

The Faults They Had

“Are you paying attention?”

Martín looked up, half mumbling something to let his wife, Britney, know that yes, he was listening.

“I said I started reading Whitman with the kids today.”

“*Leaves?*”

“Yeah.”

“How’d that go?”

“I don’t know, it gets worse every year. They love the standard poems, but the second you throw anything mildly experimental their way they turn on you.”

“Mm-hm,” he said, looking at her, and quickly looking away. This was the routine they had digressed to three months ago when their only daughter, Marcela, went off to college, the perennial chit-chat of passers-by. For eighteen years Marcela filled the small suburban home. First her wails, every four hours, as if she had a timer ticking inside her. Then the exclamations of joy, the dolls, the blocks, the crayons strewn across the entire house, and the incessant playing of *Snow White*—she especially enjoyed the dwarves, hacking away in the mines, and when they started to go home, she, too, would bundle her blankie up and throw it over her back, marching through the house in dwarf solidarity. Then, unexpectedly, the bitterness of adolescence entered

the home, turning the air thick, and with time, the bitterness gained confidence and started verbal brawls with Britney: whether or not she should hang out with her best friend Jenny, who was *troubled and lacking in guidance*; whether her first crush, Bobby, was worth her time, with his pants halfway down his *behind* and a stupid bemused grin that Brit was sure was evidence of his *affinity for marijuana*; whether or not Marcela could, just for once, not sit during dinner with a face of utter disdain, acting as if she had the worst mother in the world, for God forbid her mother actually care about her, not like Jenny's mom who was single and still hopping from guy to guy like a *trollop*. Martín would glance at his wife, smiling. *What*, she would ask. *Nothing*, he would reply with the grin still plastered across his face, *just wondering how a white girl from the Midwest could be such a spic*. She would cringe at the word, and Martín would go back to his silence, remembering that much of his wife was still part of an unknown land.

Through it all, somehow, Marcela had grown into a smart, young woman, centered on her goals and yet friendly and cheerful, two qualities Martín had told himself could not exist simultaneously when he was her age, in order to justify his loneliness. Quicker than when she had stopped crying every four hours for her bottle; quicker than when she had grown out of her *Snow White* phase; quicker than when she had stopped sparring with her mother over every little thing; quicker than anything else, she had left home, towards Harvard, to study literature. Martín had always encouraged her to study engineering, stressing that her mathematical ability was a rare gift, that she had to think pragmatically—he, even if he was an engineer, loved the humanities, but she had to think about paying the bills one day—but she refused, taking after her mother, as she did.

“Martín? You seem out of it,” Britney said.

“It's nothing,” he said, shaking his head. “Just thinking.”

“About?”

“Nothing,” he said, getting up. “You know, I went to the wine shop today and bought a bottle of Malbec. Want to taste?”

“I have to grade essays tonight, but you go ahead.”

An Argentine girl who worked at the shop had recommended the wine to him. She spoke of it as if it were a magical elixir, noting its complexity, its bitterness, its body, its thickness. It all seemed silly to Martín, but there was a weird satisfaction in seeing her thin, pink lips produce those words of praise. He egged her on, asking questions about this, that, or the other, just to have her speak some more. She reminded him of Annabelle, his first girlfriend, and with that memory came all of the insecurities of his youth. Though he had been a gloomy teenager, he still felt nostalgic.

As he poured the wine into a glass, Britney continued talking behind him, her voice tired, heavy.

“I was talking to Pat,” she said.

“Who?”

Britney sighed. The hairs on Martín’s neck perked up.

“He’s the math teacher across the hall from me. He also went to UW Madison. He’s the union rep. I’ve talked about him a hundred times.”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry, I forgot. So, you were talking to Patty...”

“Pat.”

“What?” Martín asked, turning around.

“His name’s Pat. Not Patty.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Pat’s a guy’s name. Patty’s for a girl.”

“Oh,” he said, looking through her. He hadn’t grown up with many Patricks. Strange as it had always been to Britney, the streets of Miami were not inundated with the hard-consonant names of the rest of the US. Martín did, however, know a Patricio, his childhood friend. Thinking back, when he had first introduced Patricio to Britney, he vaguely remembered her calling him Pat, and he and Patricio had exchanged that look they gave whenever the white girls they liked to date said something only a *gringa* would.

She shook her head as if to brush her husband’s ignorance away. “Are you even bothering to listen?”

He was quiet, feeling as he had when his mother had rummaged through his backpack to find a Ziploc bag with weed, waving it to his face, clearly, evidently, plain as day.

“God,” she scoffed, shaking her head, holding the rest of her words in.

Martín swirled the glass, forming thin, crimson streaks that appeared and disappeared at his command. Within the silence, all he could picture were the lips of the girl from the shop, how young she was, how close, and yet so far, his Annabelle was, standing up against a bookcase in her room. Her parents’ cigarettes, masked in vain by her vanilla body splash, consumed him as he latched onto her mouth with his, trying to back his groin away from her legs. His hand could have crept up her back and unlatched her bra, it could have gone up her belly to feel the weight of her breasts, it could have unbuttoned her blue jeans and crept downwards, it could have touched her, been with her, but all would have allowed her to explore him, to discover the extra bit of skin at the end of his cock, and the mere prospect of the horrified *gringa* kept his hands steady at his sides. A full-blown *huevoón*, if ever he had seen one.

He brought the rim of the wine glass to his lips, letting the warm liquid fill his mouth, sloshing it around, as he had once read he should do. He looked down at it, confused. Corked, he thought. The word had made him chuckle when he first saw it in a wine enthusiast magazine. Each little niche seemed to have its own stupid vocabulary. *Corked*. He laughed. The wine was shit. Why mince words?

“What?” Britney asked harshly.

A warmth crept up Martín’s neck. He couldn’t drink like he used to—he couldn’t do a lot of things like he used to. As of late, he gripped the railing of the stairway leading to his room harder and harder, a pulsing pain prickling at his knee. When he found himself on the second floor, he panted for air, becoming reluctantly aware of the gut that hung over his pants like a weighed-down sack of resignation. Whenever he read a book, he found himself orienting the lamp in different directions to get just the right angle; else, his strained eyes would begin to water.

“What are you laughing at?” Britney asked. “Did I say a joke?”

Martín looked up at his wife, his head slowly becoming heavy. He had ruined her, the sweet Midwestern girl she once was, the embodiment of the American dream, the hope, the prospect, the lie his parents had swam into the country for.

She had confessed to him once, on one of those nights when they were falling for each other, the dreams of her girlhood—she had wanted, she said laughing, blushing, turning her head slightly to the side, letting her blonde hair cover her eyes, that she dreamt of Prince Charming, and though she knew it was silly, a fairy tale myth engrained in all girls, she still, a twenty-something trying to figure it all out, found solace in the prospect of such hope. Martín had told her that he could not be her Prince Charming, but instead her *Príncipe Encantador*. Martín

smiled, thinking about how she had looked at him then, how she had snuggled up against his neck, how she had looked up into his eyes and kissed him, how he had decided then that she was the girl he wanted, but he quickly grew serious, looking at her now, her frayed hair, her tired eyes, her plain clothes—*el Príncipe* had failed.

“The wine,” Martín said, coughing midway through. “The guy from the shop had said it was great. And it’s,” he continued, grimacing, staring down at the glass, “corked.”

“The wine,” Britney said curtly.

“Yeah,” he said, sucking on his lips, trying to judge the wine fairly, “she said all these wonderful things, all this fancy wine crap, and it’s just...corked.”

“She?”

“What?”

“You said it was a guy. Now it’s a she?”

“Who cares?” he said shaking his head, annoyed at the interruption. “The point is, I paid fifty-four dollars for this bottle, and it’s not even good. As a kid I never even asked for the latest toy, and now I’m wasting fifty-four bucks on shitty wine.”

“Congratulations,” she said. “You’ve overcome your parents’ frugality.”

He shut up. Of course she thought his parents’ refusal to buy him toys was from a lack of will and not a lack of ability. She had never understood, really, what it meant to not be a privileged white girl in this country, what it meant to be the son of *illegal aliens* constantly demonized on television, what it meant to be at the center of that bubbling rage, that reactionary force his parents took out on each other in response to all the hatred piled up on them, the spewing of threats (“once I have *los papeles* I’m leaving!”), the throwing of fists (“*mijo*, you have to understand how stressful it is, to drive every day without a license, knowing I can get

caught at any moment, your mother nagging, always nagging, I just...”), the hopelessness (“I don’t know if I’ll be able to ever see your *abuelita* again”). It was all as foreign to her as the fortunate dullness of life in rural Wisconsin was to him. He drank the rest of the wine in the glass, placing it harshly on the table.

“Oh yeah,” he said sarcastically. “I’m the poster child of the American Dream.”

“You think you’re not?” she asked. “Whose parents came here from Colombia, to suffer through crappy jobs to help their son go through college, just so he could grow up to become an engineer who only knows how to complain about everything’s that been handed to him?”

“*Handed* to me?” he asked. “You think I got to where I am today because I had everything *handed* to me?”

“Don’t start,” she said.

“Don’t start what?” he asked. “Don’t take your frustrations out on me just because your perfect American life, with the perfect American parents, and the perfect American upbringing ended up with you teaching literature to a bunch of high school kids instead of writing it.”

She glared at him, but the little bit of Midwestern politeness she had left held her back. He glared right back at her, challenging her, begging her to respond, but she was silent, and in that silence he reached for the bottle, refilling his glass, finding a weird pleasure in the glugging of the liquid as it poured. He brought the glass to his lips, taking large gulps. They sat in silence, her gaze veering away, but he continued looking at her and her hazel eyes.

He remembered when he first met her, at a mixer for the engineering and humanities graduate schools they were attending in New England. She dreaded going to them, he would later find out, because she hated talking to the awkward engineering guys who were too full of themselves to find any worth in her pursuit of an English literature degree, but she went

anyways, pressured by her friends. They had started talking by mere chance, and she reluctantly told him what she was studying, expecting the usual look of disapproval, but instead his eyes widened with interest. He had always loved the humanities, especially literature, but he refused to pursue that path because, he reasoned, it didn't justify the struggle of his parents. She told him about Whitman, the subject of her thesis, and he listened to her, genuinely, noticing her eyes that slowly grew in excitement as she talked. He looked at her eyes now, droopy and drained, and drank.

Britney got up to grab a glass, snatching the bottle and filling the glass. She set the bottle back down with a loud thud. Martín looked at her as she walked away, towards the darkness of the living room. He gulped the rest of the wine in his glass, filling it one last time with the bottle upside down, shaking it slightly to see the little droplets that fell below. He walked to the recycling bin, looking under the bottle for the proper symbol. He had heard, once, that green glass was not recycled—he shrugged, throwing it in the normal trash can. What was another bottle in the grand scheme of it all? He grabbed the glass he poured himself on the way towards the living room.

Britney sat near an open window, taking long drags from a cigarette. Every time she inhaled, she tried bringing the burning end as close to her as possible, the redness creaking up, but never far enough to make it to her fingers. She puffed the smoke upwards, into the house, and stared outside.

“What?” Martín asked.

“In Wisconsin, growing up,” she said, gazing outwards, “everyone smoke and drank. Honestly, there wasn't much else to do. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, freezing cold, what could you expect? But I didn't. I always knew I wanted to get out of there. I didn't let myself

succumb to the idea that it was all innocuous—I understood that they all drank and smoked because their lives sucked. I promised myself I wouldn't let that be my fate." She grabbed the glass near her, and drank.

"Was that to be another feat of your glorious Prince Charming?"

"*El Principe Encatador*," she replied with the little Spanish she knew. She took another drag, puffing it inside as she met Martín's eyes.

Martín clenched his jaw, looking down.

She walked towards him.

He looked up at her, smelling the cigarette stench from her breath. Somewhere, far away, Annabelle reemerged, but she was no longer his—he had been replaced, as would become routine with the girls he dated, with another Colombian boy, this one skinnier, more athletic, a proper spic. His face reminded Martín of the son of every guy who went to play *fútbol* with his father on Sundays while Martín, *el pobre huevón*, sat by the sidelines, reading. The new boy's hand had held hers as they walked to her house after school, her parents working, her little sister in daycare, her brother stealing cars. He had been guided through Martín's former terrain—he had stormed through the suffocating smell of cigarettes, keen on fulfilling his goal. He did not hesitate to creep his hand up her back to unlatch her bra; he did not hesitate to feel the weight of her breasts in his hands; he did not hesitate to unzip her blue jeans; he did not hesitate to take off his t-shirt and basketball shorts to slither into bed with her, his hands exploring her, entering her. It was great, she had told Martín, when she thought they were the friends they had once been.

"I don't know what's happened to you," Britney said, "I don't know what's happened to us. But I can't..." She shook her head, sighing. "I can't do...*this*."

"We've been dealing with Marcie leaving, and..."

“No,” Britney replied, cutting him off. “Don’t put this on her.”

“My parents, when I left...”

“Don’t compare us to them.”

“They’re still my parents, Brit. They still had their only son leave for college.”

“Your daughter didn’t have to see you beat me,” she said. “Your daughter didn’t have to see you patronize me. Your daughter didn’t have to put up with half the shit you did.”

“You don’t understand...”

“You’re justifying your father beating your mom now?”

Martín shook. One night, as a boy, he and his parents got home after a car ride that ended in his father swinging at his mother’s face. The blow had brought the final silence, the stabilizing silence, the silence of generations. Slowly, somehow, they all made it inside the small, cheap apartment. The screaming started again. The slamming of doors. Martín grabbed his mother, telling her to sleep with him that night. He did not want her protection. He wanted the ability to protect her. Outside his room his father exclaimed he would commit suicide. Grab a knife and stab himself. End it all. He ran to his father crying, telling him to come to his room, to lie on the floor beside his bed, to stay there, to not do anything, to realize that it would all be okay. Martín thought, somehow, that by having both of them near him he could prevent a tragedy. He didn’t understand then, as he did now, that he was fighting against an entire way of life.

“Don’t,” he said, shaking his head, his eyes watering, “don’t ever, in your life, tell me I have justified what my father did. You don’t know anything. You only remember the bad parts. You know my parents, you see them now, they got through it...”

“I can’t believe you’re...”

“You don’t understand,” he supplicated, his voice cracking. “You don’t understand, okay? It’s different for us.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just,” he said, shaking his head. “It just is.”

They stood in silence for a while.

“It doesn’t change what’s happening here,” she said. “We can’t keep this up. And it’s not Marcie. Don’t delude yourself. This started a long time before she left.”

Martín sucked his teeth, grimacing, looking away. He knew it was true. It’s what he did, with the women he loved, or at least, the ones who loved him. He grew used to them, their comfort, their care, and he pushed them away, pushing, pushing, pushing, until they snapped, and he acted surprised, wondering: how could this have ever happened?

“*La buena vida empalaga,*” he said.

“What?”

He scoffed. “If you had bothered to learn any Spanish,” he said, before he could stop himself.

“Learn Spanish? You think that’s the issue? As if I didn’t take Spanish in school when I met you,” she said.

“Great effort, you took two classes thirty years ago, and never again.”

“And what the hell have you done?” she shot back.

“I’ve supported you,” he said.

“Oh, you’ve supported me? How chivalrous of you, I’ll be sure to build an altar in your honor, to praise you for being the great, big man supporting his poor failure of a wife.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Sure, of course not,” she said walking right up to him. “You think you’re so great, the boy who learned to love women by watching his mom be beaten...”

“Shut up.”

“You think you’re the only one with parent issues?” She scoffed. “You think you’ve overcome your dad’s chauvinism, but look at you, saying that you *support* me.”

“Stop,” he said, the word seething out of his mouth.

“You’re pathetic,” she said, pushing her hand against his chest, “at least your dad had the balls to beat his wife.”

“Shut up!” he screamed, grabbing her arm, twisting her around, and pushing her against the wall with a loud thud. “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

He backed away, shaking, looking at her, looking at his hands. “I,” he began to stutter, but nothing else came out.

A sound screeched through the house, startling them. It was Britney’s phone. Marcela.

Britney stared at Martín, breathing heavily. She took a deep breath, eyes closed. She answered. “Hi, sweetie.”

Martín felt his silent phone within his pocket.

“What’s wrong?”

Martín looked up at Britney, who instinctively looked at him.

“What are you feeling? Honey, it’s probably just a cold...get one of the vitamin C tablets I packed, put it in a glass of water and drink it...yes, I did, it’s in the bag with the cotton balls and bandages...Call me if you need anything...okay...I love you, too. Bye.”

Martín and Britney stared at each other as she shut off her phone, the silence reclaiming its dominion over the room. Britney went to one end of the couch and sat down as Martín walked

past her, grabbed his coat, and went outside. Martín exhaled, seeing his breath in the December cold. The street was quiet, painfully serene.

He took out his phone, and stared at it. It was a bit late, and he didn't want to scare his mom. He imagined waking her up, in the desolate Floridian apartment, his father snoring nearby, shocking her, but she had always had trouble sleeping, so he called her.

“*Hola,*” she said.

“How are you?”

“*Todo bien.* Your dad's already snoring. I gave him a muscle relaxant because his back's been acting up again.”

“Mm-hm.”

“*Que paso?*” she asked.

“Nothing, I just wanted to talk. Did I wake you?”

“No, *mijo*, you know me, I just roam around at night. Ever since you were born, I haven't had a good night's sleep. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

“How's Marcela?”

“She's doing alright. She just called, said she had a cold. She'll be back in two weeks for winter break.”

“*Que bueno.* I remember when you came back from your first semester away. I remember when you left again—it hit me harder than when you left the first time, as if I knew then that you were really gone,” she said. “It gets better.”

Martín looked down. “Yeah, we've been managing.”

“How's Britney?”

“Fine.”

“And how have you guys been?”

He could deceive anyone except his mother. *I did push you out of me*, she would say.

“We’ve been dealing.”

“You know I know when you’re lying to me, Martín Esteban.”

“It’s just, she’s,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“You know, I always told you to get yourself a nice *Colombiana*, someone who would treat you right, not some cold *gringa*, though you ended up a little bit like them, being raised in this place.”

Martín was silent.

She continued. “I always wondered how things would have been different if I had stayed in Colombia, if I had had you there—maybe then you would have...” She paused. “Maybe then you would have been a bit more loving.” She sighed. “What reason do you have to be like this? Your father and I suffered in this country to provide you a better life, and you accomplished all of it. You get to give yourself, your wife, your daughter all the luxuries we didn’t have. And you’re going to behave this way?” She scoffed. “You know, my *abuela* used to have a saying...”

“I know.”

“Oh yeah? What was it?”

“*La buena vida empalaga.*”

“*Exactamente. La buena vida empalaga.*”

They were quiet for a bit, contemplating the wisdom of *la abuela*.

Yet, this wasn’t why Martín had called. “Ma, I wanted to ask you something.”

“*Que?*”

He breathed deeply. “Why did you stay with dad?”

There was a long pause on the other end, a presumed moment of reflection. “When I was young I was a *pendeja*, and when I was old I was too lonely. It was...your *abuela, que en paz descansa*, she ended up alone, with me here, unable to travel, and she still in Colombia. My father was a good-for-nothing, and my mother got rid him, rightfully so, but she was alone. When you left for college, she told me ‘*mija*, whatever you do, don’t end up alone. *Una vez sola es muy dura.*’ So I understood that I wasn’t staying with your father, who I do care for, over some silly concept like love. I understood that you had to leave home, to make your own life; I couldn’t keep you tied down. And with you gone, who did I have left in this country? Who else, but your father, could pass me a glass of water if I ever got sick?”

Martín sat by the curb, eyes watering, sniffing.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” she said. “But if you’re calling me then it’s probably something you did. I love you, you know I do, and whatever you decide I’ll support you, as always. But if you can prevent whatever you think is happening, do it. You’re the man. Fix it.”

“It’ll be fine,” she added. “I love you.”

“Mm-hm,” he said. “Bye.”

He hung up and looked down the dark driveway. Small flakes of snow began to drop down. He looked up, letting the snow fall on his face. Growing up in Florida, snow had remained as special to him as when he had seen it for the first time in college. He looked up into the dark sky, and closed his eyes.

He got up and went into the house. Britney was still sitting on one end of the couch. Martín walked towards her, glancing her way, quick to avert his eyes. He sat on the other end of the couch, carefully. The silence crept up inside him. He turned the television on, muted, seeing

images of migrant children reaching a new land, twenty, thirty, forty of them crammed into a raft, some huddled within the arms of adults, others alone. They reminded him of a Whitman poem Britney had gushed over when she wrote her thesis—*there was a child went forth every day, and the first object he looked upon that object he became*...He wanted to tell Britney about the poem, to remind her that he had not forgotten, to show her that even after all this time, he still remembered that one poem she loved, but when he went to speak he heard her stifled sobs. He remained silent, staring at the screen. He should have talked to her, comforted her, been with her, but instead he decided to grant her privacy. He turned the volume of the television up, the anchorwoman's voice running through the numbers of the migrant crisis, as a boy came on screen and silently screamed, staring back into the sea.