

# Morir Soñando

*by* Jeanne Dickey

Erik cooks, although I'm not hungry. Asks if I'm too warm, too cold. Do I need a shower? Too tired? Fine. He'll give me a massage, then. Lie on the bed. Wait. Take my shirt off first. Stop and shiver. "Jeezus, Martín," he says. "You're like one of those starved dogs in a Tamayo painting."

While Erik rubs my back, I fall asleep. I'm not lying on my bed in Florida - I'm face down on the pavement outside Brooklyn Pharmacy. And it's not Erik's hand smoothing oil of cassis into my skin, but that Officer Green's meaty one gripping me by the scruff as he pounds my head on the cement. My neck gets thinner. It breaks. Then I'm flying out of my broken body on wings that are big, dirty, and white. They hurt when I flap them. I scream and Erik's hand is on my shoulder. It's alright. It's alright.

Next morning, Erik and I are eating breakfast. At least I'm trying. Soft-boiled eggs. Jam. Toast. Coffee. And orange juice. My doctor calls. New test results. "Martin, it's not good." T cells down, viral load up. I should have known, by the ache behind my knees, the wrenching in my gut, the size of the blisters.

Erik shuts his eyes. I don't think he wants to know. I stare at my plate. "This egg looks like a baby chicken."

His laugh is one I know all too well; I have wept that way. He snatches my plate away, scrapes unfinished breakfast into the trash. Pours the orange juice into the blender, mixes it with milk. *Morir soñando* is the name of this drink. To die dreaming.

I don't think he wants to know that, either. We keep lots of secrets from each other - the phone numbers, scrawled on napkins and

matchbooks that I find in his pockets; the spoon of coke I do now and then, whenever I can. Secrets that are not so hidden.

But today we're together, on the bus as it crawls through downtown Miami traffic. I rest my head on his shoulder, and I remember home. New York and its urine-scented streets, Brooklyn and my childhood. My mother's hand in mine as she walked me to school. Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, summer vacation. It all went by so fast. Smoking weed with Dmitri under the bridge. Snorting coke with Max in after-hours clubs. At Peter's, when we're alone, the sweet, sweet stuff. Jeezus, what bliss!

Then the waiting times. Days of blood tests, hospitals, shivers, hope, and despair. Peter's funeral and the sickening smell of incense, the turkey dinner back at the house, Peter's father smashed on good, expensive wine. Everyone looking at me and thinking, "He's next."

And then soon after, rehab. And Erik. He squeezes my arm, asks if I'll be alright. He looks deeply into my eyes before he gets out at the restaurant where he waits tables. "They're going to take care of you," he says. "Right?"

I continue on to the shrink's office. Dr. Bow, the new one, is standard: tan chinos, glasses. We settle into regulation clinic chairs. He looks into the manila folder with my name on the outside. A bead of sweat drips from his nose, onto the paper. "So," he says, closing the file. "You're back here now?"

Is it really a question? "Yes," I say. When I first got sick, Erik and I had moved to Brooklyn to be nearer my folks.

"And you were feeling better?" he says.

"Yes."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

I really don't. It's all in the file. But I draw a deep breath, and there we are.

One afternoon last summer, I went to Brooklyn Pharmacy to pick up my meds and some things for my parents - shampoo for my Mom, aspirin for Dad. I waited half an hour there, roaming the aisles, talking to Radha, this pharmacist I've known since I was a kid. Stood outside to get some air, and WHAM! I'm shoved to the ground. Three cops, big as buffaloes, jump all over me.

"Now you'll know how it feels to be handcuffed after you've robbed an old lady," a fat voice said.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You just mugged an old lady at the corner. Took her last \$20 in food stamps."

I heard Radha behind me say, "He's been here for the past half hour, waiting for his medication. I'll swear to it." Ruffle of a paper bag with my deliverance.

"Butt out," Gravel Voice said. Meanwhile, they cuffed me. Didn't need three to do it - they were pretty hefty guys - but one of them had his foot on my neck, another held my head, and the third yanked my arms into the cuffs.

Radha said, "He has to take this now, within the next hour. Otherwise..." His voice dropped to a whisper. I knew he was telling them about me, how if I didn't take the medication at precise times, I would fall back into full-blown AIDS.

"We've got it all at the station, more at the jail," Sleaze Voice said.

"Trust me, you don't," Radha said. "Take this, please." The scent of that paper bag reassured me, like book covers I made as a kid. But the cops threw me, yes, threw me, into a van full of black and Latino brothers. I saw, of course, before the cop slammed the door, Radha standing outside the pharmacy, holding the medicine, shaking his head.

At the station house, I'm strip-searched. Red-haired pig fingered my crotch and asked, "You get AIDS from sleeping with girls?"

I told him yes. Numb nuts. Like, who would want to fool around with him? Night in the holding pen. Dreamed I was back in PR. Birds flew out of my stomach, fluttering, choking like in that psycho movie. One shining crow landed on my belly. "Beg," he said.

I told him no.

"Why?"

"Because I don't."

"Don't what?"

"Beg."

"*Maricones*," he said in a voice too deep for a bird. "You're all a bunch of pussies." And I woke up.

*Maricones*. Pussies. Did he think that was anything new? The next day, two cops drove me to Central Booking. Officer Ryan who had mauled me, and a new one. *Pendejo* named Suarez.

"So your family's been here," 'Ryan said. He held up the Brooklyn Pharmacy bag.

What's the driver going to do, I wondered. Officer Suarez. Suarez of San Juan? Suarez *de Mayaguez?* *de Ponce?* Sure as shit, he was Puerto Rican, like me. I counted the folds of fat behind his neck as Ryan of the red mustache opened the window, turned to smile at me, held up the bag, and threw it out the window. I watched it arc over the side of the bridge, toward the river.

Locked in a cell, I shivered. Thieves, whores, junkies - their eyes picked my bones clean. Like dead rats, drowned in the sewer. Because I have, in the times before rehab, ravened whomever I could. Cash, food stamps, jewelry - you name it. I closed my eyes, and waited.

Hours passed. No time for a trial. Father, brother, lover in the room. Pleading. No, I didn't do anything. I have witnesses. Approaching anyone in a suit, telling the story in English and in Spanish. Finally, at 4:30, a Legal Aid lawyer slammed the bag on the Judge's desk and said, "This man is ..."

"Martin," Dr. Bow says gently. "Can you finish that sentence?"

I realize that I have been staring out the window, at a vacant Miami street. No people. No cars. No birds. No sound. Only buildings. And sick-looking palm trees.

"This man is .. .what, Martín?"

Mini skeletons of me rattle in the shrink's eyes,. His upper lip is pale as pork fat. We're both silent.

When he finally speaks, Bow says, "You'll need something for those

dreams, won't you?" I feel what I felt that day: Erik's hand, gripping my shoulder, growing slack.

"Take this," Bow says, handing me a square, white sheet of prescription paper. Our fingers almost touch. I take it, fold it up, and place it in my pocket. The shrink looks at his watch.

There is, of course, more to the story. Days after the arrest, days of wondering whether I would get sick again. Days when I got sick. Days I denied it. Numberless doctors. Countless shrink sessions. Infinite lawyers. Paperwork that boils down to: Police Brutality. Denial of Medical Care. Hate Crime. Lawsuits for thousands of dollars that will take a million years to win.

Something rises from my esophagus, something dark that's been sitting there a long time. Words that I'll never say, because the shrink is standing, walking softly to the door, showing me the way out. No matter. I've pocketed my prescription. I won't dream any more.

Although motionless, palm trees outside the clinic seem to whisper, "Bless you." I step out the door, out of that world, the one that holds my story. The story that has no wings; the one that's left me but can not fly away.

Death is a path that everyone walks alone. When Erik doesn't come home that night, I'm not surprised. Just broke. I need that nightmare suppressant. I dream of that *sinvergüenza* Suarez, spitting in my face.

Wake up with wet hair. Sheets drenched in sweat. At the window, wrapped in a blanket. Date palms, oranges, birds. Sound of the ocean in the distance, or is it all in my mind? Life is there and Hope, a gigantic wheel, crushing everything under it. I would sleep again, but I know I'll dream. Dream of Erik coming up the walk, apron

slung over his arm, telling me, "I just had to work late." Dream of the lawyer calling me, saying that the City settled for a cool million. That I'll have it tomorrow.

Maybe then I'll walk to Erik's restaurant; try to win him back. But I won't beg. Tonight, I'll stay here at the window. In the morning, the money will come. And I'll spend it on the biggest load of blow I can get.

