

Arturo + Lourdes, 2005 and 4ever

by Dominic Preziosi

Here's the story as compiled from the scantest of clues: The writing on the back of a stall door in the restroom of a twenty-four hour restaurant under the Gowanus Expressway. Arturo must be a romantic if he's prompted while doing his business to uncap a pen and make his declaration of love on this pocked metal surface. Not just "love," but this welding together of two souls—a co-joining meant to outlive time. What does he know at his age? And what age is he, anyway? The handwriting, though legible, bears signs of immaturity—uppercase "R"s incongruous among their lowercase neighbors, which themselves are jagged, uneven, misshaped, even when counting for the writer's haste and awkwardness of position. The sentiment itself: Bold, optimistic and thus naïve, as underscored by the inclusion of the year and intimation of permanence. He was at least fourteen the night he wrote it (it was nighttime, of course), maybe fifteen, and, at the very outside, sixteen. Boys older than that are close enough to being men that they don't bother with such public pronouncements (there are exceptions).

Other inferences: Arturo is right-handed, given the way the message unrolls across the face of the door, a pronounced fall-off from the left to the right, and in fact every character that comes after the "s" of his beloved's name seems like one in a line of lemmings going over a cliff. Arturo is of average height. At the time, he wore his hair closely cropped on the sides, though there might have been a little extra on top, stiff with gel. Denim and tanktops, and the occasional dark-blue Jeter jersey with its virginal number "2" like a brand across his broadening back. Funny with his friends, shy in school, where he causes no trouble, draws little attention, and simply, adequately, completes the assigned courses of study—information that will leave little lasting impression on him.

Let's surmise too he has survived a traumatic event, something perhaps very few of us (thankfully) have had to endure. It is a Thursday night, one night after his eleventh birthday, and he is helping his father at the liquor store. Late summer mist rolls in off the harbor; the Statue of Liberty's torch hangs like a second, nearer moon; foghorns sound. A traffic light on the corner clicks from red to green, green to amber, amber back to red, but no cars move through this desolate intersection. There are few customers—Thursday is always slow—but three men materialize out of those mists, and they are inside the store, nowhere and everywhere at once, and they bind Arturo's wrists and press the bright edge of a knife to his throat. Cursing, shouting—chaos that serves its intended purpose. One of the men kicks the knees out from under his father, who drops to the floor and is pinned there like an insect, two barrels of a shotgun flush against his beating heart.

As we've established, Arturo survives; so does his father. That's all we can say for certain. Who knows, even for all of our other inferences, how the incident shapes him? What provable theorems can we marshal, which axioms or principles can we cite in support of a conclusion? Maybe that he went on to proclaim eternal love for someone is enough.

And what of Lourdes? Best to begin by envisioning her—by hanging some flesh on her bones, so to speak. Shapely brown arms, thighs that lend form to her jeans, a backside that men twice and three times her age stare after but that she never even thinks about—or pretends not to think about. Black hair hanging straight as a curtain to her bare shoulders, straps of her bra visible under a tanktop the color of a lime lollipop. A pendant between her breasts—a crucifix, presented by her godmother (who happens to be her older cousin) on the occasion of her recent confirmation. We'll declare as we can't for Arturo her exact age: Lourdes has in 2005 turned thirteen.

Has she ever been in love? Yes. Well, maybe. The shivers she feels when she sees the young gym teacher straddling the backward-

turned chair at the end of the hallway, with his unlaced Adidas and deadly ray of a smile. That's love, isn't it, to go to jelly in the legs when he picks her out from the pack of shuffling ninth-graders to urge her on by name? "You too, Lourdes, you *better* keep it moving if you don't want to be late to class." Oh, God, isn't that love?

She is smart enough to best most of the girls and all of the boys in her math class, where complex variables and prime roots unthread themselves on the page, yielding their solutions before she can put the point of her pencil to the paper. She is smart enough to set aside the money she earns during her Sunday morning shift at the bakery, where fathers straight from the 9 a.m. at Visitation hand her an extra dollar for their sweetened coffee. She is smart enough to say nothing when they brush her fingers with theirs. She is smart enough, too, to lock herself in her room on the nights her father stays up late playing dominoes and drinking rum with some men who aren't really his friends but who also like to stay up late playing dominoes and drinking rum.

Let's say, because this is the way things sometimes go, that she enjoys the attention of Arturo, but that she does not feel what she feels for the gym teacher. She is not sure what she feels, exactly. There is something about Arturo's smell, about the roughness of his lips on hers.... She is the only one of her friends with a boyfriend and there is something to be said for that. But Arturo—well, he's just a boy. Which isn't to say she wants a *man* yet either. For now she's happy enough to wake up, to work, to enjoy the way her mind untangles math problems, to hear someone say her name in the hallway.

She knows what she doesn't want, though, and we learn it in the words we give her, finally, to toss over her shoulder as she walks away: *Don't* put that forever shit on me.

