Wanting Something You Can Have

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1.

In his dream sequined women straddle the backs of elephants, asking for help down. Turkey vultures shrug on the roof of his car, watching an old buck weave through curbed trashcans. The birds wait for the buck to wander a bit too far, for its body to find a speeding car, or at the very least, for antlers to catch and spill the lidded feast. In his dream his wife sleeps beside him; across the room his daughter turns in her crib.

When Eduardo's cancer returned his wife took him to live with their daughter in the United States. They packed and sold the house, and their daughter sent pictures of her babies wrapped in Texas flags, signed *See You Soon Grandma!*

In Venezuela, Eduardo had made rigs and made love to women. He'd made bets on racing dogs. He'd made sandcastles with his daughter under the crosshatched palms and she asked if she could bury him.

From the airplane, his life looked like it must have been small, the peninsula disappearing in minutes. The altitude screwed with his hearing, so he couldn't understand a thing the stewardess said. He gave up saying Pardon? and said Yes to everything. She brought him a thin steak, a coffee, a pack of crackers. His wife watched the little TV. Eduardo fell asleep with his mouth open and the trash on his tray-table, the stewardesses whispering in the back near the toilet; the warm gulf moving below him like a woman.

Before he looked like Gandhi, before he was sixty-four and spent most of his days at the oncologist, he had known women. Older women who kept their hair long and wore enormous bras with cups the size of stocking caps. Skinny women, their nipples always hardened with cold. Some of the women just girls, so young they tried to look old, disguised in heels and hose.

One New Year's Eve, he was dealt a hand of four kings and won a whorehouse. At home his wife, big and demanding as a poorly built mansion, was carrying his daughter, who finally had to be cut out, 10 pounds. When Eduardo got to the hospital he was surprised: he hadn't expected the baby to be so heavy, to love her as much as he did, her eyebrows little commas.

In the first two years he built two more floors, named the whorehouse The Palace. Enough women to sleep with until you get to heaven. "Just keep building up," Eduardo said. By the time he was given his diagnosis, the building, originally meant to hide behind the bar out front, was six pink stories.

Now they move into his daughter's apartment in Houston where everything is white and the babies spend all their time eating, and his daughter says to his wife, "If Papa leaves his socks everywhere I swear to God I'll cut holes in the toes." She wants to say Motherfucker! but then he'd laugh and say, It's

true! It's true! and anyway she knows she shouldn't use foul language around the babies.

Now Eduardo makes himself sandwiches and watches gossip television because he likes all of the batshit crazy women on there. He vomits and his wife drives him to radiation. American hospitals are cleaner than anywhere he's ever been in his life. So clean and bright he wonders if they're trying to prepare him for the afterlife. Not the place where you're going, his wife laughs. But Eduardo thinks this would be exactly the kind of place he should end up, friendly and sterile, pretending they're saving your life when really they're letting you die, fattening the pillows behind your head while your ass is freezing in the paper gown. The metal table shines like one of his girls' silver teeth. Nowhere on earth has ever been this clean.

His nurse bolts him to the table, wears her storm of hair in a ponytail, and looks like his daughter. "How are you doing today, Mr. Martin?" she asks. "Did you see, the sky cleared up for you?" She always thinks the weather is beautiful or pretends to.

He would like to ask her, Do you have a family?

How do you find the vein in my arm?

Do you like the beach?

Have you ever been to Venezuela?

On the drive home Eduardo notices that the carnival along the highway says it has a beach, *Coconut Grove*, blue lights blinking against a yellow shore.

"I would like to take the babies," he says to his daughter.

"Mom, this is crazy!" his daughter turns to his wife.

"It would be good for him to get out of the house." His wife folds her hands and negotiates. She promises, No Ferris Wheel. No Jalapeños. In the car she tells Eduardo how it's hard for a single mom to trust anyone with her kids.

It turns out the babies are too small to ride anything but the train that chugs as slowly as Eduardo walks. "It's not a thrilling speed, believe me!" he tells a mother who follows the train around its short loop, yelling at her kids to smile for her picture. His wife pushes the babies in the double stroller, one of them chewing a fist, the other sleeping.

They watch the line of puffed-up boys at *Coconut Grove* try to win a plush shark or dolphin by throwing coconuts through holes in a wooden board painted with palm trees. The counter is lined with waxed conch shells and Eduardo holds one to his wife's ear and then she holds it back to his, and he touches her ass. "You smooth son-of-a-bitch," she laughs.

In the waiting room his wife reads him *StarDate*, the stars far away in the black of the page. She shows him the V of the Hyades, reads that all stars are born in groups, then disperse. But the Hyades have stayed close, traveling together through space. In Houston the night is yellow, can't see shit besides Orion, Eduardo thinks.

His nurse drinks from her prescription-drug coffee mug. She washes her hands and touches the tattooed points on Eduardo's body so his wife can see the places they'll zap. "These spots will look a little sunburned. So you'll have some strange tan lines for a while, Mr. Martin." She smiles, running the sink, her hands a cloud of soap.

Eduardo starts to get tired easily and needs a break after making a sandwich or watching *Old Flames!* He feels like he's walking and fretting and sleeping for a whole opposing army of people. Once there was the happiness of being young. Once there was the flipping reel of the sun over the beach in Venezuela.

When the babies are in bed, his daughter says to his wife, "Men can't be bothered to do anything that would inconvenience their dicks or their sleep." To Eduardo this seems true.

"He needs more rest," his nurse says. His daughter implements a nap—everyone goes down with the babies. Eduardo can't sleep, can't quiet the busy hive of his heart, the queen giving orders, taking lovers.

The truth is he doesn't really remember his daughter; she was so small she seemed to disappear. To Eduardo one person didn't amount to much. What did he know about little girls? That Laura laughed easily but cried easier, her anger a high tide taking everything with it.

"This is the last one, Mr. Martin," his nurse says, and he doesn't know if this means he's well or he's hopeless. She says, "Take good care of yourself." He wants to ask if he gets a certificate, any kind of guarantee? Give me a number: two years, two weeks.

His dream is the afterlife with everyone he's ever wronged. His wife and a lifetime of dishes, mosquitoes swarming his ankles, timid drivers, fire anthills the size of houses, his daughter digging at the beach.

He wakes and heats the kettle, the want to stay alive huge in him, like a wrestler trying to fit inside his skin. Wanting something he can have has never been enough. He wants the galaxies and girls from glossy magazines, the airbrushed spot between their tits that he wouldn't be able to find even if the girl were to appear in his bed tonight. The slobbering baby born after he is gone. When he has a cigar in his hand already he wants another cigar.

He lets his coughing go until someone in the house wakes. Once he can hear his daughter moving behind her door, he goes outside to smoke. Through the window he watches her, shaking off sleep, looking out the same window he looks in, her attention caught on a high line of birds for a long time before she glances down to notice him. The long day ahead of her. Eduardo's smile like an open gate.

2.

A neighbor comes to Laura's door because her father's been taking a leak on a sapling-lined island in the parking lot of the complex. "He's doing his business in my yard," the angry man says.

Eduardo moves slowly—stopping every five or ten feet to grip the back of the couch, the hood of a car. Eduardo leaves the thick ash end of his cigar hanging off the coffee table; he drinks kool-aid his daughter makes for the babies, spilling purple on the couch when he tries to fill his cup. They find him at night trying to leave, sliding the chain lock back and forth in its track. His wife thinks he's losing his mind; Laura feels certain that he's always been this way.

"It's the freedom of pissing outside," Eduardo says to his wife. To his daughter he says sometimes he just can't hold it. He's just getting some fresh air when he becomes afraid he won't make it back to the apartment. He thinks of saying how it's humiliating, getting old. This is one thing he really believes. Laura is livid and stops buying Eduardo beer because it's a diuretic.

Eduardo now needs an escort for his trips to the vending machine for cold orange sodas and chocolate bars. His smoking has been limited to the little fenced rectangle of patio. His cough grinds in his chest. He is getting worse and he wonders what he can do about it. Eduardo thinks he should find a way to insist on a future, to continue pissing in the neighbor's "yard," to open his birthday cards. Yes, it's hard getting old, in his head he tells daughter; he's no longer quick enough to get away with not doing what he's told.

Laura's mother knows what she is doing when she decides to take a trip to see a cousin in San Antonio for the weekend. Laura will care for Eduardo. Even better, her mother will take the babies. "We all need a break sometimes," she says.

"This is unfair," says Laura, the situation bringing childishness even into her speech.

"Just spend some time with him, show him some of the city."

When Laura first moved to Houston the days felt long and strange. She sat in her apartment rubbing her bare feet against the carpet until the soles were hot. It was difficult to pass the time, as if she were waiting for a bus to arrive and take her on the next leg of the trip. In her head she said, Houston, Texas, reminding herself: I live in Houston, TX. Tee Ex.

Laura's coworkers were *so nice*, words they liked to use to thank her repeatedly when they needed her to translate a customer question or complaint. They often said that they should all go out as a group sometime. In the third month Laura started to expect this wouldn't happen. Her coworkers' lives were full. Their lives had been made in Houston. The clothes they'd outgrown they'd bought in Houston. Laura knew this place was no part of her. Everything in Houston is brown: concrete, smog, even the short drive to the coast would bring you to a brown ocean, small brown birds dipping their wings in the shallows, muddy pelicans bombing the tide. The windows of her office building are thin slits, like gills, but dark and soldered shut, no source of air. She drove south to smell the stink of the oil shore.

Laura is from Amuay, Venezuela. Amuay means "where the winds meet the water."

"Why at that particular point?" people want to know. "Can't the wind meet the water anywhere?"

Laura imagined Amuay right here on the brown gulf. She imagined Amuays all over the world. The water so clear you could see the hairs waving on your legs if you looked down while you tread. The puffing smoke-stacks of the refinery. The American oil-men pronounced it Am-Way, as in "I am way taller than you" or, "I am way more qualified for this job." In Houston Laura thought, I am way far away from home.

She'd heeded all the warnings about cold weather, keeping her life near enough to the equator to rule out snow. But Laura discovered the cold way this country works: ice spit from the door of the freezer, refrigerated eggs, offices and shops lowering their thermostats to require jackets and sweaters. Laura started buying her food frozen. Thin breaded steaks, tiny shelled shrimp curled tight like flower buds.

Laura will be home from work soon. This morning she dropped her mother off at the bus station. Eduardo goes into the bathroom and splashes water on his face. His hair has started growing back—first a silver sandpaper, but now he's got a little something to comb.

Eduardo has been in Houston for five months and has not seen a body of water. His wife said something about the body being mostly water, and when Eduardo didn't laugh she said, "I know, it's a change."

But why are they sticking around Houston when he's done his job? First he finished radiation, a month later he finished chemo. "Congratulations!" they said. Eduardo thought, Finally, good news!

"Remission?" Eduardo asked. "No," they said. Eduardo doesn't trust remission anyway—he remembers that celebration, that hoopla of false hope. People who go into remission wear shirts that say Survivor, like the reality show. If Eduardo is being voted off the island, let it be with the girl dressed like Eve.

The doctors only said, No more chemo until Eduardo can regain some strength. The doctors couldn't decide on an appropriate tone. "We're going to keep trying!" they smiled. "Hang in there, Mr. Martin," they frowned and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Probably he has till the end of the year," the doctor told Laura and her mother when Eduardo had gone outside to smoke.

Laura makes a ham omelet for her father, who announced his hunger as soon as she got home from work and then slinked into the guest room to watch TV.

She flips the folded egg and heats up a side of beans. and thinks about the place. The Palace. As a girl she believed the sad claim of the name, gilded ceilings, ivory banisters. It had made sense that children weren't allowed—royalty are particular about who they see.

But slowly, though she can't remember any clues, Laura had begun to suspect, Laura knew. Her father came home late, happy. Had her mother been oblivious or had she simply ignored it?

For a time Laura had liked hearing him use her as an excuse—I was with my daughter. My daughter was sick. She thought he must enjoy these imagined events: clapping at her choir concerts, picking her up from school, squeezing oranges for her juice, bringing it to the table by her bed while she slept, feverish.

The love Laura feels for her father is like a light left on in another room. She doesn't know that it's on, doesn't remember that she left it that way. Everyone passing in the street can see it. Everyone outside can see it. Her father can't see it, in the guest room with the door closed, wondering when dinner will be done.

"How was your day?" Laura asks when she hands him the plate.

"Pardon?" Eduardo mutes the TV, walking his fingers over the buttons on the remote, balancing the little plate on his knees.

Her father is watching her ex's favorite show. Tim had worn jeans that slipped from his skinny hips. A small man with a strength that had surprised her. He grew a little crop circle of hair around his mouth. He'd loved how she said his name, like Team. "I'm your favorite team," he'd say. His favorite team was the Cowboys.

Laura had been surprised, how he'd occupied her time but not her loneliness. He'd held long conversations without asking her questions except, Did she like her food? Tim was a good dude, her friends had said. They'd all been shocked, after Laura got pregnant how suddenly he'd picked up and left. He'd always picked up the check.

Laura takes her father's plate and suggests a trip. They'll shop for the groceries tonight; tomorrow they'll drive to the beach.

Eduardo puts pineapples in the shopping cart. Eduardo throws in bags of dry beans and Laura doesn't tell him they'll be eating chips and sandwiches, and that she already has canned beans at home. Laura opens the freezer door and stands inside.

Wanting to remember his strength Eduardo insists that he'll lift the groceries into the trunk. Laura can return the cart. Eduardo farts audibly on the drive home and looks down at his hands. The proud men of my life, Laura thinks. Eduardo sinks his thoughts into the night outside the window. Laura tries to find a word for this feeling, the hope and embarrassment they both feel sharing the front seat of the car, the quickness of her heart as she tries to think of a way to excuse her father. "That's okay," Laura says.

Eduardo imagines that forgiveness is as close as the front door. Forgiveness is a person but he forgets what she looks like. He thinks of looking out the peephole onto the empty landing. Maybe she wants him to come outside and join her. Maybe she forgot to knock.

Eduardo wakes up early and decides to dye his hair. He has seen a box of Jet-setter Black on the shelf in the bathroom. Eduardo would like to go to the beach looking good, to have people look at Laura and say, I see where she gets it. Inside the box there are two little packets. Eduardo hasn't done this in years. He remembers enough to try to keep the dye off his ears, but forgets to put on gloves; massaging the stuff into his scalp, it is clear that he has used too much. A woman's hair takes up the whole front of the box, barely room for the beautiful circle of her face in the picture. He unspools half the roll of toilet paper and mops at the navy blue drips on his forehead and down his neck. He turns on the shower, takes off his clothes and gets in.

While she waits for her father to free up the bathroom Laura cuts a pineapple into sloppy rings and puts her lips to the cutting board to sip the juice. Laura packs two little styrofoam coolers with bread, mayonnaise, ham, two cans of beer, carrots she's shaved the dirty skin from. Along the way they'll stop for ice.

Eduardo steps from the shower and dries himself, watching in the mirror as he towels his head. Yes, his hair is black. Yes, he sees some youth. He secures the towel around his waist and tries to scrub the stain from the sink with his socks. His hands wear gloves of dye, the blue-gray color of exhaust. He is taking long enough in the shower that Laura calls her mother, who is thrilled to hear about their trip.

"The babies are great," she says. "How are you two doing?"

When Eduardo comes out of the bathroom, he is covered in dark, mottled clouds that look like giant bruises.

Years before, on a morning in July, Eduardo went to the beach looking for Laura, then ducked inside a corner store to buy a case of beer and take a shit. This was the first time he learned he was sick. The toilet was bright with clots the color of hibiscus. Eduardo had to flush twice to get the pink to fade from the water.

Eduardo had been called by the police to come get her. Just kid stuff, but the officers insisted he come. Laura and her friends had built a big fire on the beach, uprooting shrubs and dousing them with lighter fluid to get the flames to shoot up into the sky. Eduardo had taken too long to arrive, dozing off again, rolling out of bed, pulling on his pants. The police had gone. The kids had scattered. He kicked the sand, looking for buried ash, a circle of bottles. Eduardo coughed, spitting oysters of phlegm into the surf, walking along the beach. In the morning the sea spit beautifully, no matter what kind of morning it was—heralding a wide blue day or silver coins of rain dropping into the waves.

The styrofoam coolers squeak behind their seats. It's not long before they meet the skunk smell of oil

wells, the sound of the waves pushing toward the beach. They get stuck in a long line of cars on the overpass to the island. "Look, pelicans," Laura points her elbow up from the steering wheel. The red ball of Laura's knee pushes through the tear in her jeans. Her dark stubble is red in the sun. Eduardo thinks about putting his hand there, the visible skin an invitation, like dogs sleeping on their backs along the sidewalk with the pink ovals of their stomachs up. My Laura, he wants to say.

Laura unties Eduardo's shoes and slips them off, then follows with his socks, his big feet warm and damp. She unfolds his chair at the edge of the tide and holds his elbow to lower him down. She sets his ashtray on the cooler.

Embarrassed by his stained toes Eduardo buries his feet. "Let's see, Dad," Laura opens the ice chest, "what have we got here to eat?"

Laura starts by popping open the cans of beer, watching Eduardo build the sand up over his ankles. There is never one person lonely in a house, she thinks. There is never one person lonely in a family. Everyone is spooning their beans wondering, how will I get what I need? Or, what do I need? Or, what do I need and how will I get them to give it to me?