, like Atoxxxico and Ritmo Peligroso, but Meche was pretty tired of the studded belts and bracelets, patches, and junk which supposedly went with being punk.

The only reason why Meche could stomach Sebastian was because he was pseudo-punk. He knew, or cared, little about punk music or punk culture in general. But he liked sci-fi and horror movies and ha

watched *Mad Max* obsessively, to the point of using a couple of old car tires to build himself what he termed a “rubber exo-skeleton” on top of his leather jacket. For him it was the aesthetic thrill of the whole thing.

“You should get a tattoo and really piss her off,” she said.

“Sure. Then I’ll get kicked out by my mom.”

Meche leaned her chin against the back of her hand and looked at Sebastian’s skull with its wide grin.

“Hey, can you come to my place after school? I want to show you something.”

“It’s meatball dinner.”

“So go home later and have the meatballs.”

“They’ll be cold. Plus, my brother will eat them all if I don’t show up.” Sebastian paused. “What’s your grandma making for dinner?”

“I dunno. Green beans with egg.”

“Gross.”

“Come on, what are you going to do all afternoon by yourself? Homework?”

“Read and draw,” he muttered.

“Come on over. Dani’s coming.”

Meche had not even told Daniela she was invited, but she assumed Daniela would tag along. Dani was as different from Sebastian as night was from day, always dressed in pink, her Barbies still lined up on her shelves, an Easy-Bake oven in her room—even though the three of them were fifteen—and predilection for soap operas. She liked listening to *Lucerito*, which made Meche want to barf, and thought Luis Miguel was the hottest man in the world, which was a double-barf. As far as Meche was concerned the only way she would listen to *Ahora te Puedes Marchar* was if someone tied her hands and feet with duct tape, then pushed a rag into her mouth to drown her screams.

But hey, Daniela was a good listener and of the three friends she was the one with the most money, which meant a chance to have free tickets to the movie theatre and loads of pop courtesy of her father, the accountant of a small furniture store.

“Mmm,” said Sebastian. “You’re not going to play *boleros*, are you? That shit’s so *old*.”

Meche punched him on the arm and he turned to stare at her with his usual stiff, offended face.

“You’re talking about Agustin Lara, you idiot. One of the greatest Mexican songwriters of all time.

“You know, I really do want to have meatballs. Why don’t you come over to my place?”

“My mom doesn’t like me going over to your place.”

Meche’s mom had this over-developed fear of teenage pregnancies, courtesy of too many articles in too many ladies’ magazines. It was a bit hard to get pregnant when Meche had never even been kissed let alone had a boyfriend, but Meche’s mother considered every boy in a twenty-block radius to be a danger to her daughter. As if anyone would try and date her.

“Fine,” Sebastian said. “I’ll come.”

Meche tried to grab the marker Sebastian was using, but he slapped her hand away and hunched over busy with his drawing. She sighed, unrolled the headphones and pressed play on the Walkman.

The tape rolled and Black Sabbath sang about children of tomorrow and revolution while she tapped her fingers against the desk, waiting for the bell to ring.

“SO WHAT YOU’RE saying essentially is that you’ve gone nuts.”

Sebastian lay on the floor of Meche’s room, drawing in his notebook. He had traded the skulls for stars and was busy creating a night sky.

“Why is it so nuts to believe in magic? My grandmother says there are witches and in the

countryside you can see them fly at nights in the shape of balls of fire.”

“Your grandma is a really good cook, but no offence, I wouldn’t take her stories at face value.”

“Why not?” Meche asked, sitting down in front of Sebastian. “You’re the one who told me about spiritism and mediums and shit in the nineteenth century.”

“I believe in ghosts,” ventured Daniela, raising her hand weakly.

“See?” Meche said. “She believes.”

“Okay. So how about we play Teenage Idol. Do I get to become Emanuel tomorrow and sing at a bunch of concerts?” Sebastian asked.

“Why don’t we find out?”

“You’re serious.”

Meche stared at Sebastian. He ripped out the page from his notebook, balled it and threw it in her wastebasket.

“Why shouldn’t music have power? My dad says it’s the most powerful thing in the world. Nietzsche says that without music, life would be a mistake.”

“Don’t quote me Nietzsche. I showed you Nietzsche,” Sebastian said in an offended tone.

“Why can’t music be magic? Aren’t spells just words you repeat? And what are songs? Lyrics that play over and over again. The words are like a formula.”

All around Meche’s room posters of band members and enlarged album covers looked down at them. Freddie Mercury leaned back on stage, Pedro Infante played the guitar. In a corner the Beatles were ready to ride the Yellow Submarine. Stacks of records were piled along Meche’s floor, cassettes poking out from a couple of boxes.

“Okay, how about backmasking?” said Meche. “Doesn’t Aleister Crowley suggest that adepts should listen to records reversed?”

“Yes,” said Sebastian. “But that doesn’t…”

“And all these people flipping out because they think Led Zeppelin’s Stairway to Heaven has a Satanic message?”

“So we should play records backwards? Do a Satanic ceremony?”

“Guys, I just want to remind you I have to be home by seven,” Daniela said. “I’m also not allowed to do any Satanic stuff.”

Sebastian and Meche looked at their friend. Daniela blinked and went back to working on the personality test culled from a teen magazine she was completing.

“Not a Satanic ceremony. You’re always talking about this stuff. Crowley? Rasputin had to be killed three times?”

“Because I like to read lots of weird shit. But I don’t want to go around brewing poisons and stuff. People already think I’m odd, I don’t want to give them any extra ammunition,” Sebastian muttered.

Sebastian began drawing on the side of his tennis shoes. More stars in black marker.

Meche wanted to hit them both on the back of the head. They didn’t get it! She expected it from Daniela because Daniela got about 10 percent of what went on in the world, but Sebastian? Sebastian loved this stuff. They had become friends four years before because Meche had been listening to Alan Parsons Project’s *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* and she didn’t get the references. So she decided to ask the only person in her class who might have the answer. At first Sebastian had been offended she didn’t know Edgar Allan Poe, but she had been equally offended he didn’t know Alan Parsons Project because they sang Games People Play from *The Turn of a Friendly Card* which, in her opinion, was a very nice concept album. Not the best, but nice. The best was an easy pick. Most people would probably say the concept album of all time was *The Dark Side Of The Moon*, but Meche preferred The Kinks’ *Arthur (Or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire)*. Her parents had met thanks to that album.

“Aren’t you curious to see if it works?” Meche asked.

Sebastian capped his marker and stuffed it back in his pocket.

“It’ll never work,” he said with finality. “I have to go. I have a couple of hours bagging groceries tonight. Later.”

Meche scowled as Sebastian stepped out of her room. Great. The big ninny was not going to play ball. Daniela, looking pained, patted Meche on the knee.

“Cheer up. Why don’t we go to my house and bake some cupcakes?”

“The stuff you make in the Easy-Bake oven tastes like ass,” Meche muttered.

MECHE COPIED THE linear equations neatly into her notebook. She was good at math.

Daniela wasn’t. Sebastian sucked even more.

Most students thought math was boring, but math was the foundation for so many things, including music. Music of the stars and all, and hadn’t Kepler...

Meche held her pencil, suspended over the page. She looked at the book again, at the black letters and numbers against the white pages.

Equations. Letters are not letters in equations. They stand for numbers and if you balance them right you’ll find the right number. What if it was the same for music? Songs stand for something, don’t they? They have a symbolic value. So if you were to somehow balance them... ugh, she was getting herself all into knots.

She heard the door opening and looked up. Her father shuffled in, taking off his coat and putting it on a peg.

“Hey, Meche,” he said, patting her head as he walked by. “Doing homework?”

“Math,” she said.

“What did you eat today?”

“Grandma made green beans. Should I heat them up?”

“Don’t bother. I’ll have some cookies.”

He sat down, poured himself a glass of milk and opened a box of animal crackers. Meche’s dad and her mom had married young and sometimes he still looked like half a kid himself when he sat hunched over a glass of milk, his shoulder-length hair pulled back.

He was the coolest grownup Meche knew. She wanted to be like him when she grew up.

“Does mom have another late shift at the pharmacy?” her dad asked.

“All week,” Meche said, shrugging.

“I don’t remember her telling me.”

“She did.”

“Your grandmother in bed yet?”

“An hour ago.”

Her dad ate a cracker and lit a cigarette, nodding absentmindedly.

“What did you play today?”

“Oh, let me see,” he said. “Miguel Bosé. A bit of Sabina. A bit of everything.”

Ever since Meche had been born her dad had worked as a DJ. He had originally intended to study veterinary medicine but had never cared for the career, which he had been more or less forced into by his family. He eventually dropped it altogether and went to work at a record store, where he’d met Meche’s mom. The radio station was where he was most comfortable. The microphone was his natural prop. Without it he seemed unreal.

He cut a cracker in half and dipped it in the milk.

“Do you believe in magic?”

“What’s your grandma been telling you?” he asked. “I hope you’re not believing any of her kooky stories about putting saints upside down so you can get a boyfriend.”

“No. I mean like serious magic.”

“Nothing serious about magic. Just superstitions.”

“What about music?”

“What about it?”

“I don’t know,” Meche muttered, looking at her equations.

“Cracker?”

Meche nodded, taking a cracker shaped like a lion.

Her dad closed the box and took the glass to the kitchen, leaving it in the sink. Then he grabbed his jacket.

“I’m going out.”

He didn’t have to say he’d be at the bar. Weekdays it was at the bar. Weekends it was the pool hall. Sometimes, when he stayed out too late, her mom had her go pull him out. Meche felt humiliated when this happened.

Her mother was out late tonight, so maybe Meche wouldn’t have to put on the sweater and head there. It wasn’t far. It was just... annoying.

She wished he’d come home early. Otherwise her parents might fight. Again.

“Be careful,” she said.

“Yup. Finish your homework, alright? Don’t skim on the reading. You can’t read, you can’t do shit. No matter how good you are at adding numbers.”

“I’m going to work with computers, dad,” she reminded him.

She had decided this two years before when her parents finally bought her a Commodore 64. She had learned how to program little games on it and thought she could make a go at it as a real career when she grew up.

“You still need to read.”

“Yes, captain.”

“Arrr. Don’t stay up late.”

Meche raised her hand, saluting her dad. She watched him put on his old leather jacket and step out. She dropped her hand and chewed on her pencil, starring at the numbers.

IT WAS A rainy morning. Meche jumped and tiptoed around puddles to the rhythm of Soda Stereo. She shook her head and snapped her fingers.

A hand grasped her shoulder and she frowned, turning around. Sebastian Soto, lanky and dour, just like every morning of the week, stood with an umbrella under his arm. He was the tallest kid in her class and when he stood like that, grimly looking down at her, Meche had to agree with the kids that teased him: he did resemble Lurch from afar.

“Hey,” he said. “I was thinking about what you said yesterday.”

“And?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should give it a try.”

“For real? When?”

“How about now?”

“School day.”

“So?”

“Oh my God, you just want to skip the chemistry test.”

“Maybe. But do you really want to go to school?”

“Nope.”

Sebastian rocked back and forth on his shoes, which, against school regulations, he had painted with faint traces of whiteout spelling out THE RAVEN. Meche pulled up her left sock, with the broken elastic.

“Daniela will be pissed if we skip out without inviting her.”

“Yeah, but her mom drives her to school. Tough luck. I’m heading to the factory. Are you coming?”

“I studied for the test.”

“Why bother when you can cheat?”

Meche rolled her eyes and held on to the straps of her backpack. On the one hand she was annoyed at Sebastian for trying to miss the test. On the other hand this might be a good chance to convince him about the music and spells. He was halfway there already. She could tell. He had the same expression as he did when they had done that Ouija session. Daniela had freaked out because she had recently seen a movie about demon-possessed people, and she swore she’d never speak to them again because they were morbid and freaky, but she came back to roost with them all the same. What else could she do? It was not like any of them had much of a social circle.

“Fine,” Meche said.

Sebastian led the way, purposely sinking into the puddles and splashing her.

Wanker.

Meche put her headphones on again and the cassette player told her about a voyeur staring through the window.

She followed Sebastian until they reached the abandoned pantyhose factory. Most of the windows were covered with wooden boards, but Sebastian ducked and went in through a large opening, obviously knowing what to do.

Meche leaned down.

She had never liked the pantyhose factory. The little kids enjoyed playing tag there and the older ones came to drink beer and make out, but it had always seemed so sad and grey.

She shoved her backpack in and then crawled in herself, emerging into one of the cavernous factory rooms. It was dark and she was glad when Sebastian took out a flashlight, even if he did shine it in her face.

“Let’s go up,” he said, handing her the flashlight.

They rushed up the stairs, their feet clattering upon the metal and making the building echo with their footsteps.

They went into a large room with scattered furniture: a table, some chairs piled in a corner. Someone—probably not the original factory workers—had dragged a lumpy, red couch into the middle of the room.

There were more windows on the second floor and fewer of these were boarded, so there was significantly more light, even though dirt had accumulated upon the panes, blurring the view. Meche walked up to the circular window on the east wall and wiped it with the sleeves of her too-large sweater, which she had inherited from her older cousin Jimena.

The neighbourhood looked different when seen like this, so diffused.

“You’ve been coming here a lot?” she asked.

“Not often.”

Sebastian tossed his umbrella on the floor and threw himself on the couch, propping his feet up.

“So now you believe me about the magic?”

“I think you are cr-aaaa-zy,” he said. “But what the hell. Life can’t get any crappier, can it?”

“Was your dad home last night?” Meche asked, frowning.

Sebastian’s dad wasn’t living with them, but he came around periodically to collect money and beat

the kids. For old time's sake.

~~"It's got nothing to do with him," Sebastian said, meaning it probably had everything to do with him~~

She shoved his feet away and sat on the couch. Sebastian had the backpack pressed against his chest and was staring at the ceiling.

"What's it got to do with?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just wish it was all different. You know?"

"Yeah."

Meche scratched her leg and sat quietly, thinking about all the things she would change if she could. She'd get rid of the pimples. She'd get nice, new clothes. Not Jimena's hand-me-downs. Her mother would yell less. She'd go out on a date with Constantino.

"How do we do it?"

"I don't know," Meche said. "I haven't thought about it too much. I mean, we need a turntable and lots of records, I guess. We have to figure out the formula."

"So you're saying you have no idea?" he asked flatly.

"I have some idea," Meche said, feeling offended. "It's just going to take some experimenting. I need to do more research. I wonder if there are any books I can use at the school library..."

"Aha."

"We need to convince Daniela. I figure we need three people."

"Why three?"

"Because it's the first lucky prime number."

Sebastian looked at her blankly, as though she had just spoken in Dutch. She sighed.

"Stuff always comes in threes. Like there are three notes in a triad, which is your basic chord. Or the holy trinity."

"Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and caldron bubble'," he said.

"What?" Meche asked. She had no idea what he was talking about.

"Macbeth's witches," Sebastian said, frowning. "Hey, I'm not a girl. Does that matter?"

"I don't think it does. You can be a warlock, can't you?"

"I suppose. We don't have to wear capes, do we? I don't think I'd look good in one."

She felt like telling him that, yeah, they most definitely had to use capes and pointy hats, and then watching what face he made at that, but Meche decided to spare him the unnecessary cruelty.

"No."

"Good. Do you have any food? I didn't eat breakfast."

He never ate breakfast. He also tended to eat Meche or Daniela's lunch. Meche's, usually, because Daniela was less generous with her food allocations. Meche figured that if half a cheese and ham sandwich was what it took to convince Sebastian to join her cause, it would be a small price.

She took out her battered tin lunchbox and scooped the sandwich, giving him half. Sebastian munched on it and grabbed her thermos without even asking for permission, taking a big gulp.

"What are Macbeth witches?" she asked, punching one of the lumpy cushions and putting it behind her head.

"I really can't believe you are like half-illiterate."

"I'm not half-illiterate."

"You are clueless when it comes to books. Rodriguez is so going to fail you in Spanish and World Literature."

"You are going to fail all the sciences, so who's talking?"

"Blah blah," he said, opening and closing his left hand. "That's what remedials were made for."

"What are Macbeth witches?"

"*Macbeth* is a play by Shakespeare," Sebastian said, grabbing the sandwich crumbs that were left on the table.

stuffing them into his mouth. “It’s about this guy who meets with these three witches and they prophesize that he’ll be king. So he begins to think about it all the time and then ends up killing the guy in charge and becomes king. It’s a tragedy.”

“It doesn’t sound too tragic to become king.”

“Obviously things don’t go as planned. You should read that book I gave you.”

Meche had read some of the books Sebastian had given her. Correction. Probably some of the *only* books she read were the ones he gave her, but she hadn’t read this particular one because she was still a little pissed off that he’d only given her a book for her birthday instead of the album she had wanted. Getting Shakespeare’s sonnets and complete works for your fifteenth birthday was like getting a sweater from your mom for Christmas: bullshit.

“I’m working on it,” she said. “Slowly working on it.”

“Illiterate.”

“Ass,” she said tossing her backpack at his face.

Sebastian dodged it and shrugged. “Better an ass than to be illiterate.”

“I can’t hear you,” Meche said, sliding to the floor and pressing the play button on her Walkman.

“What are you listening to?” Sebastian said, sliding down next to her.

Meche pulled out her extra pair of headphones and plugged it into one of the jacks. Sebastian put on the headphones. Meche pressed the rewind button. They tilted their head backs and Soda Stereo began to sing *Persiana Americana* from the very beginning.

MECHE TIPTOED INTO the apartment, trying to sneak into her bedroom. She was half an hour early and needed to hide for a bit. Grandmother Dolores was in the kitchen, humming. She spent most of her time there, looking after a boiling pot or frying onions and chillis, always on her feet and always ready to make a meal. She’d been a maid for many years before old age made her unemployable. Cooking had been her favourite task during that time.

“Meche, did you skip school today?”

Meche stopped in her tracks and cursed inwardly. Mama Dolores had an internal lie detector, so there was no sense in trying to fool her.

“Yeah.”

“You shouldn’t miss classes. Come, sit down. You can peel some potatoes. I’m making *picadillo* the way your mom likes it.”

“What’s the point? Mom and dad both eat outside.”

“Well, maybe one day your mother will come home early.”

Meche walked into the kitchen, dumping her backpack on one of the two plastic chairs and sitting at the table. She grabbed a peeler and began slicing the skins off the potatoes.

Mama Dolores turned on the little radio sitting next to the narrow kitchen windows and Pedro Infante began singing *Amorcito Corazón* while the old woman hummed and poured some oil into a frying pan. She swished the onions to the tune of the love song.

“Mama Dolores, can you tell me something and tell me the truth?”

“What, baby?”

“Were there really witches in your town?”

“Of course there were. They’d fly off at nights in the shape of great balls of fire, nestling in the trees and cackling.”

“And they did magic and it worked?”

“It did. They cast all sorts of spells.”

“If they were so powerful why didn’t they leave the town and become billionaires?”

“Oh, magic is more complex than that. You have to give as much as you take. There’s a price to everything.”

“What about music? Could there be magic in music?”

“There’s magic everywhere, if you look carefully,” her grandmother said. “The trouble is wanting it enough, and holding on to it.”

Meche slanted the peeler, slowly stripping the potato.

“What if magic...”

“Magic will break your heart, Meche,” Mama Dolores said very seriously.

Meche frowned.

MECHE’S MOTHER, NATALIA, was good looking. When angered, however, she resembled the Medusa in one of Meche’s story books. Except she still had to grow some snakes on her head. Any day now, Meche thought those would begin to sprout.

“Okay, Meche,” Natalia said, from behind the pharmacy counter. “How come I got a call from school today to ask if you were sick?”

“I don’t know,” Meche said. “I’m just here because I need money for the tortillas and grandma doesn’t have any.”

“I left money on top of the refrigerator.”

“It’s not there.”

“Your goddamn father,” her mother muttered. “Did he take it?”

“I don’t know.”

Meche rested her chin against the glass counter and shrugged. If she had known it was going to be such a big deal to get the pesos she needed, she would have borrowed them from someone. This was Spanish Inquisition stuff.

“Wait three minutes,” her mother said as she headed to the back of the pharmacy.

Meche eyed the arcade machine sitting in a corner, right by the little children’s coin-operated horse and the scale that would tell you your weight and fortune. She could play a game. Or just get the hell out of the pharmacy before her mother started asking too many questions.

“Here,” her mother said, coming out from behind the counter and opening her change purse, handing her two bills. “Buy the tortillas and give the rest of the money to your grandmother.”

“Alright.”

“Meche, if I find out that you and Sebastian Soto are skipping classes, I’m going to beat you black and blue.”

“I wasn’t skipping nothing,” Meche said, though she was impressed by her mother’s psychic skills.

VICENTE VEGA STILL had most of his hair, only a small—though increasing—gut, and a great quantity of his charm. He had, however, misplaced his common sense and his optimism as he stumbled through the streets of Mexico City. Thirty-eight—not too old, not really young—he went through life like a zombie navigating a closed course, from home to the radio cabin and from the cabin to the cantina.

On Mondays he had the seafood soup. Tuesdays the stuffed chilli. Wednesdays he fought with his wife. The weekends were for playing pool and dominoes. He drank every day.

He remembered being young once, being happy. He remembered marrying a pretty young woman he had adored and somehow stumbling into a cold, distant stranger in bed one morning. He had been his parents’ pride and joy, now a sore disappointment, their eyes turned to his younger brother who had done as he was told and—his mother reminded him every time he spoke to her—had made something

of himself. His brother was a *licenciado* and he had a big house and two nice cars, wearing good suits which threatened to explode as he moved his corpulent form around the office. At heart, his brother was still the same tricky, devious bastard he'd always been, but he played in bigger leagues now. He had set his sights squarely on the Mexican dream: lots of money and lots of women.

Vicente, always unable to understand these simplistic desires, never one to lust after lots of money or numerous broads, had looked for that elusive something else in life. Meaning. Answers that were not printed in triplicate or faxed to the office. Beauty. But life, being the bitch that she was, had denied Vicente what he asked for, had rewarded him only with ugliness and pessimism, had sunk his dreams low.

Music. He loved music. Playing it, writing songs. He'd quit veterinary school and gone to work at the record shop and then he had got the part-time stint as a DJ because—and here he could quote more than a few people—he had the most amazing voice. But that golden voice was false gold and when the demands of parenthood, of making money and getting by intruded on the band, he quit the musician bit and went full-on onto radio.

He thought this would make Natalia happy. Natalia, however, was never happy, accumulating little hates and grudges, cataloguing them by date and carefully filing them so she could pull them out later and toss them in his face.

Only Meche loved him.

She'd been born like him, Meche. Not just the looks—the shape of the eyes, the firm mouth—but his temper and his proclivities.

If he hadn't had Meche, Vicente might have gone to live at the bar forever, installed himself in a corner and drunk himself under the table. If he shuffled his feet home every night and stumbled out of bed in the mornings, it was because of his daughter.

Vicente went up the steps, trudging back into the apartment. After hanging his jacket he went towards the stereo, running his hands over the turntable. He carefully selected a record, plugged in his headphones and sat on the floor, listening to The Beatles playing in the dark as he smoked a cigarette.

He was almost done with one side of the recording when the door opened and the clatter of heels announced the presence of his wife. She turned on the lights and glanced at him.

She didn't say anything. Her heels just moved away, towards the bedroom, with a soft sort of indifference which mirrored his own.

Mexico City, 2009

THE APARTMENT HAD shrunk or had been bigger in her memory. She walked in slowly, feeling like an intruder even though she had grown up here. At some point her mother had taken down the old wallpaper and now the interior was painted in soft, institutional beiges.

Meche looked at the photos sitting all around: Natalia as a baby, Natalia as a child, Natalia at the beach. Photos of her mother's second husband, Lorenzo. Almost like an afterthought, Natalia and Meche, her teenaged face staring at the camera.

"Mercedes," her mother said as she drifted into the living room and gave her a hug. "Little Meche."

"Hey, mom," she muttered.

"How was your flight?"

"Good. Fine."

"I have had the most awful time getting *tamales*," her mother said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

"*Tamales*?"

"For the *novena*," Jimena said helpfully.

"I really wished we didn't have to do a *novena*," Meche said.

"There's no way around it," her mother said. "God knows your father can use all the prayers he can get."

"Dad didn't believe in this stuff."

"I talked to the baker and we are going to have canapés for the first night," Jimena said. "He agreed to a discount, seeing as it was us."

"Good," Natalia said, patting her niece's hand. "Meche, you are going to have to go through your father's things."

Meche had barely entered the apartment and had just sat down. She looked up at her mother, surprised.

"What?"

"Well, I certainly won't have the time. I would ask Lorenzo, but it doesn't seem right to have him going through your father's clothes. And you know how he was. It's probably a mess. But some of the records are bound to be valuable."

Valuable.

"Maybe you can play some at the party," her mother said. "I have no idea what we are going to do for music."

"You want me to go to dad's apartment and see if he had records that are worth any money?"

"Ay, don't take it like that," Jimena said. "You want a coffee?"

Norwegians drank a lot of coffee; strong and black. Meche had never taken to this custom, but she had developed a tea addiction after her year in London.

"No."

"You might as well sort it out and take whatever you want," her mother said. "Whatever he had, he left it all to you. Nothing for me."

There was a pointed bitterness to her words. Meche's father had failed her so many times and Meche got that—because dumping your family one fine day will certainly create a few grudges. And yet... the asshole was gone. No need to auction off his goods. As far as Meche was concerned, she thought they should stuff all his possessions in cardboard boxes and give them to charity. She wasn't going to go o

eBay and see if someone paid a dollar for a dusty LP. But if her mother insisted, Meche would make an effort.

“I told Meche Sebastian Soto is hanging around the neighbourhood,” Jimena said. “You sure you don’t want a coffee?”

“Nope.”

“Yes, that nice boy.”

“You never liked him,” Meche said.

Meche’s mother chuckled and sat next to her, patting her leg. Her hair was a burnished brown. It matched the furniture. Jimena slipped out, probably to the kitchen for that coffee she yearned for.

“I did like him.”

Sebastian’s new car sure must be something to cause such a tremendous change of opinion in the women in Meche’s family.

“Where’s Lorenzo?” she asked.

“Trying to fix the paperwork and arrange the burial,” her mother said, lifting her hands in the air.

“Maybe I’ll go to father’s apartment tomorrow,” Meche muttered. “Before the funeral.”

At least in her father’s apartment she’d be alone. She didn’t think she could stomach her mother and her cousin at this time.

VICENTE VEGA’S APARTMENT was smack in downtown Mexico City, in an old building which must have been quite something two hundred years before, but which was now nothing more than a tired ruin, perched at the end of an alley, waiting in the shadows. It was cold and damp as Meche walked up the stairs and when she actually opened the door to the apartment and stepped in she realized the apartment itself was even colder.

She locked the door and looked around. The first thing she noticed was a tiny kitchen that had no right to call itself a kitchen, dirty dishes piled high. She started by washing them because it was too depressing to stare at the dregs inside coffee cups and the stains of old spaghetti. Once she was done, she stood in the living room, which also served as the dining room, looking at the piles of old LPs her father had accumulated. They were sitting on shelves, but also spilled onto the floor, peeking from beneath the sofas, drowning the side table, resting upon the battered TV set.

She went to the room which served as an office, but really was nothing more than another space used to pile boxes with records, mountains of sleeves and vinyl. In a corner, forlorn, sat her father’s typewriter. When his music career failed, he had tried—and never succeeded in—writing a compendium of the history of Latin American rock-and-roll. Now that she thought about it, her father had never succeeded at anything, except maybe in finding the bottom of a bottle of tequila.

She stepped into his bedroom and discovered the same chaotic mass of records, though her father, perhaps in an effort to escape the clutter that reigned in the other parts of the apartment, had cleared a section of the wall and pinned up a large poster depicting palm trees and a sunset. The thick curtains also had a lively pattern of palm trees, this time with flamingos, so kitsch it made her wonder if it was really her father who had rented this apartment.

She remembered when she had been younger and her dad had told her he planned to spend the end of his days on a beach, watching the waves come in.

He never made it to the seaside, though he did spend several years in Guadalajara before returning to Mexico City.

His kidneys had failed him. That’s what had done him in. Not the booze. The liver put up a good fight. It was the kidneys which gave up. Her mother had told her he was on dialysis, but Meche hadn’t phoned him.

Meche took a look in the bathroom. The medicine cabinet was cluttered with pills and expired medications. ~~His glasses sat on the water tank of the toilet.~~

She walked back to the bedroom, sat on the sagging bed and wondered what it would be like to wake every morning to the old picture of the beach, feet shuffling upon the cold floor. Dying and knowing you were dying.

On the floor, by the bed, half-hidden under a sweater, was the portable turntable. Meche moved the sweater away and looked at it, hesitantly.

Was it the same one? It seemed to be the same walnut case. The one Meche used to have in her room could play full-size LPs, so chances were it *was* the same one.

Meche grabbed it, put it on her knees and found the sticker on the side. The little heart which Danie had left there.

That was it. But it just looked so... ordinary and worn now. No magic to it.

Would it still work?

She reached towards a stack of records on the bedside table and picked the first one off the top. The Beach Boys.

The needle went down. Good Vibrations began to play. She flipped the record sleeve around, looking at the image of the five young men. It had been released in 1966. That would have made her father... what... sixteen when it came out?

Meche opened the bedside drawer and found a stack of unpaid bills. There were some loose pages, stained with coffee smudges: notes for his glorious book. A matchbook. Tucked beneath the matchbook, like a postscript, a postcard from Puerto Vallarta. Meche looked at the remittance address but it had never been sent. It was an old Puerto Vallarta, Puerto Vallarta from the seventies, just left there to moulder in the drawer.

She closed the drawer and The Beach Boys finished their song, the needle lifted from the record and the apartment was silent.

Meche sighed and started going through the records, making three piles: throw away, sell and keep. She placed each record in the right pile, trying to maintain the keep pile as low as she could.

The silence was depressing. She could see why her father had kept the turntable by the bed, to liven his nights and mornings. She looked for another Beach Boys record, maybe *Summer Days (And Summer Nights!!)*, but it was not to be found. She settled on *Hotel California* by The Eagles—which was not quite the same thing at all—and pulled apart the curtains to see what the view was like.

But there was no view. The windows showed the grey façade of another building. She dropped the curtains and the flamingos returned, masking the greyness, cheerfully frolicking in a land of palm trees.

She remembered that she was now almost the same age her father had been when he had left them.

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