

A Girl More Still

by Matt Mendez

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I dream I am a mountain. Alone until the sun dips behind me and everyone says how good we go together. I want to believe, but when I wake up he's glowing outside my window, not wanting company. Lena stops scribbling and rips the page from her notebook, folds and stuffs it in her pocket. Lena has been writing since she was little, practiced cursive and loved making loops, but now it's more than letters strung together. Her words mean something, though she doesn't know what. Unsure Lena hides what she writes in the back of dresser drawers and behind mirrors, stuffs poems between the yellow pages of her mamá's bible.

Lena is waiting for Tungi and their date, told the chubby vato to park on the street and honk. Lena wants Tungi to see her run from the house, let him peep her as she strides toward him. This way Tungi will remember the night how he wishes, can tell his boys whatever makes him happy: *Dude, she couldn't wait to get with me,* or, if Tungi turns out dreamy, *Man, it was like I was there to save her or something.* At school people call Lena a slut, which is not as bad as the shit they say about her mamá and brother, Octavio. Lena tries to ignore the chisme, but it's hard. The talk a constant drip in her head.

A horn beeps and Lena runs. Outside the stars are scattered across the sky like spilled salt. The moon a dinner plate licked clean. Lena jumps in Tungi's ride, a busted Cutlass with chrome wheels and booming stereo. She hugs him, presses her chichis against his. He's wearing too much cologne, but Lena's glad he's trying. Tungi drives to Papa Burger where Lena will order a double with fries and a strawberry shake. Tungi cruises Fort Blvd past Delicious and Marie's, Carol's Bakery and Peking Garden. All places Lena goes on dates, where she eats until her stomach hurts.

Tungi holds the door at Papa's and walks Lena to a booth. Tungi tells Lena to get whatever she's hungry for. He's a big boy, not

muscles big but fat, and barely fits between the table and cracked vinyl seat. Lena can see rolls of skin stacked like doughnuts underneath his white t-shirt. Sweat under his arms. Tungi eyeballs Lena, not hungry for food but sex. He's picturing the things he's heard about her and wants his turn—all the boys who take Lena out do—but what Tungi doesn't know is that Lena wants him too, to be wide and squishy like Tungi and not trapped in her own body. The right curves at the wrong time, her mammá once said while pointing at her nalgas, telling Lena it would doom her into marrying early and divorcing late.

Tungi tells Lena he respects her; that she's down because of Octavio. This surprises her. Lena's a lot of things but doesn't want down to be one of them. She smiles at Tungi, calls him crazy and orders when the waitress comes. *I'm Your Puppet* by James and Bobby Purify floats from a jukebox. It's a stupid oldie that cholos can't resist because to them everything's "whatever, well" or "fuck-it, ese." *Pull them little strings and I'll sing you a song, Make me do right or make me do wrong.* Tungi asks what Lena remembers about her carnal, that they were only kids when he got put away. Lena doesn't remember much. She's read Octavio's prison file online: height, weight, and race, how he fatally stabbed Artemio Anaya behind Ben's Grocery and fled the scene. He looks lost in his death row photo, shaved head and open mouthed, eyes like wet rocks. Lena squeezes Tungi's hand and tells him Octavio is dead even though he isn't.

Lena's mammá knows all about Octavio but says the memories escape her whenever she asks, and Lena understands her mammá's not the kind of woman who chases answers. Instead watches television and crawls inside cans of beer. Octavio's room is how he left it, dirty clothes in the hamper and dust covering everything. Lena remembers the picture of Octavio's girlfriend beside his bed, her wearing tight clothes and bending over, butt in the air and tits dangling like fruit ready to drop from a tree. Lena wrote a poem for her, slid it inside the frame: *Two boys gone and a girl more still.*

The comida comes, hamburger buns toasted and patties sizzling, cheese dripping along the sides. Lena pours chile verde over the meat and limon on the papitas, both from plastic bottles at the end of the table. Tungi eats without taking a moment to appreciate his food; he's sloppy and gets mustard on his shirt, licks his greasy fingers and slurps his milkshake. Tungi tells Lena to dig in, not to be shy because with looks like hers she don't need to worry about nothing, but Lena worries all the time. Now about *being down*—locked down like her brother or down-and-out like mammá? Will she fall as far as her father who booked when she was five but who can rot in hell for all anyone cares? Lena takes a bite; the chile makes her face sweat, tongue burn and eyes water.

Tungi's sorry to hear about Octavio, sorry for her loss, and Lena thinks about Octavio dying. She knows the date, wonders about his last meal and the final thought he'll be asked to spill, how the chance to choose the last words of your life is the scariest thing she can think of. Most condemned apologize to the families they've broken and praise Jesús. No matter what Octavio manages to say, Lena knows her brother, the boy she barely knew, the man she doesn't, will be free. His words will become hers to remember and forgive. To repeat and change until she can make sense of them.

She hears Octavio talking in her ear: *I'm ready to go*. Lena's ready, too.

Lena pushes her food aside, surprises Tungi. He mentions how he's heard she could put a lot away, and Lena tells him he has no idea. Tungi laughs and says he needs the toilet. He rocks himself from the booth and knocks over what's left of Lena's milkshake, the pink slush sliding across the table. Tungi wipes the crumbs from his shirt, promises a quick piss and a trip back to his place. He smiles and Lena takes the folded paper from her pocket, wipes the mess back inside the cup. The ink bleeds and words dissolve as the page soaks itself blank again. Lena leaves the restaurant with Tungi still in the bathroom. She walks toward the mountains that are somehow darker than the sky and thinks about paper turning soft and easy to tear.

