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NORMANDY PARK

Jaquira Díaz

It was the fall after Hurricane Andrew, when we were still kids and Normandy Park still belonged to us, and murders were still committed only by the adults on television. Normandy Park was in northern Miami Beach, surrounded by old apartment buildings, motels, bars, and bodegas that made up the neighborhood of the same name. The park was where we spent long summer days, dribbling basketballs on the blacktop, smoking cigarettes while carving our names into half-rotted wooden benches or the oak tree in the center of the weed-infested playground, pretending we were 35 instead of fourteen. I was wild, spent most of my time in the park or the streets. My homegirl, Boogie, was the craziest girl in the eighth grade, a hood-rat with a husky voice, a serious case of ghetto booty, and a habit of talking with her hands. We were kicking back on the rundown merry-go-round, right in front of the courts, taking sips from a quart of Olde English 800 while pretending not to watch the boys shooting hoops. It was just the usual crowd, a bunch of guys from the neighborhood making jump shots, until Kilo showed up.

His real name was Kevin, but, as far back as I could remember, everyone always called him Kilo. He was the only boy in the eighth grade with tattoos, un Cubano with a low fade, with forearms so ripped you could trace every vein in them. He was the only fourteen-year-old I knew who had dunked on Mayito, a Panameño who was so tall people said he could touch the backboard with both feet still on the ground. Kilo hadn't been out in public for weeks, so I was surprised when he just strolled onto the blacktop and joined the game like he was never even gone. I picked up the quart and took a quick swig.

"Damn, he hasn't been around since, you know," Boogie said, waiting for me to finish the sentence. But neither of us was saying what I knew we were both thinking: no one had seen Kilo since the day his homeboy Chris got shot, right here in Normandy Park. "Has he told you what happened?"

"We don't talk much," I said. Kilo and I weren't exactly friends. As far as he knew, I was just one of the girls from the neighborhood. He used to spend most of his time on the courts or with Chris, and I couldn't remember ever having a real conversation with him, other than small talk whenever we ran into each other in school or the park.

"Don't you want to know?"

I did. Much more than I was willing to admit. I hadn't told Boogie, but I was dying to talk to him. I couldn't keep my eyes off him at school. I'd known Kilo and Chris for about six years, since my mom and I first got to Miami from Puerto Rico. Back then, Kilo was already the cool kid everyone knew, Chris was a skinny moreno with a busted-up fro, and I was a quiet, dirty-faced tomboy who only spoke Spanish. Every time I saw Kilo, I still felt like I was that same kid with frizzy hair, stuck in a world of English without the right words to defend myself. Kilo was a baller, not just one of those hoodlums with time to waste in Normandy Park, but a dude with a real future. He'd make it to college some day, and basketball would get him there.

"Don't worry; it won't be long 'til the whole neighborhood knows the story," I said.

"He ain't all that, Nena," she said, studying me, narrowing her eyes like she was a psychic and I just sat at her table to ask for my fortune. "You can do better."

I rolled my eyes, finished off the last of the Olde E., and tossed the bottle on the lawn.

"You just want him for yourself," I joked, even though I knew better. Boogie could have any guy she wanted, but she had a thing for older guys from other neighborhoods, always said all those Normandy Park fools wanted was to rip and dip. The two of us were so different. She was a dancer, ambitious as hell, wanted to move to California to be a fly girl on *In Living Color* as soon as she could put the cash together. I didn't even think about the future, would rather waste my time scribbling stories that always ended up with some bank heist gone wrong, lots of blood and bullets flying, and not an honest cop on the scene.

“Like hell,” she said. “Dude smells like Drakkar Noir and balls.” She ran her fingers through her thick, black hair. That was one thing about Boogie; out of the two of us, she was the girly one. Always wore makeup, painted her toenails. As fancy as you could be in a place like Normandy Park. I was the one always in baggy jeans, with crazy curls that never stayed in place.

“I’m heading back to the bodega,” I said.

We jumped the fence, and, when we were out on the avenue, I checked for the tecatos who were always panhandling—I could hustle one of them to buy another quart for us. Boogie moved slowly, her hips swinging from side to side, her hand-me-down chanclas dragging under her feet. We stopped cold when we ran into Boogie’s mom, yelling at her to get her pendeja-ass home this instant. Boogie huffed and cried, gaining more drama with each step.

“You’re ruining my life!” she yelled, but it was more for the neighbors. That was so Boogie—she knew they ate that shit up. Her mother smacked her upside the head, and Boogie shrieked all the way across the street to Normandy Apartments, where little kids and viejas with their hair in rollers were out on their balconies watching the show.

After her mom fell asleep in front of the TV, Boogie snuck out of her house and showed up outside my bedroom window. My mother and I lived a block away from the park, in one of three Art Deco motel-style walkups with multiple layers of paint peeling off in three different pastel colors—the Section Eight Projects. Or, like most of the barrio called it, the S.E.P. You could always tell who the Section Eight kids were—we were the ones whose mothers sent them to the corner store to buy cigarettes with food stamps, who were still riding their bikes in the street after midnight, who knocked on the neighbors’ doors to make telephone calls since they almost never had phones, or cable, or even electricity.

Boogie brought a bag of Doritos and a bottle of strawberry Cisco she got from the Pakistani at the bodega around the corner.

I always suspected the Pakistani had a thing for Boogie—he was always giving her free shit, and he never ever asked us for ID. I was working on a story for our school paper, *The Beachcomber*, but I was so sick of writing the same crap about basketball games and drama club, I kept pushing deadlines, turning in stories at the last minute. I had written two words on sheet of paper when Boogie showed up.

“Hey,” she said, handing me the bag of Doritos. “Still looking for a scandal?”

Boogie’s idea of a good story would involve her mom catching her up in the mango tree behind her building when she was making out with a kid from Treasure Island. Her mom made them both get down, then slapped them one after another, since they each had it coming. Boogie for being a sucia, and the kid for messing with a fourteen-year-old. We always argued about who had the worst mother, then I’d tell her about my mom, how I went to school mostly for the free lunch, since the only thing my mother ever cooked was freebase, how she spent her days smoking cookback with her junkie boyfriends, and how more than once I walked in on her doing one of her johns on the couch.

“Mothers suck,” Boogie would always say. “I can’t wait to be free.”

She turned the knob on the black-and-white television set I kept in my room, passed me the bottle of Cisco. On the evening news, the broadcaster was reporting on teen violence in Miami, about Chris’s death. All over Normandy Park, people talked about Chris whether they knew him or not. It was the story no one could get enough of. Exactly what I was looking for. I started scribbling, with Boogie hovering over me to cat a glimpse of my notes.

“Nena—” she started to say.

“What’s up?” I grabbed a handful of Doritos from her bag.

“I gotta go,” she said. “If my mom wakes up, I’m fucked.”

Boogie’s mother tried so hard to control her, to keep her close, she would end up pushing her away—right into the beds of all

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the barrio men she hoped to protect her from. I had a mother I barely recognized, who'd leave for days at a time, coming home only to catch a few hours of sleep after a weekend binge or a night in the drunk tank, who never noticed the empty fridge.

"Here's to freedom," Boogie said, holding up the bottle of Cisco, taking it with her as she climbed out through my bedroom window. Boogie would never know her idea of freedom was unthinkable to me. That, at the thought of freeing myself from the stranger who was my mother, I would feel such defeat, such loss. And even though my mother was still alive, I was already mourning her death.

I had no idea that when the story came out it would be as if Chris died all over again. In the hallways, kids who'd known him cried in each others' arms. Girls who claimed to be his girlfriends argued about who was with him last. Some of his friends from the neighborhood stopped to talk, holding up their copies of *The Beachcomber*. Even teachers discussed it between classes—what the entire barrio had been talking about for weeks.

We thought the whole thing was over a female, this morena, a red girl named Tabitha who everybody said Chris was fucking with on the down low. Then the rumors started—Chris had stolen some dude's car over by Crespi Boulevard, some cat nobody knew, or he had beef with some gangueros in Hialeah, or one of his mom's pimps tried to collect what she owed. The only thing anyone knew for sure was that one minute Chris and Kilo were at the corner of Seventy First and Rue Grandville, and the next Chris was lying on the sidewalk. Everyone had a different version of what Kilo was doing while Chris was choking on his own blood. Some people said he was sitting on the curb, just sitting there. Others said he tried going after the guy but got pistol-whipped, which would explain the cut above his eyebrow.

Now, a month later, Kilo was back in school. He was lucky, that's one thing everyone agreed on, no matter how many times the story changed. Lucky to be alive.

I was struggling with the combination on my locker when I spotted Kilo headed my way. I knew he would say something about the paper, and all I could think about was the first time I saw him. Really saw him. I was on my way to third-period English with my homegirls. We were singing Two Live Crew's "Pop That Pussy" like it was our theme song, and he was in front of Mr. Williamson's English class reading an issue of *The Beachcomber*, the one with that bullshit story I wrote about Hurricane Andrew. When I got to Mr. Williamson's classroom, I waved to my girls as they split to their own classes. He rolled up his paper, said, "Hey, Nena," then left, with a swagger in his step that almost stopped my heart.

He didn't have the same swagger as he made his way toward me this time, and, when he stopped in front of me, he looked me dead in the eye, sizing me up like he was ready to battle.

"Hi," I said, biting my lip.

He had the paper in his hand, showed it to me as if I didn't already know why he was approaching me.

"Why did you write this?" he asked.

I froze. He was talking like I wronged him—not just like the tragedy had happened all over again, but like it was me who did it. My face was burning, but the guilt didn't lift from me as he took off without another word.

I knew what he meant. Why had I waited so long to write the story when I could've done it weeks ago? Did I know it would come out the same day he came back to school? In a way, I'd hoped it would get his attention. That he would see me, like he'd seen me before, with the hurricane story. But that wasn't the only reason. To me, Chris would always be a neighborhood kid who rode around on a BMX he stole from Dios sabe donde, who lived with his scutterhead mother but spent most of his time on the streets, in and out of shelters, or with Kilo. Chris was a kleptomaniac who was known for stealing everything he could get his hands on—stop signs, the hubcaps off the principal's rusty Chevy Nova, flea-market jeans hanging from clotheslines around the barrio. His most infamous plunder had been a Chapulín

Colorado birthday cake he swiped from a little kid's party at one of the gazebos in Normandy Park—I was swimming in the park's public pool when Chris and Kilo showed up and started handing out cake.

What I didn't tell Kilo was that I wanted to say something about Chris. Something other than what was always mentioned in the news. To them, he was just a boy from the projects—a “troubled youth” who spent time in Juvie Hall, who was arrested six times before his thirteenth birthday. The truth was, Kilo was the only one with patience for Chris, and Kilo's was the only family who didn't have to worry about their shit showing up in one of Normandy Park's three pawn shops, because Chris had mad respect for Kilo's mom. Maybe he was everything they said on TV—a thief with a good heart, a victim to a random act of violence, a talented basketball player. What if he was all of that and none of it? What if he was just a boy who desperately needed a mother?

After school, I was already on the bus, lounging in the back row when Kilo got on. I'd been thinking that the next time we spoke I would explain about the story. The moment I saw him, though, I changed my mind. The speech I'd been practicing all day suddenly seemed ridiculous. He strutted toward the back of the bus, found a seat close to me, facing the side window instead of the front. He leaned back, legs stretched out in front of him. I thought I heard myself exhale with relief when he finally got up, but he just moved closer. I could smell the Newport he smoked just before he got on, could make out the Y-shaped cut above his right eyebrow.

“Why do you always look so pissed off?” he asked.

“I don't look pissed off,” I said, although it wasn't the first time I'd heard that. My mother always said I had a face like I couldn't be bothered, just like my father. I tried to avoid that expression, putting on a fake smile when there was nothing to be happy about, just so I wouldn't have to hear *Why so serious* or *What's wrong?*

“Yeah. You do. Like you could fuck somebody up.”

He put his dirty sneakers on the seat in front of him. But I noticed he was smiling, as if he was letting all the tension that had been between us just wash away.

“Maybe I’m just mad at you,” I said. “Maybe I’m mad at the world.” But I knew he didn’t buy a word I said. He knew better. After all, we were from the same barrio, from the same broken world. From broken homes, broken English, and broke-ass parents.

I’d been home from school for hours and it occurred to me: I didn’t need an excuse to talk to him; I could just go see how he was. After our bus ride, I was sure he’d be glad to see me, so I walked two blocks to his building and knocked on his door. His mother was in her nurse’s scrubs when she came to the door. I’d seen her in scrubs for years, and everyone knew she worked the night shift at South Shore Hospital.

“Yeah?” She leered at me like I was a Jehovah’s Witness coming to spread the word on a Sunday morning.

“Is Kilo home?” I regretted the question as soon as I heard myself ask it.

“Do you need him for something?” Up close, I saw her age for the first time, the crow’s feet and the bags under her eyes.

“I was just—.” She glanced at her watch, and I could tell I was wasting my time. I knew what people around the neighborhood thought about me and my mom—everyone knew my mother was a scutterhead. But I always thought Kilo’s mom—the same woman who took care of Chris, who fed him and bought him shoes for school when his own mother put him out on the street—would understand that I wasn’t my mother. “No,” I said finally.

The door was closed before I even turned to leave.

I was making my way home when I spotted him waiting for me in front of my building, a basketball under his right arm.

“You stalking me?” I asked, hoping he didn’t notice where I was coming from.

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“Why? You gonna call the cops?” Kilo had a thing about him—he was cool without even knowing it, without even trying. And he was his own person. Peer pressure didn’t touch him.

“Only if you’re dangerous,” I said.

We climbed on the hood of a broken down Tercel that had been parked in front of my building for months. He put the basketball between us, and I lay down next to him, neither one of us saying anything for a while. He lit a cigarette, and we passed it back and forth. Only the sound of cars and buses driving by, the occasional kid on a bike. Just when I thought everything would get awkward, he took my hand. I thought he would kiss me, but he wasn’t looking at me. The vein on his temple was throbbing, and he was lost somewhere up in the stars. He didn’t have to say it; I knew he was thinking about Chris. Suddenly, his friend’s death wasn’t a tragedy that happened only to Kilo—I was there with him. Under the moonlight, we were more than just two kids from the neighborhood; there was something more between us, and everything inside me wanted to know him, to reach that part of him he kept only to himself.

At school that fall people didn’t stop talking about Chris’s murder. It was always on the news and everyone said the shooter was a kid, since we all knew they’d caught a guy, but they never showed his face. Didn’t even let the cameras in the courtroom. Everyone said it was because he was a minor. The only thing we knew for sure is there were witnesses. Witnesses. That’s what every station reported.

In the hallways, Kilo was always alone. He wasn’t a loner—he was the boy everyone knew, nodding their heads as they passed him on their way to Math or Civics. Before Chris died, Kilo paraded the hallways the same way I did, surrounded by his homeboys, fucking up all the lyrics to Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story,” him and Chris with their baggy jeans and matching Air Jordans. Nowadays, Kilo acts like he just wants to get away from all the bochinche.

One afternoon, when the final bell rang, when everyone else was scrambling through the hallways to meet their boyfriends

or girlfriends, to grab a quick feel before they had to get on the bus, I caught Kilo watching me. He watched me put my books in my locker, transfer a notebook to my backpack.

"Hey," I said, making my way over.

He wasted no time—the next thing I knew, my backpack was on the floor, his hands at the nape of my neck, and his tongue in my mouth, and I had no idea what the fuck I was doing. When he pulled away, he picked up my backpack and threw one strap over his shoulder.

"Hey," he finally said, a big grin on his face.

And that was our first kiss. We didn't notice the faces or the whispers following us as we made our way past them, or the gossip that started right there in that hallway. Later, we would take the bus together, back to Normandy Park. We would hold hands, watching out the window as Miami Beach passed us by. He would kiss me again, longer that time, and I'd let myself imagine that there was an entire world outside of Normandy Park, something holding it all together. And one day I would live in that world.

Miami was a transient city—everyone who lived there was from someplace else. Some of us brought by parents who thought we'd have more opportunities. Others, like Kilo, wouldn't feel at home there, but would never know any other place they could call their own.

Kilo and I both knew where we stood in the hierarchy of Latinos—we weren't like the Argentinean or Venezuelan tourists who graced the hotels and beaches in Miami. Although sometimes we pretended to be like them, browsing through the tourist-trap electronics and t-shirt shops on Collins Avenue, or trying to sneak in to the pool at The Carillon on 67th.

The first time we snuck in we thought we'd blend in. I had borrowed a swimsuit from Boogie, thought we'd go swimming in style, like tourists. As soon as we were out in the sun though, we realized we were off the mark. Kilo was a thick *trigueño* covered in what looked like jailhouse ink. I was like a *jíbara* right off

the island, my jean shorts too baggy, my t-shirt too loose, not just because that was the style back then, but because most of my clothes were hand-me-downs from a family of pentecostales who lived two buildings over. One glance at us and you'd know we didn't belong.

I hesitated while taking off my shorts—in the Normandy Park pool, I always wore a long t-shirt over my suit. But when Kilo saw me in a bikini for the first time, he slapped my ass with his bare hand and said, “Damn, that’s a lot of booty.” We exploded in laughter, and all around us people started staring, so when the security guard headed our way, we decided to hit the beach instead of waiting to be escorted out of the hotel. We threw all our shit into my Jansport, and the two of us hoofed it across the boardwalk. Me, wearing the Jansport in the front like it was a baby, and Kilo jogging behind me, slapping my ass every chance he got.

I didn't stop to take off the backpack, just tossed it on the sand, kicked off my chanclas, and hit the water. Kilo jumped head first into a shallow wave, then came up and wrapped his arms around me.

“I need to tell you something,” he said.

“Okay.” I rested my chin on his shoulder, bracing myself. I was sure he wanted to talk about Chris.

“My sister’s coming down from St. Pete,” he said. “I’m supposed to go live with her.”

“What? Where did this come from?” He had never mentioned a sister before, and now he was going to live with her? I didn't even know anything about St. Pete, except that it was on the west coast of Florida somewhere, and it was where old people went to retire. “What do you mean you’re supposed to?”

“Just until the trial’s over. My mom thinks it’s better if they don’t know where I am.”

“What? If who doesn’t know where you are?”

“I’m supposed to testify.”

We hadn't talked about the trial at all. I hadn't asked him any questions about the night Chris died, as much as I wanted to, even though Boogie kept pushing me to get details. I thought

he'd open up when he was ready.

"So your mom doesn't want you to testify?"

"She thinks she knows what's best for me." He kissed me behind the ear, then down my neck. "Don't worry, Nena. I'm not going anywhere."

I didn't know if that's what I wanted to hear, if I wanted him to stay in Normandy Park just for me. If his mom wanted him to go, it was because she thought he'd be safer in St. Pete.

"We could run away together," I said. I was just entertaining the thought, but I wasn't playing. I knew I'd jump on it if he said the word.

"Where would we go?" He looked amused, but I couldn't tell if he was considering it.

"We could go live up north somewhere. See snow."

"What about Puerto Rico? Don't you ever think about going back?" It killed him when I talked about the island like it was a distant place. Couldn't understand why I hadn't been back there since I left, not even to visit family.

"I don't know."

"It's not like Cuba," he said. "You could go back."

He'd never been to Cuba, knew it only as the island of his mother's stories, where she met his father, where they fell in love. It was a place he knew he'd never see.

"We don't have that kind of cash," I said. But he knew it wasn't about the money. Even in the S.E.P., all the Boricuas would make it back to the island whenever they could, hustling for the cash however they could. "Anyway, when did we start talking about just me? I thought we were in this together."

"Listen, Nena," he said, holding me at arm's length, looking into my eyes so I would know he was serious. "You could go back," he said again. "If you wanted to."

Just before Hurricane Andrew hit Miami that summer, when the royal palms surrounding Normandy Park were still standing and Chris was still alive, I received a letter from my father's friend in Puerto Rico. I hadn't spoken to my father since my mother

and I left the island, but we didn't have much to do with each other before that either. To my father, I was just a consequence of his affair with my mother—a romance that lasted only three months, one that ended abruptly with my father flying back to his wife and kids the moment my mother told him she was expecting his illegitimate child.

I met my father's friend, Frank—a Vietnam veteran who was confined to a wheelchair after losing both legs—only once. I was six years old and had seen my father only a handful of times, when he picked me up from my mother's apartment in order to "spend time" with me, but, when he took me to Frank's place, a house in La Playa de Humacao, my father had no intention of spending any time with a daughter he hardly knew. Instead, he dropped me off at Frank's after a brief introduction and went next door to "spend time" with Frank's new neighbor, Yolanda. I was scared of Frank at first, couldn't stop staring at the place where his legs were supposed to be. But it was Frank who made lunch for me, who asked questions about where I went to school, what my favorite food was, what my mom did for a living. When my father returned from the neighbor's house, he had a beer with Frank and then drove me home without a word. That was the last time my father picked me up. After that, my father didn't even bother, and I saw him only when he stopped by my mom's apartment in El Caserío, where I watched TV in the living room and my parents locked themselves in my mother's bedroom.

Frank's letter came as a surprise, but what was in it did not. My father, Frank said, had passed away. Heart attack. My father's widow was the one who insisted on reaching out to me, asked Frank to find me and invite me to visit my siblings in Puerto Rico. Frank offered to pay for my ticket, said my mother and I could stay with him in La Playa de Humacao. It didn't surprise me that the chance to meet my brothers and sisters came only after my father's death. That I was allowed into my father's world only after he left it.

I never told Kilo I could go back to Puerto Rico any time I wanted, that I had a family there I'd never met. And what he didn't have, the ability to see his mother's island—a place she

both loved and hated, where she sometimes vowed she would spend the last days of her life, and other times swore she would never set foot again—I had that, too.

It wasn't until one morning after first period that I knew. I was on the way to class when Kilo came up to me, took me by the arm and pulled me into the boys' bathroom. He shut the door, jammed my math book under it, and kissed me, my back against a wall. All I could think about was the smell, and that a math book wasn't going to stop anyone from getting that door open, but he pulled down my jeans and panties and went down on me, even before I knew what going down was. I forgot about the math book and the smell of piss lingering all around us, thinking only of that scar above his eyebrow, the ink on his forearms, his tongue. And I finally knew what desire was, the kind I could only know at fourteen, when everything else was uncertain and the only thing I could be sure of is that my world was beginning and ending all at once.

I lost myself, all over his face, my hands pulling on the back of his head, leaving behind the girl I was. I wasn't her anymore. I was something else.

He came up to kiss my lips again, harder this time, pressing his body against mine, his tongue in my mouth, and I could taste myself.

And I knew—just as I'd always known we were only children who were playing at life—that I'd always wanted this.

I didn't see it coming, but I knew something was wrong when both of them didn't show up to school on Monday. I spent most of the day hoping to spot Kilo in the hallways, or to find Boogie waiting for me in front of the gym. But Kilo never showed up, and Boogie didn't come over until I'd been home for several hours.

I expected it to be Kilo when I heard the knock—Boogie never used our front door; she usually snuck through my bedroom window. She must've seen the letdown on my face because the

first thing she said was, “What’s wrong?”

“Where were you?” I pulled her inside the apartment and shut the door. I’d been worried mostly about Kilo since Boogie skipped school with boyfriends all the time. Kilo hadn’t missed a day since he came back to school, and there was no answer when I knocked on his door.

“I wanted to tell you, Nena.” She ran her fingers through her hair, started pacing back and forth in the middle of my living room. “But I thought Kilo would.”

“Tell me what?” I searched her face for a hint of what she was about to say.

“It was my fault,” she said. “Kilo and Chris were in the park. I went to get him.”

“What are you talking about?”

She sat on the edge of the sofa, stared down at her hands.

“I was the other witness. No one knew we were—you know. But then this other guy, Alex, this kid from Crespi I was fucking with, he found out about Chris.” She let the tears in her eyes fall. I plopped down next to her. This wasn’t the Boogie I knew, so broken. I’d never seen her cry before. “He saw us together once, me and Chris, then he stopped calling. But we kept seeing him around. Turns out they knew each other. Chris broke into his boy’s car or something. You know how he was.”

“Yeah.”

“Chris and I had a fight that night, and I stormed off. That’s when Alex and his boys showed up. I was already across the street, halfway to my building.

“Kilo tried to help him, then he was out cold on the sidewalk. That’s when Alex pulled out the gun.” She covered her face with her hands. “I keep thinking, maybe if I hadn’t been with both of them—”

“It’s not your fault,” I interrupted. I put my arm around her, and she rested her head on my shoulder. We listened to each other breathe for a while, wiping tears off our cheeks.

“You’re waiting for him, aren’t you?” she asked. This was the

Boogie I knew, who could always figure me out.

"He didn't show up at school," I said. "Haven't seen him all day."

"He was supposed to be in court today," she said, her face stained with mascara.

"So that's where you were all day?" She shook her head yes.

"The lawyers say his mom sent him off somewhere. She didn't want him to testify."

"But he told me he wasn't going anywhere," I said. I started going over scenarios in my head. What if he was gone?

"He wasn't there, Nena."

I bolted over to the phone and dialed his number, Boogie grabbing on to me and pushing her ear closer to the receiver. After a few rings, his mom was on the line.

"I don't know any Kilo," she said.

"Kevin," I said.

"You have the wrong number," she said and hung up.

Boogie and I exchanged confused looks. I called again to make sure I had the right number, but Kilo's mom didn't wait for me to say anything this time.

"Don't call here again or I'll call the police."

I leaned my back against the wall, with the receiver to my ear, even after she hung up on me, trying to remember Kilo's words, what he'd said to me that day on the beach. He promised to stay with me.

I slid down onto the floor, letting the phone drop, hugged my knees tight against my chest.

It turned out the kid who shot Chris was only fifteen years old, a ganguero from Crespi Park. It was all over the news, how the motherfucker got Life. I found out later that Kilo went back to court and testified, even though his mother was set against it. One day she told the cops she'd gotten some threatening phone calls, and she moved out of her apartment in the middle of the night, leaving half of her furniture behind. No one knew where

she went, but I heard she even quit her job at the hospital.

After everyone already knew who the ganguero was, and his boys were caught and charged as accomplices, even after they were all convicted and sentenced, Kilo still didn't come back to Normandy Park. I kept writing for *The Beachcomber*. Boogie stopped wasting her time with the losers she always ran with, started taking dance classes again. She was set on getting accepted to the New World School of the Arts. When we had free time, Boogie and I lounged around on the merry-go-round, not drinking anymore, but remembering a time when the days were long and the nights were hot, and I almost expected to see Kilo jumping the fence into the park to join his boys on the blacktop, or waiting for me in the hallway outside homeroom, ready to walk me to my next class. Sometimes I asked myself why I didn't try harder, during the short time I had him, to know him while he was still here. Why I never asked him about Chris. Other times, when I thought of those few months we spent together, I couldn't help wondering if he knew all along he would leave.

I always knew why I loved Kilo—because he was easy to love, because he believed in a better world, in possibilities. He even made me believe in them. But I never knew why he loved me, or if he loved me at all. Maybe he thought that, unlike Chris, I was someone he could save.

It was his mother who delivered the box a few months later. She came on a Saturday morning. I was headed to the bodega around the corner and opened the door as she was about to knock. She had the shoebox in her hands. I scanned the parking lot for Kilo, even though I knew he wouldn't be around.

"Hi," I said. She still had that same tired expression.

"How are you?" she asked, which was awkward since she'd never been one for small talk.

"Fine." My first instinct was to ask about Kilo, but it had been a long time since our days together, and I knew he was better off wherever he was. She looked over my shoulder at the

messy living room.

"Where's your mother?"

I didn't know what it was I felt then. Confused, maybe, that Kilo's mom was concerned about me. Offended that she thought I was some charity case. What if Kilo had changed her mind about me, convinced her to check on me because he thought I needed to be checked on?

"She's sleeping," I said, stepping outside and pulling the door shut behind me. It was the truth. My mom hadn't left her room in two days.

"This is for you," she said, extending the box out to me. "From Kevin."

"Thanks." I took the box from her hands.

"You know, it was never about you, Nena. I just wanted him to have a future. To be safe."

For the first time, I could see a little bit of Kilo in her, and I understood that this was her way of saying she was sorry for taking him away from me, but also trying to determine if I'd let him go.

"Me, too," I said. And I meant it. There was a time when the only life I could imagine was one with Kilo in it, and for a while I felt abandoned in Normandy Park. But not anymore. All that mattered is that he was headed where we both knew he was meant to be.

As she turned to leave, I was tempted to follow her across the parking lot. Maybe Kilo was waiting in the car. But I stepped back into the apartment and shut the door, forgetting my trip to the store.

I opened the box. It was filled with sand. I put my hand inside, ran my fingers through it. There were seashells inside, too, beautiful mollusk and clam shells, and I could tell they were handpicked from the beach. There was also a note, in his handwriting: *You could go back. If you wanted to.*

In a few years, Normandy Park would start to change. Soon it would be a completely different neighborhood. A wrought-iron gate would take the place of the chain-link fence, and the royal

palms would be planted again as part of the city's reconstruction project. Almost overnight, the playground equipment would be brand new, the blacktop resurfaced, patches of grass and weeds replaced by a lush green lawn. The Section Eight Projects would be dismantled, all the people forced to move to other areas of the inner city—Hialeah, Liberty City, Wynwood. The small houses and Art Deco apartment buildings would be gutted and renovated. Property values would skyrocket and rents would be much more than any of us could afford. People who had lived there ten, twenty years would pick up and go to other parts. White folks would move in, mostly young families from places like Madison, Wisconsin, with babies they pushed in expensive strollers. They would walk their rare-breed dogs with names like Lucky or Champ, unlike our mutts, which we named Pancho and Chispita. The new residents would build their health food markets and coffee shops where the old bodegas and pawn shops used to be. The only thing that would remain of that fall after Hurricane Andrew would be our names carved into the trunk of the oak tree in the middle of the park: *Nena and Kilo Forever*. It was, after all, a transient city. But we would never really know if we outgrew Normandy Park, or if Normandy Park outgrew us.