Manchas

“Digame Paloma, what happened?’

Paloma had just walked into the apartment with her head down, tears squeezing out her eyes and cutting down her face. Her hands were clenched in fists and the mud streak on her blue shirt told me that she had fallen. She was hunched over as if she was trying to roll into a ball like a hedgehog. I put down my book. It was one Mr. Benitez, my sophomore English teacher, had given me, told me that he thought I would like it – because it had the same rambling voice and ideas that he saw in my writing.

I collected Paloma in my arms. I knew she would have to cry first and then she’d tell me what happened but a little bit of me hoped that she would blurt it out while she cried, just so that I didn’t have to wait so long. Of course, that’s not how it happened. I held her while she cried, and I tried to remember that damn Dora the Explorer theme song. Paloma watched the show so much I figured it had to be ingrained somewhere in my brain, like La Cucaracha or Las Mañanitas – or Mami’s rezas. The ones she made us say before bed every night when we were younger and the ones Hector and I now lie about saying every night when she asks. They stick around, like ugly manchas from when you were younger.

It finally popped into my head.

“Hey Paloma,” I whispered into her ear, “Dora, Dora, Dora, the explorer! Boots, that super cool exploradora! Dora, Dora, Dora, uh –”


“Oh, ok Palomita. You know it better than I do.”
“And then it’s ‘Need your help! Grab your backpacks! Let’s go! Jump in! Vamanos! You can lead the way! Hey! Hey! Do-do-Dora! Do-do-do-Dora! Do-do-Dora! Do-do-do-Dora! Swiper no Swiping! Swiper no Swiping! Dora the explorer!’ ”

By the end she was smiling and standing in front of me.

“Ok Palomita, what happened?”

“Nada,” she said, her arms coming in to hug herself and cover up the mud stain.

“Paloma? Mi Palomita, ¿que paso?” I ask, grabbed her hands.

“It’s just – just that Ryan and Eric pushed me down,” she said, wiping her nose on her sleeve, “and then they took my Ra-punzel doll. They said that they were gonna cut her hair off. But she needs her hair, it’s where her power comes from.”

Paloma grabbed her own hair, as if to prove that her wavy brown mejicana hair was the same as Rapunzel’s blonde straw. To her, maybe it is.

“Hector, Hector! Come out here man!”

I could hear him clanging around in our room.

“Hector!”

“Oye, what man?” he said as he came down the hallway, shirtless but tugging an oversized tee over his head. The hall light was off but I found myself looking for the outline of his tattoo – the one he got after Antonio was killed – and I caught the outline of the calavera imposed over a crucifix, taking the place of Jesus, before it was concealed under his shirt.

“The white boys took Paloma’s doll.”

“Pendejos. We should rough them up a bit and get the muñeca back.”

“Come on Hector, that’s what you said when they took Chango’s ball.”
“Well, the putamadres keep taking our shit, eventually imma let them know how I feel bout it.”

“Just go get Tía Rosa. I’ll take care of Paloma.”

Hector went out the front door, undoubtedly he’d take way too long just to go next door and get Tía Rosa but it was okay, it meant that I had a minute to clean Paloma up. She turned her palms upwards to me and I saw that she’d scuffed them, not bad, just the scrapes of palms hitting the concrete but Mamí would ask me later if I’d cleaned them with the hydrogen peroxide we keep under the sink so I figured I probably should. After dabbing on the peroxide, that Paloma winced at with each touch of the cotton ball; I washed her face, erasing the tear trails that had grooved their way into the dirt on her cheeks.

“Ok Palomita, you feeling better?”

“Um-uh,” she said, nodding her head.

“Ok, go turn on the TV. Tía Rosa will be over in a minute and we’ll make you something to eat, ok?”

She scurried into the living room, smiling already at the idea of watching TV. Funny how quickly she got back to normal. I knew I’d have to retell the story later tonight when Mamí came home and asked about the afternoon and when Papí came home right before dinner Mamí would tell him about it, but hopefully by then Paloma wouldn’t be listening – so she wouldn’t be reminded again. And hopefully by then we’d have the doll back and it would be a memoria to forget about.

Tía Rosa busted into the apartment at that moment, no Hector in sight.

“Hector dijo something happened with Paloma.”
“Yes, she ok now, but the white boys, the Rowes, took her Rapunzel doll. They pushed her down. Just a few scratches on the palms but nothing too bad. It’s just that they still have her doll.”

“So whatchyou doing about it? ¡Va y arranca la muñeca! But only the doll – nada mas!”

“Uh- um, ok.” Tía Rosa went into the living room to sit with Paloma and I grabbed my jacket. It wasn’t too cold outside but hell if I knew where we were going so I figured I’d grab it anyways.

I passed through the living room, pulling Hector’s hand-me-down jacket on, and step out the front door onto the deck. Hector’s standing there, leaning over the edge, just looking down at the yard. He wasn’t staring at anything too interesting; there was nothing going on – not even a couple of kids kicking around a ball.

“Oye pendejo – we gonna go get those kids or what?” Hector said without even turning to look at me.

“Yeah, Tía Rosa wants us to get Paloma’s doll back.”

“Carajo – what do I look like a fucking delivery boy?” Hector said, but he pushed away from the bannister and started off towards the stairs – I was sure he already knew where the two boys were.

Hector moved down the stairs with a quick laziness, with as little effort as possible but only the most efficient movements. His focus surprised me; he spends most of his time pent up in his room or out all night. When he does do something, he does it in that haze that fogs his eyes, so seeing him engaged like that – focused in on finding the white boys, it was kind of cool.
The blanquitos live in the apartment across the courtyard, the last one in the building, tacked onto the edge. They got a welcome mat and even two pumpkins outside their door – in the spirit of the season. They didn’t know that those pumpkins aren’t a good idea – they’ll wake up one morning and the pumpkins’ll be smashed in pedacitos all over that mat of theirs.

Hector went straight through the yard, like he was doing one of those drunk driving tests, no stumbling or weaving. Bianca, one of the barrioetas with nails long enough to count as claws, sat outside her padres’ apartment door, bouncing her nena in her lap. She’s one of those who’ll never get out of here. Not unless she wins the lotto or finds some papíchulo with money.

“Bianca – did the blanquitos go home?” Hector asked as he walked by her, not really waiting for her to reply.

“Yeah, ellos ran inside just a minute ago,” she calls to my back. I give her a thumbs up but Hector didn’t even acknowledge that she answered him, he was already at the apartment door. He banged on the door, four heavy fists.

The door opened, latch in place and we could see a sliver of the Mom.

“What do you want?” she spat it out at us.

“Your sons took our sister’s doll.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why are you here?”

“Because your little bullies stole our sister’s doll!” She seemed a little taken aback at how loud Hector is; he was actually yelling at her. I was convinced he was about to put his shoulder into the door when she quickly pushed the door shut.
“What the fuck? ¡Este putamadre!” Hector started pounding on the door again, his knocks are more like punches than taps and I could tell he was ready to do something bobo. Chances are if he broke in the door I’d have followed him in. He was pounding on the door when it cracked open again. The Mom’s pale hands darted out the door real quick and empuja the Rapunzel doll at Hector.

Hector barely glanced at it before passing it to me. He’s locked in a stare with the Mom. I stared at it in my hands, all quebrado. Her hair had been hacked off, cut in jagged pieces, and she was missing her right hand. It looks like it’s been cut off with scissors – deliberate. She’s also missing her left shoe and there’s drying mud on her purple dress.

“What are you going to do bout your boys?”

“None of your business,” she spat back at Hector and slammed the door again. We heard the deadbolt lock down but Hector doesn’t turn away from the door.

“Hey! Tell your chingadas that they better watch it! They come near her again we gonna have problemas!” He hesitates a moment, to make sure that his threat is received, then he turned to me and looked at my hands, holding Rapunzel’s butchered remains.

“Fuck. They really fucked her up. Cabrones.” Hector turned the doll over in his hands, “Vamos, we’ll get her a new one.”

Hector spat on the welcome mat and we started to walk away. As we walked out onto the street, towards the Target over on Monroe, Hector tossed the mutilated doll in the trash.

We cut across the street and went down Jefferson all the way to Perspective before hooking a right towards Target. When we walked in the doors Hector didn’t even pretend to look at any clothes, he went straight for the toy section. We found the dolls crammed into
the end of an aisle with Barbie doll backpacks and tiaras. Hector stood in front of them, his hands placed on his hips and his eyes darted across the rows of dolls.

“Marcos, ves the Rapunzel doll?” he said, without turning to look at me.

“No.”

Hector nodded his head and then walked down the aisle and found one of them guys who works there. The dude didn’t look much older than me; he was probably around Hector’s age. His nametag read Joseph.

“Ey, I’m looking for a Rapunzel doll. Purple dress.”

“Well, all our dolls are down this aisle –“

“I know. We just checked. Ain’t you got some in the back?”

“I’m sorry, if it’s not here, we’re sold out,” Joseph said as he scanned the rows of dolls.

“Can you check in the back?”

“I’m sorry, we must be out.”

“What cha mean out? There are fucking thousands of this fucking doll made and you don’t have one?”

“I’m sorry sir.”

“Fuck you,” Hector said.

“Sir, please calm down. I’m sorry we’re out of the –“

“Oh, well I’m sorry too. Fucking hijodeputa,” Hector brought his shoulders back tightened his jaw.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you to leave. Please,” Joseph said, his eyes widening.
“Fuck you,” Hector spits out. “I’m just trying to buy a fucking doll.” Hector flipped the guys off as we walked away and all I could do was shrug apologetically at him.

Hector booked it out of Target. His shoulders were tight and he had that look of someone who needs to hit something.

“Vamos. We gotta talk to that white lady again.”

I could tell it wouldn’t do nothing to try and talk Hector down, he was focused. We retraced our steps back to our apartment complex. Hector didn’t say a word the whole way, just simmered like horchata – all the heat swirling below the surface.

We got to the outer gate and Hector dug into the trash can, shoving aside a McDonald’s bag and a soda cup before finding the Rapunzel doll. He brushed off a burger wrapper and stared at the doll. He touched the severed wrist and rubbed at the dried mud on her dress. He turned to me, gave me a nod and blew air out his nose before stepping inside the gate and cutting across the courtyard towards the white boy’s apartment.

He reached the front door and started pounding, violent fists that thudded like an ax against a tree trunk.

“Open up!”

“No. Get away from the door. I’m calling the cops.” The white lady’s voice back at us through the door.

“Yo, get your white ass out here – you gotta pay for this doll!”

“Leave!”

Hector continued to pound on the door. He kicked at the door jam and attacked the door like he was a boxeador and this was a title fight.

“Your boys fucked up our doll!”
There was no reply from the other side. Hector kicked the welcome mat and his eyes came to rest on the pumpkins.

“Hector man, dejalo. We'll come back later.”

“No Marcos. This is how it goes. They hit us. We hit back.”

He picked up the first pumpkin and heaved it against the door. It splattered like a water balloon and the orange seeds shot out at us. The pieces of the pumpkin carcass smacked against the ground and stained the welcome mat. Hector didn't even hesitate; he picked up the second pumpkin and drew his arm back, took a step forward and put his weight behind the pumpkin. It at the same spot of the door, smashing like shards of glass and opening a split in the wood. A small crack.

“Fucking putamadre! Open the door and look at this doll!” he yelled.

“Hector. Let's go man. Vamos. She ain't coming out.”

“Ey! Shut up man. I got this,” Hector snapped at me.

“Come on lady. Let's just talk then. Let's just talk.”

“Hector. Let's go man. We can find the doll somewhere else.”

“Damn Marcos, go home man if you ain't gonna help me. Carajo.”

“I ain't going nowhere –“

“Fucking go hombre. I got this,” Hector said, stepping towards me.

I started to back towards the apartment.

“Lady, let's talk Goddamnit.”

At that moment two white cops came running across the courtyard with their hands already on their holsters. One of them wore sunglasses – as if it wasn’t October in Toledo.

“Step away from the door!” the cop with sunglasses yelled at Hector.
“Yo man, I ain’t doing nothing.”

“Get on your knees and put your hands up. And you,” the cop says, looking at me, “Stay over there.”

Hector is tossed to the ground and the cop placed a knee in his back while cuffing him. Hector’s face was mushed in a puddle and when the cop hauled him to his feet, dirty water streaked down his face and mud was mashed on his shirt.

“You have the right to remain silent . . .”

“Damn dude – these fucking cuffs too tight. I can’t feel my hands.”

“You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford and attorney . . .”

“What rights? I ain’t got no fucking rights!”

“. . . do you wish to speak?”

Hector shut up at that moment, refused to answer. The cop pushed Hector over to his car and put him in the back seat – all TV style, hand of the top of Hector’s head. One of the cops went inside the apartment to talk to the white lady. When he came out, he sneered at me and then got into the cop car and they drove away. I called Mamí right away. She got off work and came and picked me up. We drove to the Toledo Police Department Station.

That was an hour ago. Now I’m sitting with Mamí in the lobby of the police department. The clerk said he’d be with us in a moment. Mamí’s purse rests in her lap and she stares at the Rapunzel doll in her hand. She tries to wipe the mud off the dress but it’s set into the purple. It doesn’t matter though; Mamí continues to rub her thumb over the stain – trying to erase the mancha.