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Happy Sun

by Julien Fish

I wept for Armando Palomo at his viewing lunch. I don’t know what set me off. Maybe it was the weight of my steady indifference over the years, or the thought that had things been reversed and it been my viewing, he’d have been too busy consoling my family, stirring the mood to a warm reverence, to reckon with the reasons for our losing touch. But whatever hard truth the crying had flushed out of me was soon lost to my embarrassment at the thought that others at the table had taken my tears to mean that Armando and I shared a love for these tamales—his mother’s tamales—and now the taste had triggered some tender memory. I blew my nose into a napkin.

We ate in the church gym on black-clothed folding tables, with only a partition accordioned between us and the chapel where we had just seen the body. The water was sour with the stench of cheap candles and unwashed black nylons. Sounds of sad eating rattled the basketball hoops, and the hardwood gave mottled imitations of the chatter.

A third person joined our table. She came as the two before her, holding a folded chair and an untouched bowl of menudo. I excused myself to say goodbye to the immediate family, whose table, the woman pointed out, now stretched nearly the length of the court: a train of tables drifting into a crooked arc. The three who joined us were among the others floating about the gym looking for an opening at the half-dozen remaining tables—displaced by the dozens who’d moved their tables to join to the family Palomo, feeling confident that, given their special relationship with Armando, it could only have been by some oversight that they had been seated elsewhere.

At the big table I kissed his mother on the head, first kissing Pati, his sister, by mistake. After eighteen years Pati looked more like Armando’s mother than his mother now did. She had grown into her mother’s hardened grace, that sensual sobriety. I mean to say she was beautiful. Pati was kind about it, if only because she didn’t recognize me. She smiled and lifted her chin toward the swollen, gray woman whose chair was pushed several feet back from the table. This woman was holding an oval-framed photo to her breast, rocking in small circles. She opened her small eyes as I kissed her and said, “Y tú mijo?”

“Amigo de trabajo, Señora, no más. Mi más sentido pesame.”

“Bueno,” she said. “Muy amable.”

Others had lined up behind me to kiss her. From the colorlessness of her voice it seemed that many of them had become like me—strangers. It must be strange to see strangers at
your son’s funeral. Of course, you trust that if any stranger had come to pay respect, they
would leave before the burial, as I now did.

But before I left the building I stopped outside the chapel doors, wondering what I’d feel if I
were to look on the body alone, without the grief pollution of the wake. There’s no comfort
in the company of mourners—not chicanos. White people will at least put on a playlist of
sentimental country as something simple to lean into. At the viewing I sat far on the back
pew and watched with contempt the feigned wailings and contortions, the irreverent
conversations whispered loudly in each other’s ears. Well-meaningness can’t make up for
certain things. They’ll probably make peace with his passing before the day is over, I thought.
If they’d loved him like I had they wouldn’t be talking about the Cowboys moving to LA.
They wouldn’t be so eagerly speculating as to what would be served at lunch or how soon.
Then again, I suppose if they had loved him like I had, the back pews would have all been
full.

I entered. A well-legged girl was up on the casket, knelt on the polished cedar in white socks,
on the closed half of the lid where his hands folded. She was bent into the opening, elbows
strung, reaching toward his face with a pair of tweezers. On the floor was the heap of
ofrendas she had moved from the casket: candles, flowers, photographs—a large painted
portrait of Elvis propped on a small easel. Her black hair hung in a gathering on the far side
of her neck, her head cocked to keep it there. I coughed to make myself known, but she
didn’t break focus as she plucked a palm’s worth of makeup-caked hairs between his
eyebrows. She slid down from the casket and flipped over her hand to shake loose the thick
hairs. They fell to the carpet and disappeared into the obscured industrial pattern, as does
anything smaller than a coin.

“You try the menudo?”

“Sure,” I said. “Any good?”

“It’s menudo.”

She forced a smile, pulling her hair back into a fist and tying it with an elastic band from her
wrist.

“I’m gonna end the culo that made him look like this.”

“How old are you?”

“They made him smile like he’s got a fart.”

“Huevón probably died with a fart or two still in him, que no?”

She frowned and turned. She reached across the casket and gripped the long handle, then
scrambled onto her knees and into the opening again, now resting her palms on his cheeks.
“My mom says they drained his blood. You can’t smile if you don’t got no blood, right?”

“I think they drain it, yeah.”

She nodded at the ofrendas. “Is any of this stuff yours? ‘Cuz you can take it back if you want.”
"No."

"Do you want some of it anyway? Lookit—those flowers are pretty. Take some for your wife. It'll make her happy. You don't have a wife?"

I shook my head.

"No girlfriend or nothing?"

"No."

"Oh. Cuz, like, we don't need any of this stuff, you know?"

"I'm okay."

"You really don't want nothing? It's free."

"No, thanks."

"But it's free."

I asked her name, but she didn't answer. She had shifted from her knees to her stomach to lay her head on his chest. With the back of her hand she moved over his cheeks and along his jaw, her shoulder blades undulating in quiet sob. I left her there without saying goodbye to Armando.

The car wouldn't start and Claire wouldn't answer her phone. "Vamos," I said and turned the key a third time. Nada, that piece. I was annoyed, then relieved at the thought of missing Claire's show tonight. I had already taken off work to make her last two performances tomorrow, so I welcomed the possibility of having to stay the night. It takes five hours to drive from El Paso to Santa Fe without a storm, which you shouldn't count on. *If you don't like the weather here, just wait fifteen minutes!* You hear it everywhere, but people in this part of the country say it with propriety. As if their abuela was the first to ever stitch it into an almohada.

From the back of the lot where I was parked I saw a pair of uncles wobble from the church to a plum colored F150, where they sat on the tailgate and broke into a six-pack one had left cooling in bed. I knew the other by his impressively straight back, which, while still plane to the neck, now angled with the weight of his belly so his shoulders slung forward and he had to lift his head to see. He looked like one of those disgustingly eager old men, but I knew better. He had taken us camping one summer near Cloudcroft and said to call him Tio. He's good people. Someone who listens more than he talks. I thought about walking over and asking for help. He would have gladly given me a jump, a lift. But I couldn't talk to Tio or any other Palomo right then.

I called Claire again and left a message. "Sorry I couldn't be there tonight, babe. You know I wanted to. There's a problem with my car, but I should be back—well, I don't know. I'll let you know. Good luck tonight."

A phantom slap on my arm as I hung up. Luis! she'd say, It's bad luck to say good luck in theater! We say break a leg. Fijate, I'd say. Such were the daily fights that make you grateful to get some time alone, even if you're in El Paso.
Pati came out with cake slices for the uncles. Tio picked the walnut bits from the frosting and laughed at something she said. The scabs on his bald head were too sad to look at. I closed my eyes and pictured the Tio I once knew: his yellow eyes and board plank of a back, his smile more gum than tooth. The long ponytail he kept tucked in the back of his shirt. But I remained too long on the ponytail, and soon was seeing the girl on the casket, bent into the opening, touching Armando. Was she his? Had Armando been in love? Married? Were there other children? The questions I had never asked myself and didn’t want to. I folded my things—phone, keys, tie, wallet—into my jacket and laid it on the seat. As I walked away from the church I Happy Sun / Fish / 5 turned and waved to Tio. He couldn’t see me, but the gesture felt well-received somehow. We both had left the lunch looking for something less familiar.

The air was crisp against the September sun, warming the street with a generous glow. I rolled my sleeves to feel it. Upper valley was pleasant and lonely with its wide roads and tall cars. There was the clean smell of privacy that hadn’t changed. I passed the brick homes and RVs, down the sharp hills, through the parking lots of two neighboring malls. I went inside the second for a pretzel before feeling for my wallet. The place was new and loud and bright, the salt-and-sweet-dough-air heavy and coming through my ears. I looked around for teenagers, but saw only sandalled couples, some as old as my parents and most of them Trump-white like my dad. A well-dressed toddler running from his abuela to the escalator, the leash on his harness flitting along the linoleum. A sad man hunched on a stool at the cell-phone cover kiosk, snoring.

On luck I found an abandoned massage chair with fifty-three seconds left on the session timer. I slipped out of my loafers and sat with forty-six seconds left. The rotating knobs were punishing, but wanted, so I closed my eyes and sunk into the soft and surging leather. The colors swirling on my eyelids washed with a warm darkness and I was heading for a restful moment when the time expired, ending the massage and reminding me of my surroundings.

But I really was heading somewhere. I stayed in the chair with my eyes closed, trying to give myself back to the feeling. But now, without the massage, my mind began to turn, and soon was streaming with memories of childhood summers in El Paso. . . . In Abuelito’s bootbox of an office at the community college, spinning in his chair while he taught Biology in the next building, knocking scantrons and yogurt cups of staples to the floor. . . . Armando and me at Ysleta pool, winding our towels into fat, wet cords to snap at each other’s legs, our basketball shorts heavy with the chlorine smell that always left us hungry and horny. . . . The plaster horse head at the swap meet entrance—big as a truck and painted white by pigeons. Waiting with Pati in its menacing shade as Armando jacked switchblades for each of us. . . . Watching varsity football practice—just the boys now—from the top of the bleachers, sucking down limones cut with our new knives, sucking it up when the sun burned our sour hands. . . .

Then the memories yielded to a pale blue shape that opened slowly and beautifully into a darkness, which I occupied for the next hour or so. There, between sleep and focus, I was present in the pleasure of not knowing where I was or where I had been—the good feeling of forgetting.
Near evening I crossed the tracks into lower valley. The wind smelled like wet ground, and I could feel the sweat-beads slowing and cold on my temples. I unrolled my sleeves and watched the sun poach earthward, washing orange the mountains and a thinning bar of sky. At once the ripest and most rotten peach in a broken pool, taking with it all the heat. I kept along the sidewalk as the shadows pulled and weakened.

The houses modest and stately and closer together. In one groomed yard a St. Bernard filling up the porch, present as a bear. He was nimble coming to the iron fence and bowed his head between the bars. His eyelids yawned in pink, sodden bowls that seemed to say, “Come, reason with me.” Ears first, I scratched him as ownerly as one can through a fence. I could really read that dog. I found the good spots fast—the best spots—warm patches of underbelly that pitch a growl up to a purr. I scratched that slobbering son of a bitch til he rolled over, snoring like a generator. Crossing the street with clumps of white hair on my slacks and hands, I felt an aching hollowness. Claire hates dogs.

Every other streetlamp was dead or dying in the quickened darkness. Feeling my blisters, I walked to the playground on the corner and sat on the carousel. I heeled my loafers in the dirt, inching myself around its axis. I was pulling my arms into my shirt for warmth when a green Explorer, much like mine, slowed left at the corner. It passed the playground then stopped, reversed, and stopped again in front of the carousel. The driver dropped his window and waited for something. I was the only thing around, so I approached with my tucked elbows jutting from under my shirt. I was nearly close enough to see his face when he tossed something black at me.

“Here enfries, OK huero?”

He gave a yellow smile, then pulled away and was gone. I replaced my arms in the sleeves and picked up the black thing. I laughed at my luck—it was a jacket. Left arm in first, I swung the heavy suede around my back and as I entered it felt the fit I had once paid the tailor for. I reached inside the left-breast pocket and found: a ticket stub for Grease!, a tissue with blotted snot and chile verde, a receipt for roses and gin. It was my jacket. My tongue dried into a brick as I checked the other pockets. No wallet, no phone—he even kept the tie. It was my Explorer that wouldn’t start, my green Explorer. Tio probably even helped him jump it—now he just wanted to pass along the kindness. Pendejo robbed one stranger, clothed another, called it even.

There was no dog when I returned to the fence, only his shape stamped dark into the lawn. I crushed the unswept leaves along the walks through a snake-line of streets, thinking of anything but my car and Claire’s post-show eyebrows, the hellish vibrato-humming and conjugal levels of detail in telling how her solo went. I could see her thighs crashing in her poodle skirt, livid that I hadn’t tried harder to reach her. Then the yelling. What if something had happened to you?! Why didn’t you borrow a phone? Her pink face wagging as I admit that I hadn’t in our six years of dating, memorized her number. I stared at the ground, approaching a very large sadness, when the image of my girlfriend slimmed and
blurred into the girl on the casket, white socks bunched and loose about slender, brown ankles. I laughed.

“Ankles? Those are the first thing to go,” Armando would say. “Like, Carmen? She’s a hottie now, fersure, but come twenty-five, twenty-six, she’ll blow up like a brinka brinka. It’s the magic taco, man. Every mehicana’s gotta eat it sooner or later. Just look at her mamis!”

Each summer our pillow talk became increasingly devoted to girls and sex; which, until the summer of our junior year, when Armando got laid, were two very separate topics. But from a young age we would often speculate about girls among the other particulars of growing up. These talks were wonderfully uninformed and unfocused, but would always end the same way. One of us would remind the other how fast the summer had passed or how short the other had once been. We’d laugh, then the room would get very still and we’d hear ourselves breathing, and all we could do was look up at the dark canvas of ceiling. It was a panic of unknowing that we silenced by rolling from our beds and pacing frantically, making rules for each other’s futures. So one night, the summer before we started high school, Armando made me swear to God that I would never marry a white girl.

“Whatever. You know I’m not about that,” I said.

“When you’re down here, yea,” he said. “But that’s cuz the brown girls are bangin’ down here. How do I know you don’t have a little white girl up in Albuquerque? For reals, like, what if you’re into like freckles or some shit?”

“Not even. You crazy.”

“I’m serious. You’re half white already. It’s, like, your duty, fool. You gotta be true to your inner beaver.”

Claire and I had never talked so intimately as to reckon with my earliest expectations of love, let alone my promise to Armando, yet somehow she’d always seemed aware and afraid of it. It was how quickly she’d accuse my mother of a disapproving look, her annual suspicion that I was finally going to leave her and New Mexico forever to find some busty latina. It was the memorized Spanish, the growing list of words and phrases she’d shout during sex.

A droning wherrghr. The snuff of lust and cardboard. Cats own nights in the lower valley as rats do in other cities, and I hear them brawling and breeding in the unlit places. I keep walking and the cats soon fade. The dust thickens to dirt as I move down the narrowing street. The street is hardly lit, so familiar and so awful.

A tall girl with a round belly kicks a basketball up into the earthy swirl and in my path. I kick it back but miss, sending her with dragged feet toward the neighbor’s truck it’s rolling toward. Most everyone’s inside. I see the telenovellas glowing round and warm on the curtains. A few boys sit on patched cement with loose heads, the light from their phones betraying their boredom. They look lonely for siblings. I feel the same loneliness on this street, where houses turn to trailers spaced just enough to swing a door. They are all painted one of six colors, like an opened box of forgotten chalks. Once-bright pastels worn to rubble by children and monsoons.
On the last day of the camping trip, before heading back to El Paso, we stopped at White Sands. Tio pulled off into a long, smooth bay of sand until the tires sank. We walked out as far as we could without losing sight of the pickup. We had marveled at the sand from the road, but walking in it changed everything. It was suddenly so white and endless. Like crema forever. We took off our shoes and socks expecting a mild scorch, reasoning by its light color that it wouldn’t be too bad—no worse than the concrete at the pool. But there was no sting. The sand was soft and defiantly cool, like flour. Harina forever.

We climbed to the top of a long dune and built a fire with a phonebook. Nobody had said anything about building a fire. In our minds it was just a given, something that we felt we had to make happen from the moment we passed White Sands on the drive there. Before Tio locked the pickup, Armando and I fished the lighters from our packs and Pati crawled under the seats to find something made of paper to burn. Tio seemed to understand the impulse, and he smiled big when Pati climbed from the driver’s side hugging the phonebook against her tiny body.

“Look how strong!” he said.

We sat around the book and watched the coke-warped pages shrivel bright and black. The sun and smell mixed so thick and hot, we hardly felt the flames when we put our hands up to them. We all smiled at the feeling—the magic of this new place. The flames flapped high, then shrunk. I threw my shirt onto the remains to keep it alive, but the sweaty cloth only smothered it, leaving a muddy, black smear of ash.

“Sabes,” Tío said, “por qué no se quema?”

“The sand? I dunno,” Armando said.

“It’s amazing. It feels like when you’re waiting for the tub to fill up,” Pati said. “I love it, I love it so much!”

“Huerito?” Tio clicked his lips at me.

“Maybe we’re sitting on top of ice,” I said. “Like an underground iceberg or something.”

“That’s just stupid,” Armando said.

“Shuttup.”

“Cállense,” Tío said. “Pati, what you think?”

Pati stood up and circled us, moving the hair from her face as she kept her eyes on her feet. She walked around for several minutes, thinking. Armando made me laugh and Tio flicked me. I hit Armando and Tio pinched me hard this time. He put his finger to his lips and warned us both with his eyes.

“I know it’s not magic,” she said, stopping for a moment. “I’m not stupid. I’m nine.”

She did a few more laps, then took her place in the circle. She didn’t speak, just looked
around at us with a crazy smile, waiting for someone to ask.

“Andale, Einstein,” Armando said. “What’s the answer?”

“It’s the sun,” she said. “There’s places where the hotness don’t touch the ground. Get it? It’s like a present you get just for being here. The sun just wants to be kind!”

#

Now I’m standing at the end of a trailer with no car. Above me are three bay windows covered by a wire screen, each angled to its own view of the black sky. I step back and forth, looking at these windows and I’m feeling light, now heavy—my body trading balance for grief. I buckle. Do I know this place?

I know this place. I skirt the trailer, eyes adjusting. The once-blushed walls now bleached, the aluminum skirting peeled out in sanctuary to every small animal. In back a glassy patch of sand we once called wild, a single piece of rebar staked there. I shake it. It’s still too deep to move, still bent at the top from the post driver—that bend our only edge against the older kids in the neighborhood when we played horseshoes. No horseshoes in sight. I run to the front side and see the aluminum storm door, still dented and clacking loose with the wind. I knock. I knock again and nothing. In the window by the door a small, orange for rent sign with a phone number markered. I return to the end of the trailer, to the three windows. 136 Calle Delfina. Donde vivian los Palomo. I vomit pale and red until I’m left heaving only my grief.

A pitbull stirs ten steps from me. She’s asleep, sunken in a channel of her own clawing. She’s prostrated in pointed attention like a sphynx, held by twenty feet of slackless chain. Her tongue is out and limp, as if she had collapsed in a struggle to reach something she’d been barking at. I catch my breath, spit and clear out my nose. I crouch beside her. She opens an eye to me with a lazy growl, sniffing the air.

“What’s that?” she says.

“What’s what?”

“That smell. What did you eat?”

“It’s vomit,” I say.

“Yes, but what did you eat before?”

“Some tamale and menudo. Not much, though.”

“Eso.” I ask if I can sit with her a while, and she says it’s a free country. The air has taken on the cold of night. She leans into me as I tell her about my day, about Claire and Armando.

“So are you lonely or angry?” she says.

“Both, I guess.”

“You can’t be both,” she says, “not at the same time. I’m sure you’re lonely, but as soon as you get angry you’ve got everyone you’ve ever hurt right there with you, angry too.”
“Are you angry a lot?”

She laughs. “I’m a dog.”

We sit a while longer, listening to the dark for cats and borrachos. Long rolls of silence and understanding. She tells me I’d better go to the police about my car before it ends up in Juarez. I offer to unhook her from the chain before I go, but she says this is her home. I thank her for listening.

“No, gracias a ti,” she says.

“Por qué?” “Just for being here.”

At the police station the secretary finds Claire’s number. I call, but she doesn’t answer. I don’t leave a message. I’m going to leave her, I think. I’m going to tell her about the promise I made to Armando and how lonely I feel. I’m going to get a dog.

Officer Suekawa offers me a holding cell for the night.

“I’ll be back at seven to take you to the car rental. They’ll contact your insurance and get you set up from there. Know what? We better stop at the bank first so you can get a temporary card. Just in case. You Chase? Wells Fargo?”

“Actually, could you take me to the church over by the hospital?”

“The big one, on North Loop?”

“That’s it.”

“I’m all for prayer, sir, but I think you should go forward from this point as if you’ll never see that Explorer again.”

“I have some friends who’ll be there,” I say. “They’ll take care of me.”

The cell is warm and still, but I can’t sleep. Tomorrow I’m going to find the familia Palomo at the early service and sing himnos with them. I’ll tell them who I am. I’ll meet the ones I don’t know and listen to them tell about the burial. I’ll ask the girl who was on the casket for her name. I’ll embrace Tio like brother. I’ll see Pati. If she’s married, I’ll give her husband an abrazo. And if they have kids, I’ll kiss them and tell them about their uncle Armando and how we used to play horseshoes and eat limones. I’ll tell how their mom would tag along with us sometimes. I’ll tell them I had forgotten how beautiful she is.

I close my eyes. Our three bright faces pressed to the acrylic of the bay windows, each angled to our own view of the happy sun. Armando, Luis, Pati. Tres mosqueteros. Two machotes and a mosquito knowing nothing in summer but joy. Being nowhere but here.
Julien Fish is from an avocado town in southern California. He lives in Idaho with his wife and dog.