

Isidro, Our Friend

By Kevin Ryan (Caoimhín Ó Riain)

Now? A stampede *now*? As he was counting his grapes for midnight? Two-hundred men, he estimated. All in black prisoner uniforms, most of them sprinting, plodding dry ground, a dirt tornado like the kid from Charlie Brown, the one who never bathes. “Dad always said that the only thing you need a lot of people for is stupidity or war.” Perhaps this is war, Isidro reckoned. Then he spat, then he farted, a little sad, a little proud.

Why shouldn't he get drunk like the rest of the world? It was New Year's Eve, after all. And most of the officers and guards vanished yesterday. Someone had to guard the prisoners, and of course it would be the youngest, newest, lowest-ranking — the least of all to matter.

Thanks to the Spanish government, Isidro had plenty of ammunition and guns, including a seacost howitzer cannon. It's just that he was so damn bad at using any of them. Since arriving two weeks ago, Isidro had been ridiculed by fellow guards, by officers, as well as kitchen staff, and even Father Pedro — waist-high in dementia, a babbling mess — even *he* had the upper hand?

One bad round of target practice during rifle training and suddenly Isidro was a national buffoon? Yes, okay, he admits, it was in fact *several*

(exceedingly) bad rounds, but hey. Still ridiculous. Okay, fine, there was also the time at the BBQ. When he dropped his pistol into one of the firepits, pinned between two rows of spinning hogs on rotisserie pikes, then he leapt to catch it and fell and hog carcasses thrashed him like a pinball. Back and forth for how long? Too long. Fire singed his uniform down to the underwear and he was coated in ash and char so it looked like he'd donned blackface. Hopping around, smoke tooting from his ears, you'd swear it was vaudeville, even as he screamed.

Two days later, he woke up wrapped in gauze, an atlas of burn-marks covering his torso, and suddenly his life was a joke, with baked beans in his rifle and laxatives in his gazpacho and his bed constantly soaked with urine, his or someone else's — nobody ever knew.

Now, alone, as every second the stampede got closer and louder, closer and louder. The lake wobbled, the ground shook. Trees spat cocoons and dead bark and fruit pods, and an acorn floated down through the tower's rafters onto the crown of Isidro's head. "Ouch!" he cried, even though he'd barely felt it. He yanked through his pockets for the morcilla and chorizo. His peacoat strained to cover his belly.

As he gnawed into the meat, his mouth reddened with grease and oil and tendon and fat. *He* was the predator, blood down his chin! But just as

quickly, he planked, gasping when he noticed dark haze over the trees, behind the stampede, oil-black and growing blacker, more dark sky by the minute, ribbons of smoke billowing up from the direction of the camp and the village and the barracks, as Isidro realized that he was alone and surrounded. He cried for a minute-and-a-half, then moaned like a lonesome bull. Swung at his pillow — missing —groaned, “They’re going to rape me.”

II.

Isidro aimed his rifle at the herd of men, now half a mile away, and shouted: “Last chance to turn around, you perverts and chickenshits.”

Several of the men stopped, then kept going, which Isidro considered a textbook example of an act of hostile behavior. He clamped the trigger and a round spat out with ricochet thunder.

He peered through his scope, fired again, knowing full well he wouldn’t hit a thing.

Two men fell backwards and the rest of them scattered. But half-a-minute later they regrouped, lifted the fallen men, then continued their approach.

Isidro shot, they scattered, then they came back together, a little closer and louder, until they didn’t flinch at all. That meant it was time: Duck

and cover, run and hide. Because, does bravery really outlast violence?

What courage is there to dying?

He spun with a dull yank, eyes drawn to the levers and knobs on the switchboard. Ordinarily, the lights grasshoppered from green to blue, red to green, yellow to off, but presently they strobed red, only red, red with a lollygagging panic.

After locking the window hatches, Isidro barricaded the door with a desk and a pile of beer crates. The tower itself was a four-story oval concrete-and-wood structure, with an interior that resembled the spiraling all-sidedness of a lighthouse, the groundfloor concealed via hatchway, then another hatchway that led down into the dark earthy basement, then another and another and another, down into tunnels until you got to the cave.

Isidro bolted each of the series of steel chambers and hatches. By the time the men arrived at the guard tower, by the time they started clobbering at the door from every angle, Isidro had burrowed so far below that the men would need dynamite to get to him.

A dozen of the prisoners huddled at the foot of the tower. Centuried oak trees swathed along the perimeter like misarranged numbers in a manmade grove.

“What’s the plan,” one of them asked.

“Grab what we can and keep moving.”

“There’s a crate and some rifles on the first level, but most of it is in the basement and it’s locked from below.”

“How can we get that little man out of there?”

“He shot at us. Why should we?”

“Go easy,” said the leader, “he probably doesn’t know.”

Impatient: “*Well*. What do we do now?”

“We need those guns.”

“Time, though.”

“How long to get into that basement?”

“No idea. At least a few hours. Then who knows what’s even down there.”

The men yanked their heads toward the hum of a commotion.

“How about let’s use this,” a man shouted, straddling the cannon like it was his own magnificent penis.

III.

Isidro sloped down each rung of the ladder into the basement, past no more electricity, and descended into the cave.

Around him shivered pitch-black.

Hiccupping, he jabbed each vest pocket, tugged out a matchbook, struck a match.

— Was he alone? —

He opened his eyes. Weak darts of light. He saw the boat, just as he left it. He coughed and it echoed through the cave, which itself branched off into tunnels that wove through the mountain.

He remembered what Lt. Grump said that first day, wheezing while giving a tour: “Not too long ago, this was filled with treasures, but the King milked it, so it’s a little dismantled, and there is still coal dust in the air thick as mud.”

The coal shat down whenever it felt like it. At all times, in every place, black dust hung in the air. It was like inhaling diamonds or asbestos or finely ground pepper.

With cambered sighs, Isidro raised the lantern, rung into the stagelit air whose glow was as timid as it was foregone — bare, indifferent, callow; stung by the dalliance of this man who’d hidden from an army who’d levied to find him. Down here, waiting for the pacific glades of silence, the

obedient stench of moisture, the hours and the delight, to trench out an array of spatter-dash grit: a pearl from coal. And on top of it all he'd forgotten his grapes!

“For now,” he thought, “I’ll just have to stay.”

There was, it seemed, no escaping this.

“If only I had chosen stupidity over war,” filthy in his slugabed knee-highs and overlarge khakis.

The young man sang to himself, some ancient gypsy song about generals and toreros, stuck in a grime-fangled haze, outmoded in an unfamiliar place.

He'd spent his entire life in Madrid — a four-hour bus ride away, through canyons, over plains — so he was new to the vast, mountainous, sparsely-peopled countryside of Bash Province. He was new to ruralness itself, new to its quiescence, lost without the urban haste and fervor he'd always known, always relied on, and he felt dumb without city theatrics.

And for the rest of his life, Isidro would yearn for Bash Valley. Any time he thought about the lake, he could feel the closeness of the haunted water, and the trees and the hillside. He always imagined that the impression of his life still resonates in that forest and lake and all the buildings, the watchtower, even the coal-dust cave.

His belief was that he lived with such intensity, *then* and *there*, that his essence merged with the spirit of the place. But he never returned, not even for his mother's funeral. And he never cared to learn the reality — the people and friends and the family he left behind.

IV.

The Mono, short for Monopoloust Forced Labor Camp, was built by the first group of prisoners brought to this secluded area. It quickly became a military secret, a hub for clandestine scheming, perfectly hidden by its location, surrounded by miles of nothing.

People thought Mono was a high-security prison full of anarchists, murderers, pedophiles, radicals, war criminals, and all the other human nightmares that don't belong. Later, they would be called harmless antagonists. Later still, after the fall of fascism, they became known as men who'd been imprisoned by a paranoid dictator, a lesson in the dangers of authoritarianism. Even most of the camp guards had no idea that it was actually a labor camp for activists and lawyers, artists and Protestants, liberals and intellectuals, Freemasons and journalists, professors and socialists, scientists and gays.

A year in, the prisoners were ordered to build again.

“Why’s the bridge got to be so tall? That river is hardly anything,” they asked.

Reluctant: “Uh, dam, actually. The *dam* is for a lake.”

As the wall rose, the prisoners were struck by what seemed like a grave oversight: at the bottom of the valley was a village. With two cathedrals, four bars, a bakery, a butcher, a schoolhouse, a market, and rows of white-plashed houses and tall, unfenced stables.

Even when the prisoners laid the asphalt for the dam’s bridge, the villagers remained in their village, as if unaware the dam was blocking the sun a little more each day.

“Are we not going to relocate the town,” asked the prisoners.

“No time. That water is electricity. And electricity is money.”

“You’ve warned them, though, of course?”

Forcing a nod: “Yeeeeeaaes. Mm-hm.”

“It’s just that they seem so oblivious.”

At the unveiling ceremony, it was the King who turned the dials and cut the velvet ribbon with massive gilded scissors. The guards shoved the prisoners out of view for the Royal visit. Onlookers cheered as the riverwater burst into the valley. To them, the King was advancing the country, with citizenry in mind. The event was tuxedoed and many-cheese-

plated, a loyalist's celebration. "How modest and humane of the King to attend," was the consensus. But it was the prisoners, not the King (whose white Rolls Royce limousine sped off the moment cameras stopped flashing), who heard the villagers at night.

V.

The cave's junctions kept stitching themselves inward, a little closer in, then a little closer, then too close to Isidro.

Each thought dove past the thought that came before it. Any image shook, as the frigid air climbed along a gradation toward heat. Isidro, downstairs, thought: Lost in useless territory. Lost below, downstairs. For the first and only time, *there* and *then*, Isidro became violently claustrophobic. Then, somehow, he fell asleep.

His dreams fought with some greater presence, a force of perfertion. He blended along the most exquisite storyline. It felt like he'd been dropped into an Ingmar Bergman film. In one dream, a man with a child's voice called Isidro by name and insisted that he swim.

His dreams were so intense that, when he awoke, he thought they had caused the gasping heat in the cave. He blinked and it was nothing, that's how black and warm it was.

Staring into the dark of the cave, Isidro swelled with feelings of rebellion. He suffered the chaoticized vision of youth. A sudden whirl trembled the dust from the air and brightened the lantern, eddying into a hologram of Isidro's father: "Time and age are clever old deceptions," said his father. "Youth does not belong only to the young. It's something you can arrive at in a person's eyes, something you can imagine rising up out of the defenseless moment when they risk status for love, power for kindness, certainty for miracle, time for compassion."

Boldly the victor, Isidro replied: "Those cowards: The officers and priest and nurses and medic and cooks who abandoned me, regardless of their age, they are old! They have lost their youth. They have succumbed to their bodies, discarded their chance at infinity."

But his father was gone, and the cave was all shadowed with cold.

Isidro decided it was worth it. To keep a youth that life itself often all but capsizes, outright fumbles, windfallingly hungers for yet leeringly angles toward, its spigots overflowing a nugatory coal that we are forced to breathe till our lungs resemble grottoes.

VI.

He unhatched each gate and door until he was in the basement, where noodles of sunlight blinded him. When his eyes adjusted, he realized that the groundfloor hatch was gone, having warped backward onto a spate of jag-walled concrete surrounded by field: The tower had been cannoned to rubble and the guns were all gone.

Isidro climbed up into sheer desolation. It was miraculous or horrific, destructive or flawless, depending which direction you looked.

The mountain on one side of the lake had caught fire overnight, and the hillside was blackly-orange. The blaze had spread along the entire forest but, despite the prisoners' Molotov-cocktail efforts, stopped at the border of the camp. Just went around it and the forest behind it, darting away.

Isidro could feel an unbridled heat rattle the air. It was red itself.

He spotted another guard, near the lake. The young man was not wearing his full military uniform, only the pants and belt. His boots were in disrepair. Prodding a satchel of wine, he half-ass saluted Isidro, who shook out: "What happened here, man?"

"Prisoners tried to set Mono on fire, but winded up setting the forest on fire and Mono is fine mostly. And now they're all gone. They're free."

"How?"

“General Prushna is dead. His lackeys will be dead soon, too, the way things are going. Pretty sure the prisoners will take care of that.”

Isidro yawned, because what the hell else could he say?

“Prushna selected Prince Constin as his replacement, thought he was the guy who would keep the ship running and keep things like they were. Nope. Prince Constin says he’s been waiting for years to leave the dark ages. Reforms of every kind. He even legalized weed, no shit. ”

“Wha?”

“Here,” handing him a possum-shaped joint. “This is a democracy now, young buck. We’re free. You can take off that uniform. We don’t have to be soldiers anymore.”

The two men wandered off in different directions. The drunk sentry went to the bus stop, Isidro trudged back to the barracks, shoved through debris and furniture till he got to his bunk. The room was a sunny theater of mattresses and books and regimented golf-balls of ash and plaster and circle-inked maps of the area. Tomorrow he would leave. Or maybe the day after. Maybe even a week. However things worked out.

The next day, he strolled down the hill, through the thickets of lavender and sunflower until he arrived at his cove, the beach he had

always gone to in his off-duty hours. He swam till the coal dust vanished. Swimming always brought him closer to God.

On his way back, he met a group of locals, mostly in their 30s, and drank homemade wine at their bonfire. One of them had a Nazi machine gun and a jacket with swastikas. Immediately, Isidro fell in love with Maria and Isabel, identical twins (jointly called Maribel), who owned La Hostia, the only bar in the county, right down the road, docked to the lake.

The cold air was back. Field-stripes of moonlight exploited the sunken fields. Everyone wobbling. The twins vanished before midnight, and Isidro invited one of the other women back to his room. A frail type, from West London, a book satcheled into her arm.

“Nobody else so wildly clutches the beauty of nature like Gerard Manley Hopkins,” she told him, pacing through her words. “The romance Wordsworth found above Tinturn Abbey, for example, among the wilderness of the landscape with the quiet of the sky, is not the same as Hopkins’ grandeur. When the Lake District Romantic listened — really listened — to the noises all around him, what he heard was the still, sad music of humanity. He heard the echoes of city — plangent and hurrying and secretly portentous. Hopkins, on the other hand, heard music, heard his Eden resound with an orchestral siege, a near-manic liveliness, an

impearling amazement, and he was enamored of the mother's infinite song for *Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)* in this world charged with the grandeur of God."

With a borrough to his rasp, "Can we talk about something else? Something with less syllables? Your English is hurting my brain."

In the hallways, they both wagged their clothing loose.

She talked the entire time, always about poets divided by their own natures.

The next morning, Isidro hungover, the woman was bouncing in the bed beside him. "I want you to meet my mother," she said. "You'll love her."

Throughout Hell, the pilgrim must reconcile darkness with light — as if glimpsing his reflection across a filmstrip negative, a warped image that abstracts both the privation of evil and the dynamism of humanity. The vale of death in the dark wood of human error, the vault abovehead, the hope in burnished spectral mirrors—whichever way you saw it, Isidro would by no means be meeting this lady's mother! Was that a fucking joke? Was she a practical joker?

Six months later, Isidro hadn't left Bash. Nine months. A year. Two. Several.

Something about the desolation of forest and the way rural people treated one another. He grew his hair out, his beard, too. For money, he worked at La Hostia. He kept a garden. He got drunk, took LSD. Took LSD whenever he could. And there was lots of it around back then. He loved wandering the forest at night with a head full of acid, between emperor-like mountains, under the orange moon.

Down the road from the camp, surrounding La Hostia, in a meadow lined with double-wides and full of trash and dog shit, was “LA HOSTIA Trailer Park.” Maria and Isabel lived in separate trailers on opposite sides of La Hostia’s patio. Isidro stayed with either twin, often for weeks at a time. When he needed to get religious he stayed with María, slept on her couch. Mostly, he took acid and mushrooms with Isabel. They took showers together and stayed naked for days at a time and chased each other around. Half of her teeth were rotting (he guessed she had gone through a meth phase) and she never cooked and each day she grew more promiscuous, sometimes in a scary way. Isidro spent most of his time with Isabel. Occasionally, her somewhat-boyfriend “Jhon the Magician stopped by, but not very often and he didn’t mind Isidro.

Isabel didn’t know anywhere but Bash Valley. “I was born, in a natural pool, hot water, over there,” she told Isidro, pointing at the cliffs across the

lake. “Local women always gone there for to give birth. Called ‘The Faces.’ Ancients carved them. Lots of faces. More than one hundred. Hundreds and hundreds. Fortunetellers. You go and you see, and say, ‘this one face,’ special to you, when you see, you know it is perfect for you , and that is your fortune.”

“How the hell you supposed to know?”

“You just know.”

Four times a year, there was even a holiday, “The Day of Faces,” when everyone wore garish outfits, so elaborate that you couldn’t tell who was who, and you interacted with hand signs and motions and dances and no talking allowed, although, by nightfall, everyone was so drunk that most of the rules had been broken, as long as people still had their faces hidden. Isabel never could find Isidro when he had his mask on, and for some reason it drove her into a rage every time. She’d kick him out of her trailer for a week or two, ignore him, pouting, then, after she’d calmed down, usually at night, she’d wave him through the door then into the bedroom then onto the bed and it wouldn’t come up until the next festival.

One morning, Isidro’s mother arrived at La Hostia, slammed the bar till someone told her where Isidro was, then she slammed Isabel’s screen

door, dented it, stomping, in a gaudy sundress and too much jewelry:

“Isidro Ulises! It’s time you came home!”

“I don’t want to.”

When she saw his face she yelped in terror and nearly began sobbing. She clawed at his beard like it made her sick, like she could see a tumor and it had to be removed. He slapped her hand. She recoiled. Then shoved him. He shoved her back, wanted to punch her. Paused. Said fuck it, slapped her instead. She halfway gut-jabbed, knuckle out. “I’ll choke you to death, you little faggot.” Amused by her use of the pejorative “puto”, Isidro pauses. He was about to flick her nose but stopped when he realized she was ready to spit in his face if he followed through. Instead, he muttered a nasty phrase in English that she couldn’t understand.

“¡Hijo de puta!” she shouted.

“Yes, mother, I am in fact a son of a bitch. You being the bitch.”

“No, no, Isidro. Joder. Fuck you. Joder. Me cago in la hostia.”

“Leave it alone,” he said.

“What has gotten into you? What’s this Devil-may-care routine about? You were always such an impatient child. Always, at the swimming pools I had to yell at you, I had to say, ‘Isidro Ulises, get off the diving board, there are still four people ahead of you!’ Never listened, of course. And now? You

are *nothing but* patience.’ And all the other boys drooling at topless women. Why couldn’t you have just stared tits like a normal boy? Why is it, you with these strange urges? I bet you’re making up for it now, is that why you’re here? Some cousin-fucking whore with goat tits. Is that it? Has some trailer trash whore cornered you? These hick cunts love when they catch a civilized man, a actual Madrileño. How well you always spoke, what have they done to your beautiful, pure accent? You tell those cunts. Tell them I will rip their throats out like I’m gutting a fish if they poison you with their hepatitis and their toothy, inbred blowjobs. Tell them I know a gypsy when I see a gypsy.”

“Good Christ, mother ... A bit dark, that was.”

He handed her a cigarette and she wolfed at it in silence. Then another, then more silence. Then one more, calmer now. She puffed out smoke rings, slow and lazy as her eyes.

“It’s nice here,” he said. “I have friends. People are nicer here. They believe that every time they swim in the lake spirits fill their body. I don’t know if I even believe it but it’s helped. It’s calming.” He shrugged. “You wouldn’t get it.”

“Abandon your family then, Isidro? To swim with ghosts? You have lost your mind. Your father would be red in the face.”

“No he wouldn’t. I talked to him.”

“You *talked to him?*”

“Yes.”

“He’s been dead for ten years, Isidro.”

“I know. But I saw him. I mean, it was probably because of all the gasoline in the air, but I still believe it. I was alone. I thought I was going to die in a coal mine and was so afraid. And dad appeared, and he told me that we only ever say goodbye for a little while.”

“I see,” she whispered. “Well that doesn’t sound too bad.”

She left as gracelessly as she ever did anything, haloed by cigarette smoke and hissing at every woman she passed.

Each day led to a time of choosing, and he said “what the fuck,” and left Bash the next week, back to Madrid. It took him a few days to stop saying hello to every single person everywhere he went. He hated the noise and constant activity. Someone robbed him. Probably a kid. All the prostitutes on Gran Via heckled him and groped him with their sallow hands and stalked him with their heroin faces.

He fled back to Bash Valley. The forest quiet, the pine aroma. He smiled, in bed with Isabel while the guard dogs dumped outside the window screen and the whole trailer stank like dog shit.

“Ah,” he said, “now this is home.”

That evening, Isabel taught Isidro all about the lake. One massive undertow composed of undertows and undertows, etc., like fractals in motion.

“Even divers of great experience, even they refuse it. The currents: too much. It scares them, very very much. Too easy to drown!”

She said that the townspeople, from the village at the bottom of the lake — they were still down there, still alive, just in a new way. She said the thing to do was to let them pass through you.

“It makes you new. The water.”

“Like baptism?” he asked. “Sounds like baptism.”

He decided to try it, alone. Took two hits of acid, waited 30 minutes, then walked to his cove. He blinked and the whole star-pointed lake was flawless. A great drift of brownish, tide-rousing water, glinting with red hexagons. He closed his eyes as he sank, floated, and felt the water barely move, then he waded out a ways.

An awful smell overtook him, he gagged. Ten feet away, a ring of dead fish floating in muck, half devoured, half rotten. He crossed himself dolorously and recited a poem:

“you can’t beat death but
you can beat death in life, sometimes.

and the more often you learn to do it,
the more light there will be.
your life is your life.
know it while you have it.
you are marvelous
the gods wait to delight
in you.”

He stood there for who knows how long. Then, by sheer coincidence, the a breeze swept over the lake and the fish drifted away in the direction of The Faces.

Half-amused, he thought what if the fish came back to life? And they dove, dove far, low, deep — launched down, into the coldest darks, down, down, toward the village silhouette, guided by the cathedrals’ spires — then darted from house to house, reviving the lethargic women and burrowed men, and led them up, gripped by an undulous tide, a thrush of getting.

To this day, there are undiscovered mass graves all throughout the forests surrounding Bash Valley. In total, an estimated 250,000 people died during the General’s reign — execution, torture, forced labor, even experimentation. Human experimentation was as rampant there as it had been in Nazi Germany.

On the first warm day of spring, cramped at La Hostia, a teenage boy stared at Isidro and the room got quiet as the boy spoke: “It takes a stubble of forest, a clatting of plurals, for all the vicissitudes, for all the foxes,

despite each weed, despite each miser, to paunch hortations, to plash coal grey, before the diver, before the sentry, can say two choices or withhold two bygones, one here, and one there, and one in the here and there now.”

“Gotcha,” said Isidro, as in *what the fuck was that about? Was he so obvious? Take hippy drugs, listen to hippy music, and suddenly everyone’s spouting him hippy bullshit because they think that’s his language?*

Later, he swam $\frac{1}{4}$ of the way across the lake, then when he turned back, he saw people, lots of them on shore. He could tell they were in the throes of something strange or wild. He laughed. Closer, he saw that many of them were his friends. Closer, they shouted about some holiday and they were mostly naked, the freaks.

On shore, he lifted his hands and everyone waited and listened. Somehow, the most perfect words flowed out of his mouth. He defined God, with elucidatory clearness, then he pondered the limits of the soul and the mysteries of imagination. He wove through a constellation of words, words that he chose for their beauty, and words that he chose for their meaning, and words that he chose for their clarity, and even some words that he chose for deception. Then he encouraged his friends “to live in truth as much as you can,” but he did not tell them that no good story has too much accuracy. That no good man is as good as he seems.

Smiling, Isabel began speaking, in English, which she rarely did:
“Yes, because language is the perfection of truth. In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, thought is the infinite dialogue between the soul and itself, so, to converse is to channel a boundless current through mind and mouth in an exchange of thought, whereby you are simultaneously a part of and an actor to the limitlessness of the Word, the Logos, that which created Life, the Inspiration, the Holy Spirit, the original Light, the Host, the origin, the first thing to exist, which you carry in you via language via thought, so when you converse you simultaneously become enmeshed in your own infinite dialogue and given to the anticipation of exchange with other people’s inner dialogues.”

Maria picked up seamlessly from Isabel: “So when you speak with someone, you become part of them and they do the same. But when a conversation is put onto paper or written down, the Word is no longer a fragment of the past world, but rather a transmigration of boundless instants, so that the ideality of the Word is what raises everything linguistic beyond the finitude and transience that characterize other remnants of past existence.”

“The underlying truth here is invigorating,” said Nazi-gun guy.

The palisading night smothered down over the lake and the mountains. People gave toasts at the bonfire all night into morning. Near midnight, under a waning crescent, Isidro and Isabel snuck off and wandered through the woods. Isidro took her to the ruins of his old guard-post. He found a blanket and they spread out, gasping at the lamplight sky.

“Tonight, Isidro, tonight. I saw it in your fortune.”

They fucked — cadenced and slow — and he knew she would get pregnant. It had happened before. Twice, although one was a miscarriage. And she knew Isidro wouldn't stay much longer, nobody ever did. But it was okay, because Isabel thought of sex and love and life, of everything, the same way she thought of the lake and the townsfolk: Spirits colliding, lives crisscrossing, vastness that will never be tamed, all part of the constant flow of essence (straight from a Ram Dass picture book), so being pregnant was no big deal for her. (Trailer Park kids were everywhere! Those coñazos! Less refined than the diarrhea-prone guard dogs.) She couldn't find the right words. But Isidro understood. A familiar ache has its own reliable softness, and softness does a person good, and goodness makes a soul better.

Isidro was 21 at the time, Isabel was 39. It was sick, really, what they were doing, or rather what they'd been doing since he was barely 17.

“Tonight, Isidro, your fortune.”

“Was that not what you meant? The sex? I thought you were trying something new. I thought that was my fortune.”

“Be serious, you little shit.”

“Yes, mam.”

“You know, Isidro, things have a way of smacking each universe, and smacking you too, smacking you before you get caught or rewarded.”

What struck Isidro most about life was that, somehow, it always keeps going.