

from

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

by
Junot Díaz

“An extraordinarily vibrant book that’s fueled by adrenaline-powered prose...a book that decisively establishes Junot Díaz as one of contemporary fiction’s most distinctive and irresistible new voices.”

—Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Oscar is a sweet but disastrously overweight ghetto nerd who—from the New Jersey home he shares with his old world mother and rebellious sister—dreams of becoming the Dominican J.R.R. Tolkien and, most of all, finding love. But Oscar may never get what he wants. Blame the fukú—a curse that has haunted Oscar’s family for generations, following them on their epic journey from Santo Domingo to the USA.

Encapsulating Dominican-American history, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao opens our eyes to an astonishing vision of the contemporary American experience and explores the endless human capacity to persevere—and risk it all—in the name of love.

ONE

GhettoNerd at the
End of the World

1974–1987

THE GOLDEN AGE

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock.

And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him).

He was seven then.

In those blessed days of his youth, Oscar was something of a Casanova. One of those preschool loverboys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a merengue and giving them the pelvic pump, the first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it any chance he got. Because in those days he was (still) a “normal” Dominican boy raised in a “typical” Dominican family, his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike. During parties—and there were many many parties in those long-ago seventies days, before Washington Heights was Washington Heights,

before the Bergenline became a straight shot of Spanish for almost a hundred blocks—some drunk relative inevitably pushed Oscar onto some little girl and then everyone would howl as boy and girl approximated the hip-motism of the adults.

You should have seen him, his mother sighed in her Last Days. He was our little Porfirio Rubirosa.⁴

All the other boys his age avoided the girls like they were a bad case of Captain Trips. Not Oscar. The little guy loved himself the females, had “girlfriends” galore. (He was a stout kid, heading straight to fat, but his mother kept him nice in haircuts and clothes, and before the proportions of his head changed he’d had these lovely flashing eyes and these cute-ass cheeks, visible in all his pictures.) The girls—his sister Lola’s friends, his mother’s friends, even their neighbor, Mari Colón, a thirty-something postal employee who wore red on her lips and

4. In the forties and fifties, Porfirio Rubirosa—or Rubi, as he was known in the papers—was the third-most-famous Dominican in the world (first came the Failed Cattle Thief, and then the Cobra Woman herself, María Montez). A tall, debonair prettyboy whose “enormous phallus created havoc in Europe and North America,” Rubirosa was the quintessential jet-setting car-racing polo-obsessed playboy, the Trujillato’s “happy side” (for he was indeed one of Trujillo’s best-known minions). A part-time former model and dashing man-about-town, Rubirosa famously married Trujillo’s daughter Flor de Oro in 1932, and even though they were divorced five years later, in the Year of the Haitian Genocide, homeboy managed to remain in El Jefe’s good graces throughout the regime’s long run. Unlike his ex-brother-in-law Ramfis (to whom he was frequently connected), Rubirosa seemed incapable of carrying out many murders; in 1935 he traveled to New York to deliver El Jefe’s death sentence against the exile leader Angel Morales but fled before the botched assassination could take place. Rubi was the original Dominican Player, fucked all sorts of women—Barbara Hutton, Doris Duke (who happened to be the richest woman in the world), the French actress Danielle Darrieux, and Zsa Zsa Gabor—to name but a few. Like his pal Ramfis, Porfirio died in a car crash, in 1965, his twelve-cylinder Ferrari skidding off a road in the Bois de Boulogne. (Hard to overstate the role cars play in our narrative.)

walked like she had a bell for an ass—all purportedly fell for him. *Ese muchacho está bueno!* (Did it hurt that he was earnest and clearly attention-deprived? Not at all!) In the DR during summer visits to his family digs in Baní he was the worst, would stand in front of Nena Inca's house and call out to passing women—*Tú eres guapa! Tú eres guapa!*—until a Seventh-day Adventist complained to his grandmother and she shut down the hit parade lickety-split. *Muchacho del diablo!* This is not a cabaret!

It truly was a Golden Age for Oscar, one that reached its apotheosis in the fall of his seventh year, when he had two little girlfriends at the same time, his first and only ménage à trois. With Maritza Chacón and Olga Polanco.

Maritza was Lola's friend. Long-haired and prissy and so pretty she could have played young Dejah Thoris. Olga, on the other hand, was no friend of the family. She lived in the house at the end of the block that his mother complained about because it was filled with puertoricans who were always hanging out on their porch drinking beer. (What, they couldn't have done that in Coamo? Oscar's mom asked crossly.) Olga had like ninety cousins, all who seemed to be named Hector or Luis or Wanda. And since her mother was *una maldita borracha* (to quote Oscar's mom), Olga smelled on some days of ass, which is why the kids took to calling her Mrs. Peabody.

Mrs. Peabody or not, Oscar liked how quiet she was, how she let him throw her to the ground and wrestle with her, the interest she showed in his *Star Trek* dolls. Maritza was just plain beautiful, no need for motivation there, always around too, and it was just a stroke of pure genius that convinced him to kick it to

them both at once. At first he pretended that it was his number-one hero, Shazam, who wanted to date them. But after they agreed he dropped all pretense. It wasn't Shazam—it was Oscar.

Those were more innocent days, so their relationship amounted to standing close to each other at the bus stop, some undercover hand-holding, and twice kissing on the cheeks very seriously, first Maritza, then Olga, while they were hidden from the street by some bushes. (Look at that little macho, his mother's friends said. *Que hombre.*)

The threesome only lasted a single beautiful week. One day after school Maritza cornered Oscar behind the swing set and laid down the law, It's either her or *me!* Oscar held Maritza's hand and talked seriously and at great length about his love for her and reminded her that they had agreed to *share*, but Maritza wasn't having any of it. She had three older sisters, knew everything she needed to know about the possibilities of *sharing*. Don't talk to me no more unless you get rid of her! Maritza, with her chocolate skin and narrow eyes, already expressing the Ogún energy that she would chop at everybody with for the rest of her life. Oscar went home morose to his pre-Korean-sweatshop-era cartoons—to the *Herculoids* and *Space Ghost*. What's wrong with you? his mother asked. She was getting ready to go to her second job, the eczema on her hands looking like a messy meal that had set. When Oscar whimpered, Girls, Moms de León nearly exploded. Tú ta llorando por una muchacha? She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear.

Mami, stop it, his sister cried, stop it!

She threw him to the floor. Dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if the little puta respects you.

If he'd been a different nigger he might have considered the galletazo. It wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies. (Unlike his sister, who fought boys and packs of morena girls who hated her thin nose and straightish hair.) Oscar had like a zero combat rating; even Olga and her toothpick arms could have stomped him silly. Aggression and intimidation out of the question. So he thought it over. Didn't take him long to decide. After all, Maritza was beautiful and Olga was not; Olga sometimes smelled like pee and Maritza did not. Maritza was allowed over their house and Olga was not. (A puertorican over here? his mother scoffed. Jamás!) His logic as close to the yes/no math of insects as a nigger could get. He broke up with Olga the following day on the playground, Maritza at his side, and how Olga had cried! Shaking like a rag in her hand-me-downs and in the shoes that were four sizes too big! Snots pouring out her nose and everything!

In later years, after he and Olga had both turned into overweight freaks, Oscar could not resist feeling the occasional flash of guilt when he saw Olga loping across a street or staring blankly out near the New York bus stop, couldn't stop himself from wondering how much his cold-as-balls breakup had contributed to her present fucked-upness. (Breaking up with her, he would remember, hadn't felt like anything; even when she started crying, he hadn't been moved. He'd said, No be a baby.)

What *had* hurt, however, was when Maritza dumped *him*. Monday after he'd fed Olga to the dogs he arrived at the bus stop with his beloved *Planet of the Apes* lunch box only to

discover beautiful Maritza holding hands with butt-ugly Nelson Pardo. Nelson Pardo who looked like Chaka from *Land of the Lost*! Nelson Pardo who was so stupid he thought the moon was a stain that God had forgotten to clean. (He'll get to it soon, he assured his whole class.) Nelson Pardo who would become the neighborhood B&E expert before joining the Marines and losing eight toes in the First Gulf War. At first Oscar thought it a mistake; the sun was in his eyes, he'd not slept enough the night before. He stood next to them and admired his lunch box, how realistic and diabolical Dr. Zaius looked. But Maritza wouldn't even *smile* at him! Pretended he wasn't there. We should get married, she said to Nelson, and Nelson grinned moronically, turning up the street to look for the bus. Oscar had been too hurt to speak; he sat down on the curb and felt something overwhelming surge up from his chest, scared the shit out of him, and before he knew it he was crying; when his sister, Lola, walked over and asked him what was the matter he'd shaken his head. Look at the mariconcito, somebody snickered. Somebody else kicked his beloved lunch box and scratched it right across General Urko's face. When he got on the bus, still crying, the driver, a famously reformed PCP addict, had said, Christ, don't be a fucking *baby*.

How had the breakup affected Olga? What he really was asking was: *How had the breakup affected Oscar?*

It seemed to Oscar that from the moment Maritza dumped him—Shazam!—his life started going down the tubes. Over the next couple of years he grew fatter and fatter. Early adolescence hit him especially hard, scrambling his face into nothing you could call cute, splotching his skin with zits, making him self-conscious;

and his interest—in Genres!—which nobody had said boo about before, suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with a capital L. Couldn't make friends for the life of him, too dorky, too shy, and (if the kids from his neighborhood are to be believed) too *weird* (had a habit of using big words he had memorized only the day before). He no longer went anywhere near the girls because at best they ignored him, at worst they shrieked and called him *gordo asqueroso*! He forgot the *perrito*, forgot the pride he felt when the women in the family had called him *hombre*. Did not kiss another girl for a long *long* time. As though almost everything he had in the girl department had burned up that one fucking week.

Not that his “girlfriends” fared much better. It seemed that whatever bad no-love karma hit Oscar hit them too. By seventh grade Olga had grown huge and scary, a troll gene in her somewhere, started drinking 151 straight out the bottle and was finally taken out of school because she had a habit of screaming *NATAS!* in the middle of homeroom. Even her breasts, when they finally emerged, were floppy and terrifying. Once on the bus Olga had called Oscar a *cake eater*, and he'd almost said, Look who's talking, *puerca*, but he was afraid that she would rear back and trample him; his cool-index, already low, couldn't have survived that kind of a *paliza*, would have put him on par with the handicapped kids and with Joe Locorotundo, who was famous for masturbating in public.

And the lovely Maritza Chacón? The hypotenuse of our triangle, how had she fared? Well, before you could say *Oh Mighty Isis*, Maritza blew up into the flyest *guapa* in Paterson, one of the Queens of New Peru. Since they stayed neighbors, Oscar saw

her plenty, a ghetto Mary Jane, hair as black and lush as a thunderhead, probably the only Peruvian girl on the planet with pelo curlier than his sister's (he hadn't heard of Afro-Peruvians yet, or of a town called Chinchá), body fine enough to make old men forget their infirmities, and from the sixth grade on dating men two, three times her age. (Maritza might not have been good at much—not sports, not school, not work—but she was good at men.) Did that mean she had avoided the curse—that she was happier than Oscar or Olga? That was doubtful. From what Oscar could see, Maritza was a girl who seemed to delight in getting slapped around by her boyfriends. Since it happened to her *all the time*. If a boy hit *me*, Lola said cockily, I would bite his *face*.

See Maritza: French-kissing on the front stoop of her house, getting in or out of some roughneck's ride, being pushed down onto the sidewalk. Oscar would watch the French-kissing, the getting in and out, the pushing, all through his cheerless, sexless adolescence. What else could he do? His bedroom window looked out over the front of her house, and so he always peeped her while he was painting his D&D miniatures or reading the latest Stephen King. The only things that changed in those years were the models of the cars, the size of Maritza's ass, and the kind of music volting out the cars' speakers. First freestyle, then Ill Will-era hip-hop, and, right at the very end, for just a little while, Héctor Lavoe and the boys.

He said hi to her almost every day, all upbeat and faux-happy, and she said hi back, indifferently, but that was it. He didn't imagine that she remembered their kissing—but of course he could not forget.

THE MORONIC INFERNNO

High school was Don Bosco Tech, and since Don Bosco Tech was an urban all-boys Catholic school packed to the strakes with a couple hundred insecure hyperactive adolescents, it was, for a fat sci-fi-reading nerd like Oscar, a source of endless anguish. For Oscar, high school was the equivalent of a medieval spectacle, like being put in the stocks and forced to endure the peltings and outrages of a mob of deranged half-wits, an experience from which he supposed he should have emerged a better person, but that's not really what happened—and if there were any lessons to be gleaned from the ordeal of those years he never quite figured out what they were. He walked into school every day like the fat lonely nerdy kid he was, and all he could think about was the day of his manumission, when he would at last be set free from its unending horror. Hey, Oscar, are there faggots on Mars?—Hey, Kazoo, catch *this*. The first time he heard the term *moronic inferno* he knew exactly where it was located and who were its inhabitants.

Sophomore year Oscar found himself weighing in at a whopping 245 (260 when he was depressed, which was often) and it had become clear to everybody, especially his family, that he'd become the neighborhood *parigüayo*.⁵ Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have

5. The pejorative *parigüayo*, Watchers agree, is a corruption of the English neologism "party watcher." The word came into common usage during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924. (You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either.) During the First Occupation it was reported that members of the American Occupying Forces would often attend Dominican parties

pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks. He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses—his “anti-pussy devices,” Al and Miggs, his only friends, called them—sporting an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded. The Eyes of Mingus. (A comparison he made himself one day going through his mother's record collection; she was the only old-school dominicana he knew who had dated a moreno until Oscar's father put an end to that particular chapter of the All-African World Party.) You have the same eyes as your abuelo, his Nena Inca had told him on one of his visits to the DR, which should have been some comfort—who doesn't like resembling an ancestor?—except this particular ancestor had ended his days in prison.

Oscar had always been a young nerd—the kind of kid who read Tom Swift, who loved comic books and watched *Ultraman*—but by high school his commitment to the Genres had become absolute. Back when the rest of us were learning to

but instead of joining in the fun the Outlanders would simply stand at the edge of dances and *watch*. Which of course must have seemed like the craziest thing in the world. Who goes to a party to *watch*? Thereafter, the Marines were *parigüayos*—a word that in contemporary usage describes anybody who stands outside and watches while other people scoop up the girls. The kid who don't dance, who ain't got game, who lets people clown him—he's the *parigüayo*.

If you looked in the Dictionary of Dominican Things, the entry for *parigüayo* would include a wood carving of Oscar. It is a name that would haunt him for the rest of his life and that would lead him to another Watcher, the one who lamps on the Blue Side of the Moon.

play wallball and pitch quarters and drive our older brothers' cars and sneak dead soldiers from under our parents' eyes, he was gorging himself on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells, Burroughs, Howard, Alexander, Herbert, Asimov, Bova, and Heinlein, and even the Old Ones who were already beginning to fade—E. E. “Doc” Smith, Stapledon, and the guy who wrote all the Doc Savage books—moving hungrily from book to book, author to author, age to age. (It was his good fortune that the libraries of Paterson were so underfunded that they still kept a lot of the previous generation's nerdery in circulation.) You couldn't have torn him away from any movie or TV show or cartoon where there were monsters or spaceships or mutants or doomsday devices or destinies or magic or evil villains. In these pursuits alone Oscar showed the genius his grandmother insisted was part of the family patrimony. Could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic. (If only he'd been good at videogames it would have been a slam dunk but despite owning an Atari and an Intellivision he didn't have the reflexes for it.) Perhaps if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't. Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to.⁶

6. Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from

Oscar was a social introvert who trembled with fear during gym class and watched nerd British shows like *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7*, and could tell you the difference between a Veritech fighter and a Zentraedi walker, and he used a lot of huge-sounding nerd words like *indefatigable* and *ubiquitous* when talking to niggers who would barely graduate from high school.

Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both). After a transition like that I'm guessing only the most extreme scenarios could have satisfied. Maybe it was that in the DR he had watched too much *Spider-Man*, been taken to too many Run Run Shaw kung fu movies, listened to too many of his abuela's spooky stories about el Cuco and la Ciguapa? Maybe it was his first librarian in the U.S., who hooked him on reading, the electricity he felt when he touched that first Danny Dunn book? Maybe it was just the zeitgeist (were not the early seventies the dawn of the Nerd Age?) or the fact that for most of his childhood he had absolutely no friends? Or was it something deeper, something ancestral?

Who can say?

What is clear is that being a reader/fanboy (for lack of a better term) helped him get through the rough days of his youth, but it also made him stick out in the mean streets of Paterson even more than he already did. Victimized by the other boys—punches and pushes and wedgies and broken glasses and brand-new books from Scholastic, at a cost of fifty cents each, torn in half before his very eyes. You like books? Now you got two! Har-har! No one, alas, more oppressive than the oppressed. Even his own mother found his preoccupations nutty. Go outside and play! she commanded at least once a day. *Pórtate como un muchacho normal.*

(Only his sister, a reader too, supporting him. Bringing him books from her own school, which had a better library.)

You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest.

Pa' 'fuera! his mother roared. And out he would go, like a boy condemned, to spend a few hours being tormented by the other boys—Please, I want to stay, he would beg his mother, but she shoved him out—You ain't a woman to be staying in the house—one hour, two, until finally he could slip back inside unnoticed, hiding himself in the upstairs closet, where he'd read by the slat of light that razored in from the cracked door. Eventually, his mother rooting him out again: What in carajo is the matter with you?

(And already on scraps of paper, in his composition books, on the backs of his hands, he was beginning to scribble, nothing serious for now, just rough facsimiles of his favorite stories, no sign yet that these half-assed pastiches were to be his Destiny.)

One of those nerds who was always hiding out in the library, who adored Tolkien and later the Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman novels (his favorite character was of course Raistlin), and who, as the eighties marched on, developed a growing obsession with the End of the World. (No apocalyptic movie or book or game existed that he had not seen or read or played—Wyndham and Christopher and Gamma World were his absolute favorites.) You get the picture. His adolescent nerdliness vaporizing any iota of a chance he had for young love. Everybody else going through the terror and joy of their first crushes, their first dates, their first kisses while Oscar sat in the back of the class, behind his DM's screen, and watched his adolescence stream by. Sucks to be left out of adolescence, sort of like getting locked in the closet on Venus when the sun appears for the first time in a hundred years. It would have been one thing if like some of the nerdbos I'd grown up with he hadn't cared about girls, but alas he was still the passionate enamorado who fell in love easily and deeply. He had secret loves all over town, the kind of curly-haired big-bodied girls who wouldn't have said boo to a loser like him but about whom he could not stop dreaming. His affection—that gravitational mass of love, fear, longing, desire, and lust that he directed at any and every girl in the vicinity without regard to looks, age, or availability—broke his heart each and every day. Despite the fact that he considered it this huge sputtering force, it was actually most like a ghost because no girl ever really seemed to notice it. Occasionally they might shudder or cross their arms when he walked near, but that was about it. He cried often for

his love of some girl or another. Cried in the bathroom, where nobody could hear him.

Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands. Everybody noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it. His tío Rudolfo (only recently released from his last and final bid in the Justice and now living in their house on Main Street) was especially generous in his tutelage. Listen, palomo: you have to grab a muchacha, y météselo. That will take care of *everything*. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y météselo! Tío Rudolfo had four kids with three different women so the nigger was without doubt the family's resident météselo expert.

His mother's only comment? You need to worry about your grades. And in more introspective moments: Just be glad you didn't get my luck, hijo.

What luck? his tío snorted.

Exactly, she said.

His friends Al and Miggs? Dude, you're kinda way fat, you know.

His abuela, La Inca? Hijo, you're the most buenmoso man I know!

Oscar's sister, Lola, was a lot more practical. Now that her crazy years were over—what Dominican girl doesn't have those?—she'd turned into one of those tough Jersey dominicanas, a long-distance runner who drove her own car, had her

own checkbook, called men bitches, and would eat a fat cat in front of you without a speck of vergüenza. When she was in fourth grade she'd been attacked by an older acquaintance, and this was common knowledge throughout the family (and by extension a sizable section of Paterson, Union City, and Teaneck), and surviving that urikán of pain, judgment, and bochinche had made her tougher than adamantine. Recently she'd cut her hair short—flipping out her mother yet again—partially I think because when she'd been little her family had let it grow down past her ass, a source of pride, something I'm sure her attacker noticed and admired.

Oscar, Lola warned repeatedly, you're going to die a virgin unless you start *changing*.

Don't you think I know that? Another five years of this and I'll bet you somebody tries to name a church after me.

Cut the hair, lose the glasses, exercise. And get rid of those porn magazines. They're disgusting, they bother Mami, and they'll never get you a date.

Sound counsel that in the end he did not adopt. He tried a couple of times to exercise, leg lifts, sit-ups, walks around the block in the early morning, that sort of thing, but he would notice how everybody else had a girl but him and would despair, plunging right back into eating, *Penthouses*, designing dungeons, and self-pity.

I seem to be allergic to diligence, and Lola said, Ha. What you're allergic to is *trying*.

It wouldn't have been half bad if Paterson and its surrounding precincts had been like Don Bosco or those seventies feminist

sci-fi novels he sometimes read—an all-male-exclusion zone. Paterson, however, was girls the way NYC was girls, Paterson was girls the way Santo Domingo was girls. Paterson had mad girls, and if that wasn't guapas enough for you, well, mother-fucker, then roll south and there'd be Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City, the Oranges, Union City, West New York, Weehawken, Perth Amboy—an urban swath known to niggers everywhere as Negrapolis One. So in effect he saw girls—Hispanophone Caribbean girls—everywhere.

He wasn't safe even in his own house, his sister's girlfriends were always hanging out, permanent guests. When they were around he didn't need no *Penthouses*. Her girls were not too smart but they were fine as shit: the sort of hot-as-balls Latinas who only dated weight-lifting morenos or Latino cats with guns in their cribs. They were all on the volleyball team together and tall and fit as colts and when they went for runs it was what the track team might have looked like in terrorist heaven. Bergen County's very own cigüapas: la primera was Gladys, who complained endlessly about her chest being too big, that maybe she'd find normal boyfriends if she'd had a smaller pair; Marisol, who'd end up at MIT and *hated* Oscar but whom Oscar liked most of all; Leticia, just off the boat, half Haitian half Dominican, that special blend the Dominican government swears *no existe*, who spoke with the deepest accent, a girl so good she refused to sleep with *three consecutive boyfriends!* It wouldn't have been so bad if these chickies hadn't treated Oscar like some deaf-mute harem guard, ordering him around, having him run their errands, making fun of his games and his looks; to make shit even worse, they blithely went on about the particu-

lars of their sex lives with no regard for him, while he sat in the kitchen, clutching the latest issue of *Dragon*. Hey, he would yell, in case you're wondering there's a male unit in here.

Where? Marisol would say blandly. I don't see one.

And when they talked about how all the Latin guys only seemed to want to date whitegirls, he would offer, *I like Spanish girls*, to which Marisol responded with wide condescension. That's great, Oscar. Only problem is no Spanish girl would date you.

Leave him alone, Leticia said. I think you're cute, Oscar.

Yeah, right, Marisol laughed, rolling her eyes. Now he'll probably write a book about you.

These were Oscar's furies, his personal pantheon, the girls he most dreamed about and most beat off to and who eventually found their way into his little stories. In his dreams he was either saving them from aliens or he was returning to the neighborhood, rich and famous—It's him! The Dominican Stephen King!—and then Marisol would appear, carrying one each of his books for him to sign. Please, Oscar, marry me. Oscar, drolly: I'm sorry, Marisol, I don't marry ignorant bitches. (But then of course he would.) Maritza he still watched from afar, convinced that one day, when the nuclear bombs fell (or the plague broke out or the Tripods invaded) and civilization was wiped out he would end up saving her from a pack of irradiated ghouls and together they'd set out across a ravaged America in search of a better tomorrow. In these apocalyptic daydreams he was always some kind of plátano Doc Savage, a supergenius who combined world-class martial artistry with deadly firearms proficiency. Not bad for a nigger who'd never even shot an air

rifle, thrown a punch, or scored higher than a thousand on his SATs.

O S C A R I S B R A V E

Senior year found him bloated, dyspeptic, and, most cruelly, alone in his lack of girlfriend. His two nerdbos, Al and Miggs, had, in the craziest twist of fortune, both succeeded in landing themselves girls that year. Nothing special, skanks really, but girls nonetheless. Al had met his at Menlo Park. She'd come on to *him*, he bragged, and when she informed him, after she sucked his dick of course, that she had a girlfriend *desperate* to meet somebody, Al had dragged Miggs away from his Atari and out to a movie and the rest was, as they say, history. By the end of the week Miggs was getting his too, and only then did Oscar find out about any of it. While they were in his room setting up for another "hair-raising" Champions adventure against the Death-Dealing Destroyers. (Oscar had to retire his famous Aftermath! campaign because nobody else but him was hankering to play in the postapocalyptic ruins of virus-wracked America.) At first, after hearing about the double-bootie coup, Oscar didn't say nothing much. He just rolled his dro's over and over. Said, You guys sure got lucky. It killed him that they hadn't thought to include him in their girl heists; he hated Al for inviting Miggs instead of him and he hated Miggs for getting a girl, period. Al getting a girl Oscar could comprehend; Al (real name Alok) was one of those tall Indian prettyboys who would never

have been pegged by anyone as a role-playing nerd. It was Miggs's girl-getting he could not fathom, that astounded him and left him sick with jealousy. Oscar had always considered Miggs to be an even bigger freak than he was. Acne galore and a retard's laugh and gray fucking teeth from having been given some medicine too young. So is your girlfriend cute? he asked Miggs. He said, Dude, you should see her, she's beautiful. Big fucking tits, Al seconded. That day what little faith Oscar had in the world took an SS-N-17 snipe to the head. When finally he couldn't take it no more he asked, pathetically, What, these girls don't have any other friends?

Al and Miggs traded glances over their character sheets. I don't think so, dude.

And right there he learned something about his friends he'd never known (or at least never admitted to himself). Right there he had an epiphany that echoed through his fat self. He realized his fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends were embarrassed by *him*.

Knocked the architecture right out of his legs. He closed the game early, the Exterminators found the Destroyers' hide-out right away—That was bogus, Al grouched. After he showed them out he locked himself in his room, lay in bed for a couple of stunned hours, then got up, undressed in the bathroom he no longer had to share because his sister was at Rutgers, and examined himself in the mirror. The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions! He looked straight out of a Daniel Clowes comic book. Or like the fat blackish kid in Beto Hernández's Palomar.

Jesus Christ, he whispered. I'm a Morlock.

The next day at breakfast he asked his mother: Am I ugly?

She sighed. Well, hijo, you certainly don't take after me.

Dominican parents! You got to love them!

Spent a week looking at himself in the mirror, turning every which way, taking stock, not flinching, and decided at last to be like Roberto Durán: No más. That Sunday he went to Chucho's and had the barber shave his Puerto Rican 'fro off. (Wait a minute, Chucho's partner said. *You're Dominican?*) Oscar lost the mustache next, and then the glasses, bought contacts with the money he was making at the lumberyard and tried to polish up what remained of his Dominicanness, tried to be more like his cursing swaggering cousins, if only because he had started to suspect that in their Latin hypermaleness there might be an answer. But he was really too far gone for quick fixes. The next time Al and Miggs saw him he'd been starving himself for three days straight. Miggs said, Dude, what's the matter with *you*?

Changes, Oscar said pseudo-cryptically.

What, are you some album cover now?

He shook his head solemnly. I'm embarking on a new cycle of my life.

Listen to the guy. He already sounds like he's in college.

That summer his mother sent him and his sister to Santo Domingo, and this time he didn't fight it like he had in the recent past. It's not like he had much in the States keeping him.

He arrived in Baní with a stack of notebooks and a plan to fill them all up. Since he could no longer be a gamemaster he decided to try his hand at being a real writer. The trip turned out to be something of a turning point for him. Instead of discouraging his writing, chasing him out of the house like his mother used to, his abuela, Nena Inca, let him be. Allowed him to sit in the back of the house as long as he wanted, didn't insist that he should be "out in the world." (She had always been over-protective of him and his sister. Too much bad luck in this family, she sniffed.) Kept the music off and brought him his meals at exactly the same time every day. His sister ran around with her hot Island friends, always jumping out of the house in a bikini and going off to different parts of the Island for overnight trips, but he stayed put. When any family members came looking for him his abuela chased them off with a single imperial sweep of her hand. Can't you see the muchacho's working? What's he doing? his cousins asked, confused. He's being a genius is what, La Inca replied haughtily. Now váyanse. (Later when he thought about it he realized that these very cousins could probably have gotten him laid if only he'd bothered to hang out with them. But you can't regret the life you didn't lead.) In the afternoons, when he couldn't write another word, he'd sit out in front of the house with his abuela and watch the street scene, listen to the raucous exchanges between the neighbors. One evening, at the end of his trip, his abuela confided: Your mother could have been a doctor just like your grandfather was.

What happened?

La Inca shook her head. She was looking at her favorite picture of his mother on her first day at private school, one of those typical serious DR shots. What always happens. Un maldito hombre.

He wrote two books that summer about a young man fighting mutants at the end of the world (neither of them survive). Took crazy amounts of field notes too, names of things he intended to later adapt for science-fictional and fantastic purposes. (Heard about the family curse for like the thousandth time but strangely enough didn't think it worth incorporating into his fiction—I mean, shit, what Latino family doesn't think it's cursed?) When it was time for him and his sister to return to Paterson he was almost sad. Almost. His abuela placed her hand on his head in blessing. *Cúdate mucho, mi hijo*. Know that in this world there's somebody who will always love you.

At JFK, almost not being recognized by his uncle. Great, his tío said, looking askance at his complexion, now you look Haitian.

After his return he hung out with Miggs and Al, saw movies with them, talked Los Brothers Hernández, Frank Miller, and Alan Moore with them but overall they never regained the friendship they had before Santo Domingo. Oscar listened to their messages on the machine and resisted the urge to run over to their places. Didn't see them but once, twice a week. Focused on his writing. Those were some fucking lonely weeks when all he had were his games, his books, and his words. So now I have a hermit for a son, his mother complained bitterly. At night, unable to sleep, he watched a lot of bad TV, became obsessed with two movies in particular: *Zardoz* (which

he'd seen with his uncle before they put him away for the second time) and *Virus* (the Japanese end-of-the-world movie with the hot chick from *Romeo and Juliet*). *Virus* especially he could not watch to the end without crying, the Japanese hero arriving at the South Pole base, having walked from Washington, D.C., down the whole spine of the Andes, for the woman of his dreams. I've been working on my fifth novel, he told the boys when they asked about his absences. It's *amazing*.

See? What did I tell you? Mr. Collegeboy.

In the old days when his so-called friends would hurt him or drag his trust through the mud he always crawled voluntarily back into the abuse, out of fear and loneliness, something he'd always hated himself for, but not this time. If there existed in his high school years any one moment he took pride in it was clearly this one. Even told his sister about it during her next visit. She said, Way to go, O! He'd finally showed some backbone, hence some pride, and although it hurt, it also felt motherfucking *good*.

OSCAR COMES CLOSE

In October, after all his college applications were in (Fairleigh Dickinson, Montclair, Rutgers, Drew, Glassboro State, William Paterson; he also sent an app to NYU, a one-in-a-million shot, and they rejected him so fast he was amazed the shit hadn't come back Pony Express) and winter was settling its pale miserable ass across northern New Jersey, Oscar fell in love with a girl in his SAT prep class. The class was being conducted in one of

those “Learning Centers” not far from where he lived, less than a mile, so he’d been walking, a healthy way to lose weight, he thought. He hadn’t been expecting to meet anyone, but then he’d seen the beauty in the back row and felt his senses fly out of him. Her name was Ana Obregón, a pretty, loudmouthed gordita who read Henry Miller while she should have been learning to wrestle logic problems. On about their fifth class he noticed her reading *Sexus* and she noticed him noticing, and, leaning over, she showed him a passage and he got an erection like a motherfucker.

You must think I’m weird, right? she said during the break.

You ain’t weird, he said. Believe me—I’m the top expert in the state.

Ana was a talker, had beautiful Caribbean-girl eyes, pure anthracite, and was the sort of heavy that almost every Island nigger dug, a body that you just knew would look good in and out of clothes; wasn’t shy about her weight, either; she wore tight black stirrup pants like every other girl in the neighborhood and the sexiest underwear she could afford and was a meticulous putter-on of makeup, an intricate bit of multitasking for which Oscar never lost his fascination. She was this peculiar combination of badmash and little girl—even before he’d visited her house he knew she’d have a whole collection of stuffed animals avalanched on her bed—and there was something in the seamlessness with which she switched between these aspects that convinced him that both were masks, that there existed a third Ana, a hidden Ana who determined what mask to throw up for what occasion but who was otherwise obscure and

impossible to know. She'd gotten into Miller because her ex-boyfriend, Manny, had given her the books before he joined the army. He used to read passages to her all the time: That made me *so* hot. She'd been thirteen when they started dating, he was twenty-four, a recovering coke addict—Ana talking about these things like they weren't nothing at all.

You were thirteen and your mother *allowed* you to date a septuagenarian?

My parents *loved* Manny, she said. My mom used to cook dinner for him all the time.

He said, That seems highly unorthodox, and later at home he asked his sister, back on winter break, For the sake of argument, would you allow your pubescent daughter to have relations with a twenty-four-year-old male?

I'd kill him first.

He was amazed how relieved he felt to hear that.

Let me guess: You know somebody who's doing this?

He nodded. She sits next to me in SAT class. I think she's orchidaceous.

Lola considered him with her tiger-colored irises. She'd been back a week and it was clear that college-level track was kicking her ass, the sclera in her normally wide manga-eyes were shot through with blood vessels. You know, she said finally, we colored folks talk plenty of shit about loving our children but we really don't. She exhaled. We don't, we don't, we don't.

He tried to put a hand on his sister's shoulder but she shrugged it off. You better go bust out some crunches, Mister.

That's what she called him whenever she was feeling tender or wronged. Mister. Later she'd want to put that on his gravestone but no one would let her, not even me.

Stupid.

A M O R D E P E N D E J O

He and Ana in SAT class, he and Ana in the parking lot afterward, he and Ana at the McDonald's, he and Ana become friends. Each day Oscar expected her to be adiós, each day she was still there. They got into the habit of talking on the phone a couple times a week, about nothing really, spinning words out of their everyday; the first time she called *him*, offering him a ride to SAT class; a week later he called her, just to try it. His heart beating so hard he thought he would die but all she did when she picked him up was say, Oscar, listen to the *bullshit* my sister pulled, and off they'd gone, building another one of their word-scrappers. By the fifth time he called he no longer expected the Big Blow-off. She was the only girl outside his family who admitted to having a period, who actually said to him, I'm bleeding like a *hog*, an astounding confidence he turned over and over in his head, sure it meant something, and when he thought about the way she laughed, as though she owned the air around her, his heart thudded inside his chest, a lonely rada. Ana Obregón, unlike every other girl in his secret cosmology, he actually fell for *as* they were getting to know each other. Because her appearance in his life was sudden, because she'd come in under his radar, he didn't have time to raise his usual wall of nonsense or level some wild-ass

expectations her way. Maybe he was plain tired after four years of not getting ass, or maybe he'd finally found his zone. Incredibly enough, instead of making an idiot out of himself as one might have expected, given the hard fact that this was the first girl he'd ever had a conversation with, he actually took it a day at a time. He spoke to her plainly and without effort and discovered that his constant self-deprecation pleased her immensely. It was amazing how it was between them; he would say something obvious and uninspired, and she'd say, Oscar, you're really fucking smart. When she said, *I love men's hands*, he spread both of his across his face and said, faux-casual-like, Oh, *really*? It cracked her up.

She never talked about what they were; she only said, Man, I'm glad I got to know you.

And he said, I'm glad I'm me knowing you.

One night while he was listening to New Order and trying to chug through *Clay's Ark*, his sister knocked on his door.

You got a visitor.

I do?

Yup. Lola leaned against his door frame. She'd shaved her head down to the bone, Sinéad-style, and now everybody, including their mother, was convinced she'd turned into a lesbiana.

You might want to clean up a little. She touched his face gently. Shave those pussy hairs.

It was Ana. Standing in his foyer, wearing a full-length leather, her trigueña skin blood-charged from the cold, her face gorgeous with eyeliner, mascara, foundation, lipstick, and blush.

Freezing out, she said. She had her gloves in one hand like a crumpled bouquet.

Hey, was all he managed to say. He could hear his sister upstairs, listening.

What you doing? Ana asked.

Like nothing.

Like let's go to a movie, then.

Like OK, he said.

Upstairs his sister was jumping up and down on his bed, low-screaming, It's a date, it's a date, and then she jumped on his back and nearly toppled them clean through the bedroom window.

So is this some kind of date? he said as he slipped into her car.

She smiled wanly. You could call it that.

Ana drove a Cressida, and instead of taking them to the local theater she headed down to the Amboy Multiplex.

I love this place, she said as she was wrangling for a parking space. My father used to take us here when it was still a drive-in. Did you ever come here back then?

He shook his head. Though I heard they steal plenty of cars here now.

Nobody's stealing *this* baby.

It was so hard to believe what was happening that Oscar really couldn't take it seriously. The whole time the movie—*Manhunter*—was on, he kept expecting niggers to jump out with cameras and scream, Surprise! Boy, he said, trying to remain on her map, this is some movie. Ana nodded; she smelled of some perfume he could not name, and when she pressed close the heat off her body was *vertiginous*.

On the ride home Ana complained about having a headache and they didn't speak for a long time. He tried to turn on

the radio but she said, No, my head's really killing me. He joked, Would you like some crack? No, Oscar. So he sat back and watched the Hess Building and the rest of Woodbridge slide past through a snarl of overpasses. He was suddenly aware of how tired he was; the nervousness that had raged through him the entire night had exhausted his ass. The longer they went without speaking the more morose he became. It's just a movie, he told himself. It's not like it's a date.

Ana seemed unaccountably sad and she chewed her bottom lip, a real bembra, until most of her lipstick was on her teeth. He was going to make a comment about it but decided not to.

You reading anything good?

Nope, she said. You?

I'm reading *Dune*.

She nodded. I *hate* that book.

They reached the Elizabeth exit, which is what New Jersey is *really* known for, industrial wastes on both sides of the turnpike. He had started holding his breath against those horrible fumes when Ana let loose a scream that threw him into his passenger door. Elizabeth! she shrieked. Close your fucking legs!

Then she looked over at him, tipped back her head, and laughed.

When he returned to the house his sister said, Well?

Well what?

Did you *fuck* her?

Jesus, Lola, he said, blushing.

Don't lie to me.

I do not move so precipitously. He paused and then sighed. In other words, I didn't even get her scarf off.

Sounds a little suspicious. I know you Dominican men. She held up her hands and flexed the fingers in playful menace. *Son pulpos*.

The next day he woke up feeling like he'd been unshackled from his fat, like he'd been washed clean of his misery, and for a long time he couldn't remember why he felt this way, and then he said her name.

OSCAR IN LOVE

And so now every week they headed out to either a movie or the mall. They talked. He learned that her ex-boyfriend, Manny, used to smack the shit out of her, which was a problem, she confessed, because she liked it when guys were a little rough with her in bed; he learned that her father had died in a car accident when she was a young girl in Macorís, and that her new stepfather didn't care two shits about her but that it didn't matter because once she got into Penn State she didn't ever intend to come back home. In turn he showed her some of his writings and told her about the time he'd gotten struck by a car and put in the hospital and about how his *tío* used to smack the shit out of him in the old days; he even told her about the crush he had on Maritza Chacón and she screamed, Maritza Chacón? I know that *cuero*! Oh my God, Oscar, I think even my stepfather slept with her!

Oh, they got close all right, but did they ever kiss in her car? Did he ever put his hands up her skirt? Did he ever thumb her clit? Did she ever push up against him and say his name in a

throaty voice? Did he ever stroke her hair while she sucked him off? Did they ever fuck?

Poor Oscar. Without even realizing it he'd fallen into one of those Let's-Be-Friends Vortexes, the bane of nerdbos everywhere. These relationships were love's version of a stay in the stocks, in you go, plenty of misery guaranteed and what you got out of it besides bitterness and heartbreak nobody knows. Perhaps some knowledge of self and of women.

Perhaps.

In April he got his second set of SAT scores back (1020 under the old system) and a week later he learned he was heading to Rutgers New Brunswick. Well, you did it, hijo, his mother said, looking more relieved than was polite. No more selling pencils for me, he agreed. You'll love it, his sister promised him. I know I will. I was meant for college. As for Ana, she was on her way to Penn State, honors program, full ride. And now my stepfather can kiss my ass! It was also in April that her ex-boyfriend, Manny, returned from the army—Ana told him during one of their trips to the Yaohan Mall. His sudden appearance, and Ana's joy over it, shattered the hopes Oscar had cultivated. He's back, Oscar asked, like forever? Ana nodded. Apparently Manny had gotten into trouble again, drugs, but this time, Ana insisted, he'd been set up by these three cocolos, a word he'd never heard her use before, so he figured she'd gotten it from Manny. Poor Manny, she said.

Yeah, poor Manny, Oscar muttered under his breath.

Poor Manny, poor Ana, poor Oscar. Things changed quickly. First off, Ana stopped being home all the time, and Oscar found himself stacking messages on her machine: This is Oscar,

a bear is chewing my legs off, please call me; This is Oscar, they want a million dollars or it's over, please call me; This is Oscar, I've just spotted a strange meteorite and I'm going out to investigate. She always got back to him after a couple of days, and was pleasant about it, but still. Then she canceled three Fridays in a row and he had to settle for the clearly reduced berth of Sunday after church. She'd pick him up and they'd drive out to Boulevard East and park and together they'd stare out over the Manhattan skyline. It wasn't an ocean, or a mountain range; it was, at least to Oscar, better, and it inspired their best conversations.

It was during one of those little chats that Ana let slip, God, I'd forgotten how big Manny's cock was.

Like I really need to hear that, he snapped.

I'm sorry, she said hesitantly. I thought we could talk about everything.

Well, it wouldn't be bad if you actually kept Manny's anatomical enormity to yourself.

So we can't talk about everything?

He didn't even bother answering her.

With Manny and his *big cock* around, Oscar was back to dreaming about nuclear annihilation, how through some miraculous accident he'd hear about the attack first and without pausing he'd steal his tío's car, drive it to the stores, stock it full of supplies (maybe shoot a couple of looters en route), and then fetch Ana. What about Manny? she'd wail. There's no time! he'd insist, peeling out, shoot a couple more looters (now slightly mutated), and then repair to the sweaty love den where Ana would quickly succumb to his take-charge genius and his

by-then ectomorphic physique. When he was in a better mood he let Ana find Manny hanging from a light fixture in his apartment, his tongue a swollen purple bladder in his mouth, his pants around his ankles. The news of the imminent attack on the TV, a half-literate note pinned to his chest. *I koona taek it*. And then Oscar would comfort Ana with the terse insight, He was too weak for this Hard New World.

So she has a boyfriend? Lola asked him suddenly.

Yes, he said.

You should back off for a little while.

Did he listen? Of course he didn't. Available any time she needed to kvetch. And he even got—joy of joys!—the opportunity to meet the famous Manny, which was about as fun as being called a fag during a school assembly (which had happened). (Twice.) Met him outside Ana's house. He was this intense emaciated guy with marathon-runner limbs and voracious eyes; when they shook hands Oscar was sure the nigger was going to smack him, he acted so surly. Manny was muy bald and completely shaved his head to hide it, had a hoop in each ear and this leathery out-in-the-sun buzzardy look of an old cat straining for youth.

So you're Ana's little friend, Manny said.

That's me, Oscar said in a voice so full of cheerful innocuousness that he could have shot himself for it.

Oscar is a brilliant writer, Ana offered. Even though she had never once asked to read anything he wrote.

He snorted. What would you have to write about?

I'm into the more speculative genres. He knew how absurd he sounded.

The more speculative genres. Manny looked ready to cut a steak off him. You sound mad corny, guy, you know that?

Oscar smiled, hoping somehow an earthquake would demolish all of Paterson.

I just hope you ain't trying to chisel in on my girl, guy.

Oscar said, Ha-ha. Ana flushed red, looked at the ground.

A joy.

With Manny around, he was exposed to an entirely new side of Ana. All they talked about now, the little they saw each other, was Manny and the terrible things he did to her. Manny smacked her, Manny kicked her, Manny called her a fat twat, Manny cheated on her, she was sure, with this Cuban chickie from the middle school. So that explains why I couldn't get a date in those days; it was Manny, Oscar joked, but Ana didn't laugh. They couldn't talk ten minutes without Manny beeping her and her having to call him back and assure him she wasn't with anybody else. And one day she arrived at Oscar's house with a bruise on her face and with her blouse torn, and his mother had said: I don't want any trouble here!

What am I going to do? she asked over and over and Oscar always found himself holding her awkwardly and telling her, Well, I think if he's this bad to you, you should break up with him, but she shook her head and said, I know I should, but I can't. I *love* him.

Love. Oscar knew he should have checked out right then. He liked to kid himself that it was only cold anthropological interest that kept him around to see how it would all end, but the truth was he couldn't extricate himself. He was totally and irrevocably in love with Ana. What he used to feel for those

girls he'd never really known was nothing compared to the amor he was carrying in his heart for Ana. It had the density of a dwarf-motherfucking-star and at times he was a hundred percent sure it would drive him mad. The only thing that came close was how he felt about his books; only the combined love he had for everything he'd read and everything he hoped to write came even close.

Every Dominican family has stories about crazy loves, about niggers who take love too far, and Oscar's family was no different.

His abuelo, the dead one, had been unyielding about one thing or another (no one ever exactly said) and ended up in prison, first mad, then dead; his abuela Nena Inca had lost her husband six months after they got married. He had drowned on Semana Santa and she never remarried, never touched another man. We'll be together soon enough, Oscar had heard her say.

Your mother, his tía Rubelka had once whispered, was a loca when it came to love. It almost killed her.

And now it seemed that it was Oscar's turn. *Welcome to the family*, his sister said in a dream. *The real family*.

It was obvious what was happening, but what could he do? There was no denying what he felt. Did he lose sleep? Yes. Did he lose important hours of concentration? Yes. Did he stop reading his Andre Norton books and even lose interest in the final issues of *Watchmen*, which were unfolding in the illest way? Yes. Did he start borrowing his tío's car for long rides to the Shore, parking at Sandy Hook, where his mom used to take them before she got sick, back when Oscar hadn't been too fat, before she stopped going to the beach altogether? Yes.

Did his youthful unrequited love cause him to lose weight? Unfortunately, this alone it did not provide, and for the life of him he couldn't understand why. When Lola had broken up with Golden Gloves she'd lost almost twenty pounds. What kind of genetic discrimination was this, handed down by what kind of scrub God?

Miraculous things started happening. Once he blacked out while crossing an intersection and woke up with a rugby team gathered around him. Another time Miggs was goofing on him, talking smack about his aspirations to write role-playing games—complicated story, the company Oscar had been hoping to write for, Fantasy Games Unlimited, and which was considering one of his modules for PsiWorld, had recently closed, scuttling all of Oscar's hopes and dreams that he was about to turn into the next Gary Gygax. Well, Miggs said, it looks like *that* didn't work out, and for the first time ever in their relationship Oscar lost his temper and without a word swung on Miggs, connected so hard that homeboy's mouth spouted blood. Jesus Christ, Al said. Calm down! I didn't mean to do it, he said unconvincingly. It was an accident. Mudafuffer, Miggs said. Mudafuffer! He got so bad that one desperate night, after listening to Ana sobbing to him on the phone about Manny's latest bullshit, he said, I have to go to church now, and put down the phone, went to his *tío's* room (Rudolfo was out at the titty bar), and stole his antique Virginia Dragoon, that oh-so-famous First Nation—exterminating Colt .44, heavier than bad luck and twice as ugly. Stuck its impressive snout down the front of his pants and proceeded to stand in front of Manny's building almost the entire night. Got real friendly with the aluminum

siding. Come on, motherfucker, he said calmly. I got a nice eleven-year-old girl for you. He didn't care that he would more than likely be put away forever, or that niggers like him got ass *and* mouth raped in jail, or that if the cops picked him up and found the gun they'd send his tío's ass up the river for parole violation. He didn't care about nada that night. His head contained zero, a perfect vacuum. He saw his entire writing future flash before his eyes; he'd only written one novel worth a damn, about an Australian hunger spirit preying on a group of small-town friends, wouldn't get a chance to write anything better—career over. Luckily for the future of American Letters, Manny did not come home that night.

It was hard to explain. It wasn't just that he thought Ana was his last fucking chance for happiness—this was clearly on his mind—it was also that he'd never ever in all his miserable eighteen years of life experienced anything like he'd felt when he was around that girl. I've waited forever to be in love, he wrote his sister. How many times I thought *this is never going to happen to me*. (When in his second-favorite anime of all time, *Robotech Macross*, Rich Hunter finally hooked up with Lisa, he broke down in front of the TV and cried. Don't tell me they shot the president, his tío called from the back room, where he was quietly snorting you-know-what.) It's like I swallowed a piece of heaven, he wrote to his sister in a letter. You can't imagine how it feels.

Two days later he broke down and confessed to his sister about the gun stuff and she, back on a short laundry visit, flipped out. She got them both on their knees in front of the altar she'd built to their dead abuelo and had him swear on

their mother's living soul that he'd never pull anything like that again as long as he lived. She even cried, she was so worried about him.

You need to stop this, Mister.

I know I do, he said. But I don't know if I'm even here, you know?

That night he and his sister both fell asleep on the couch, she first. Lola had just broken up with her boyfriend for like the tenth time, but even Oscar, in his condition, knew they would be back together in no time at all. Sometime before dawn he dreamt about all the girlfriends he'd never had, row upon row upon row upon row, like the extra bodies that the Miraclepeople had in Alan Moore's *Miracleman*. *You can do it*, they said.

He awoke, cold, with a dry throat.

They met at the Japanese mall on Edgewater Road, Yaohan, which he had discovered one day on his long I'm-bored drives and which he now considered part of their landscape, something to tell their children about. It was where he came for his anime tapes and his mecha models. Ordered them both chicken katsu curries and then sat in the large cafeteria with the view of Manhattan, the only gaijin in the whole joint.

You have beautiful breasts, he said as an opener.

Confusion, alarm. Oscar. What's the matter with you?

He looked out through the glass at Manhattan's western flank, looked out like he was some deep nigger. Then he told her.

There were no surprises. Her eyes went soft, she put a hand on his hand, her chair scraped closer, there was a strand of yellow in her teeth. Oscar, she said gently, *I have* a boyfriend.

She drove him home; at the house he thanked her for her time, walked inside, lay in bed.

In June he graduated from Don Bosco. See them at graduation: his mother starting to look thin (the cancer would grab her soon enough), Rudolfo high as shit, only Lola looking her best, beaming, happy. You did it, Mister. You did it. He heard in passing that of everybody in their section of P-town only he and Olga—poor fucked-up Olga—had not attended even one prom. Dude, Miggs joked, maybe you should have asked *her* out.

In September he headed to Rutgers New Brunswick, his mother gave him a hundred dollars and his first kiss in five years, his tío a box of condoms: Use them all, he said, and then added: On girls. There was the initial euphoria of finding himself alone at college, free of everything, completely on his fucking own, and with it an optimism that here among these thousands of young people he would find someone like him. That, alas, didn't happen. The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy. After a spate of parties that led to nothing but being threatened by some drunk whiteboys, and dozens of classes where not a single girl looked at him, he felt the optimism wane, and before he even realized what had happened he had buried himself in what amounted to the college version of what he'd majored in all throughout high

school: getting no ass. His happiest moments were genre moments, like when *Akira* was released (1988). Pretty sad. Twice a week he and his sister would dine at the Douglass dining hall; she was a Big Woman on Campus and knew just about everybody with any pigment, had her hand on every protest and every march, but that didn't help his situation any. During their get-togethers she would give him advice and he would nod quietly and afterward would sit at the E bus stop and stare at all the pretty Douglass girls and wonder where he'd gone wrong in his life. He wanted to blame the books, the sci-fi, but he couldn't—he loved them too much. Despite swearing early on to change his nerdy ways, he continued to eat, continued not to exercise, continued to use flash words, and after a couple semesters without any friends but his sister, he joined the university's resident geek organization, RU Gamers, which met in the classrooms beneath Frelinghuysen and boasted an entirely male membership. He had thought college would be better, as far as girls were concerned, but those first years it wasn't.