



Sergio Troncoso is a writer of essays, short stories, and novels, and the author of five books. Among the numerous awards he has won are the Premio Aztlan Literary Prize, Southwest Book Award, Bronze Award for Essays from *ForeWord Reviews*, and International Latino Book Award.

The son of Mexican immigrants, Troncoso was born and grew up on the eastern outskirts of El Paso, Texas in rural Ysleta. He graduated from Harvard College, and studied international relations and philosophy at Yale University. He won a Fulbright scholarship to Mexico, where he studied economics, politics, and literature.

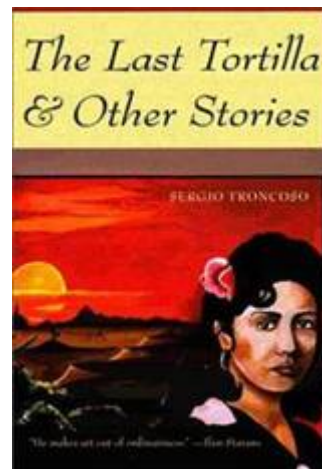
Troncoso was inducted into the Hispanic Scholarship Fund's Alumni Hall of Fame and the Texas Institute of Letters. He also received the Literary Legacy Award from the El Paso Community College. He is a member of PEN, a writers' organization protecting free expression and celebrating literature. The El Paso City Council voted unanimously to rename the Ysleta public library branch in honor of Sergio Troncoso. He served as one of three national judges for the 2016 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

He is currently an instructor at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York and a resident faculty member of the Yale Writers' Conference in New Haven, Connecticut.

Booklist hailed Troncoso's first book, *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories*, as "Enthusiastically recommended," and *Publishers Weekly* said, "These stories are richly satisfying."

"Day of the Dead" is one of the twelve stories in *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories*.

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Day of the Dead

Doña Rosita took the small ax, raised it, and severed the hind leg from the trunk of the pig on her counter. A clear liquid dripped over the side and onto the floor. Thick blood filled the empty socket and crept over the bone. She took the leg and rinsed it underneath the faucet with cold water and threw it in the battered tin pot full of boiling water on the stove. Pieces of two onions floated on top of the bubbles of water. Chopped up garlic swirled at the bottom. She lifted the cover of another pot on the kerosene stove. With a fork, she pinched off a strand of white meat from the cheek of the pighead whose snout stuck out above the water line. The meat was still tough. She added more salt. Outside the hens clucked away from the rooster, running underneath and into the rusted frame of the Ford Fairlane which was still on cinderblocks right where Joaquín Pérez had left it eleven years ago. He had worked on a shrimp boat in Yucatán before his brother had told him about the money to be made working in the maquilas on the American border. Cochinita pibil had been his favorite dish. Rosita knew just the right amount of achiote, lime, and orange juice in which to marinate the pork meat overnight after boiling it first for a few minutes. Doña Rosita and Lupe would eat most of the cochinita pibil by next week. Just a small bowl of it, with a smattering of red onion rinds, would be left at the altar for Don Joaquín today, on Día de los Muertos.

"Mi hija, wake up," Doña Rosita called from the kitchen, stirring the pighead so that the scalding water would lap up around the nose of the snout. "Get up, niña! El rutero will be here in an hour."

"What? ¡Ay Dios!" Lupe said weakly, still half-asleep, lying on a foam mattress in the living room floor. A Pemex diesel truck slowly creaked to a halt in front of the twisted Alto sign outside. A cloud of white dust rolled against the front wall of the shack, which had been painted aqua. The other three walls were covered with a raggedy blanket of white plaster that exposed patches of sandy brown adobe underneath.

"You're going to miss it."

"No, I'm up already."

"I made you some sandwiches, with cajeta and cheese."

"Ay, mamá. I told you: la familia Rogers feeds me. Why don't you just eat them yourself?"

"Take them. What if you get hungry after they feed you? Then you'll have enough to eat. Take them. I'm making cochinita, I'll have enough to eat for a while."

"It's just more for me to carry, but ándale pues. Are you going to save me some of this?"

"Sí. I'll put some of it in the freezer."

"I hope you don't poison me. I don't trust that freezer. Maybe la señora Rogers will give me the same Christmas as last year. Then I'll have enough for a new refrigerator at Aurrerá. I saw one for 1,250,000 pesos. I can give a down of 200,000 with my Christmas and what I have now."

"But what about you, mi hija? You're always paying for this or that and you still don't have anything but rags for dresses."

"I don't need a dress. What for?"

"I don't want to argue about this now."

"Neither do I. I'm getting ready."

"Aren't you taking a shower? What are those americanos going to say about you? 'Phew! All those people from Juárez stink up la frontera.'"

"I took a shower last night. Just leave me alone. I'm already tired and I haven't even started the week. Por favor, mamá."

"I was just trying to help."

"I don't need it."

Lupe took a washcloth that was hanging over the sink in the bathroom, soaked it with cold water, and scrubbed each underarm until a red patch of warmth shined through her chestnut skin. She soaked the washcloth again and wrung it free of cold water. Holding on to the edge of the sink, she scrubbed hard against her vulva, between her thighs, and over her legs which she splayed out over the cement floor. She scrubbed until she was free of the grimy deadness in her pores, until she reached a place beyond the impurity of her skin. She hung the washcloth on the shower curtain rod and splashed water on her face and black hair until all of it was dripping wet.

"¡Mamá!"

"What?"

"Didn't I tell you to plug up the hole in the wall underneath the sink! Spiders are

crawling all over the bathroom floor!"

"Oh, I forgot. I'll do it, don't worry. Those spiders are harmless anyway."

"¡Mamá! I can't do everything! You have to help me. We have to get things done around here. It's disgusting! I can't live like this. We live like animals!"

"Don't get so excited. Stop yelling, mi hija. What are you talking about?"

"We live like animals!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Just look at this place! I hate it here!"

"Cálmate. Why are you screaming?"

"We live like pigs here! We live like pigs and you're cooking pigs for a dead man!"

"What? ¡Dios te disculpe! You're talking about your father."

"Look at what he left us. ¡Nada! Spiders are running all over the floor! We barely have enough money to eat! We live in this barraca!"

"We do what we can. We're not rich."

"We live like pigs. I don't want to live like this anymore."

"What are you saying, mi hija?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to live like this."

"Please, look. I have the spiders here on this towel. There are no more spiders, mi hija."

"Ay, mamá. That's not it. I'm tired of all of this. I'm tired and I just got up."

"Son nervios. Just relax. Please, mi hija. What's wrong?"

"I want to throw up. My head hurts. I have blisters on my feet. My back feels as if someone has been sticking needles in my spine all night. I can't even sleep when I have the time."

"Maybe you could call la señora Rogers and tell her you're sick. Tell her you can't go until Tuesday or Wednesday."

"I'm not going to tell her anything. I'm getting dressed."

Joaquín will love this, Doña Rosita thought, admiring her handiwork. Atop two milkcrates, she stacked the small shoebox carefully wrapped in gold foil paper. The milkcrates themselves, also encased in gold, sat on a rickety wooden table by the front door. She had already wedged a folded piece of cardboard under the short leg of the table. Over the warped tabletop planks, Doña Rosita had smoothed a white tablecloth embroidered with tiny yellow and red roses. In her bedroom, she unhooked a picture in a black frame from a thick, rusted nail by her dresser and, gently, arranged the picture upright inside one of the milkcrates. The milkcrate started to tip over, but she caught it with one hand before the edifice crashed onto the cement floor.

She placed the picture flat on the table and hurried to the kitchen, where she found, in a topmost shelf, a large clay bowl with 'Mariscos de Yucatán' etched in white on the side. She gingerly leaned the picture against the back wall of the milkcrate again, just as she set the heavy bowl inside the milkcrate too. The crate was finally steady. Back in the kitchen, Doña Rosita busily prepared the rest of what would adorn the pyramidal altar of the table and the milkcrates and the shoebox. From the picture inside the milkcrate, the faded image of a man with a vaquero hat --green eyes dancing above parched, sunburnt skin-- gazed out the window. His smile was easy and kind. His ears flapped out from under his hat. His brown flannel shirt seemed old and comfortable. An image of life frozen beyond time.

Just before Lupe waved goodbye, the streetlights flickered and then went out in Colonia Loma Linda again. Plan de Ayala Street was absolutely black except for the soft glow of kerosene lamps inside a few of the shacks on the street. Whenever a car zoomed through the street on its way to Calzada Tampiqueña, the bright flash of headlights would sweep across a flat and dusty bleakness. The broken pavement of the curbless street. The earth, scarred, and beaten down, and forsaken. A terrible starkness that seemed almost to engulf even the aqua and oyster white splashed onto these adobe walls. But indeed it did not.

Doña Rosita lit her own kerosene lamp and moved hurriedly about her altar for Don Joaquín. The awful silence around her seemed shut out as she attended to her task. She filled a bowl with bizcochos and arranged it just at the corner of the small table near the door. Whoever might stop for a visit today would see them and feel free to sample a few on a napkin. On the altar table itself, she created simple flower patterns with sweet orange skull candy. At the top of

the pyramid, inside the shoe box, she delicately placed a surprisingly vivid picture of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe she had purchased at the basilica in Mexico City years ago. She kissed her fingertips and pressed the kiss onto the Virgin's tiny feet and prayed for a moment. Then she laid a fresh rose in front of Her. Inside a straw basket in the other milkcrate, Doña Rosita carefully arranged clumps of white bread glazed to a crispy golden brown and shaped like bones. In a cup, she brought a few morsels of cochinita pibil and spooned the pork meat into the large clay bowl in front of Don Joaquín. She decorated the top of this red heap with five rinds of red onion that interlocked like the Olympic rings.

She slowly lowered the wick until the flame sputtered and died. She peeked through the window into the dark, empty street. Lupita was long gone. Nothing else was out there. Doña Rosita walked into her bedroom, Lupe's foam mattress under one arm. She tied it into a neat bundle and pushed it into a low, narrow closet and jammed the wooden latch back into place. The old woman, whose strong leathery hands suddenly trembled, stared at the bizarre shape of the altar under the persistent moonlight from the window. The altar seemed to sway in the bluish shimmer. She was at once frightened and excited. She believed the spirit of Don Joaquín might already be lurking among the living, here in this room. She thought she heard voices. They seemed to emanate from the walls. She knew that every day and night the world of the living was visited by that of the dead. But today and tonight, in this unique time, the primordial link between the living and the dead would become a highway easily traversed. An open passage in time would erupt to bring together misery and freedom. The trees and the mountains would shiver with what once was, and what would be. Tonight, Don Joaquín would be close to her again. She felt it in her bones. Tonight, he would lie next to her again, and she would travel to his own nether world and almost not return to her own bed. Tonight, she might remember him again, for this was what her heart could do. She might dream of a better time as she lay on her foam mattress on the floor.

Lupe climbed into the white van which stopped at Plan de Ayala Street and Calzada Tampiqueña. The sky over Juárez was still dark. The gasoline fumes rising from the grates of the gutter seemed to thicken the darkness into a saturate smoke. She handed the driver two 1,000 peso bills and told him she was going to Avenida Riberena and Epsilon. He nodded his head while staring straight ahead at the red light dangling over the street. From there, she would cross the Río Grande on a pasamojado. There were always so many of them near the Chamizal. Some with huge black inner tubes, others in makeshift rafts, and a few oldtimers who still carried people across the river on their shoulders. La migra sometimes rushed in to try to stop them, but someone always saw the pale green trucks coming at full tilt on the Border Highway. The pasamojados had arranged it so that one of them was always on the lookout while the others ferried people across. By the time the mojadados were on the other side, it was just a matter of time before they could spring out of the bushes and trees that lined the river. They would dash

across the highway and into the Ascarate neighborhood. Then they would be free. A few blocks north, on Alameda Street, Lupe would take the bus to San Jacinto Plaza in downtown El Paso, transfer to the Mesa Street bus, and take that all the way up to Festival Drive on the westside. Here, in another world, tony houses with whiterock landscapes and yucca plants were quiet and clean in the chill of the morning.

Four other people were riding in the van with her. Two men sat on the wooden bench in front of her and looked as if they were friends, both in jeans splashed with plaster and cement. Their faces were wrinkled red and stiff, and altogether stoic. Another man, in a shiny lavender polyester shirt, sat in the passenger seat next to the driver and yapped about his favorite rancheras, about José Alfredo Jiménez, and about that joto Juanito Rodríguez and the shame he had brought to Juárez with his effeminate incantations of '¡Arriba Juárez!' at his concerts throughout the republic. Another woman, with a cherubic face and stocky legs, sat next to Lupe in the cushioned seat at the back of the van. Lupe had seen her before and presumed she was also a maid who worked in El Paso, although they had never said a word to each other. When Lupe had ducked into the van and found a seat in the back, the woman had glanced up from her folded hands on her lap and smiled at her. But that was it. For the rest of the ride, the woman just stared at the calluses on her palms, gazed blankly into the street once in a while, and shut her eyes whenever the van stopped in traffic. In a brown bag between the woman's legs, a plastic skeleton mask crinkled whenever the van would halt. Underneath the mask, Lupe could also see the chest of greenish fluorescent bones of a garish Grim Reaper outfit.

The van stopped at 16 de Septiembre and López Mateos, in front of the Río Grande Mall. One of the construction workers in the back opened the sliding door with a tug, and his buddy followed him out. Before they could push the door closed again, another man climbed in from the street and handed the driver two folded bills. Wearing a cowboy hat, black boots, and a large silvery belt buckle with a rider atop a bronco, the new man sat down on the empty wooden bench and shut the door behind him. He turned to Lupe and the woman sitting next to her and stared at Lupe's legs and at her crotch and at the tightness of Lupe's dress around her breasts. Lupe turned away and focused on the traffic outside: a policeman was ticketing a motorist in front of the Plaza Monumental while the driver held out a wad of bills at the cop and seemed to plead for him to look up from his busywork. She turned again to the mustachioed vaquero with the bronco belt. He was still looking her over. She glanced at his face, and just as a smile seemed to form on his lips, she closed her eyes and tried to shut him away, but still imagined his eyes roaming up and down her body, like the tiny black legs of a thousand spiders pattering over her flesh. After a while, in the reddish darkness behind her eyelids, she began to daydream about the eyes of Roberto Carlos. The bold and intelligent eyes that sprung out from her album cover at home. His curly brown hair which just grazed his shoulders. His lips and his mouth. He holding her hand and walking with her on the beach. His caress behind her back, his body tightly against hers. His hand slowly tracing the outline of her face. Her lips reaching out to kiss his fingers. Their kisses and their passion, uninhibited and profound and free.

"Señorita, Avenida Riberena."

Lupe opened her eyes and stepped out of the van. The van resumed its course toward downtown Juárez. She walked across an empty field and in the direction of a clump of trees on the river's embankment. The sky was still mostly a purplish blue. Yet, in the horizon toward Van Horn, a reddish glow already crept up from the ground. The line of amber streetlights along the Border Highway on the other side of the river also shimmered. The desert air was cold and stiffened Lupe's ankles and calves and thighs so that her hurried steps thumped hard against the dirt. She stepped over a knee-high metal rail about twenty meters from the river. Its coldness against the inside of her knee zapped a shiver up her spine and across her back. Now able to look down the embankment, she scanned the edges of the river. About a half kilometer to the west of her, she found a group of five or six persons waiting on the river's edge. One raft, with a man astride on it, waited on the Mexican side while a man in another raft was just pushing off the American side with a long pole. Three people were scurrying up the embankment on the other side. They stepped through a perfectly square hole in a chainlink fence that was welded atop a guardrail and curved toward Mexico like an upright hand with an infinite number of fingers bent at the knuckle. Lupe walked quickly toward the pasamojados.

She glanced up and down the highway just beyond the chainlink fence and could find only one pair of headlights slowly descending from the overpass to the east. Far away and apparently not in too much of a hurry. Lupe had never been arrested crossing the river, but she had heard stories about what they would do to you if they did catch you. They might rape you in the back of the INS truck. They might rape you for a few hours and then let you go. Who would believe a poor mexicana anyway? They'd ship you back to Mexico before you had a chance to tell your story. They'd say somebody at the detention center raped you, but they surely didn't. Or they might just beat you up because they're angry and frustrated that hundreds and hundreds of mexicanos cross everyday. They might kill you. Lupe did read in El Fronterizo how a man from la migra had shot and killed a pasamojado last month. Self-defense, he claimed. Self-defense when there were no other witnesses. When the poor bastard only had a stick. A stick against a gun.

The blister on her little toe on her right foot rubbed against her flat shoes. Rubbed until the pain seemed to throb through the bone where she planted her weight. Rubbed and hurt so much that she limped as a matter of course, not noticing that her every step forward was more of a sway and a lurch than a smooth walk. By the time she reached the group, another raft had already drifted across the Río Grande and was on its way back. A couple waited anxiously together, holding hands and looking around and stamping their feet to ward off the coldness of this morning air. With great care, Lupe slid and stepped down the crumbly dirt bank. A few rocks of dried mud tumbled almost to the feet of the couple at the edge of the river. The man, wearing a Dodgers baseball cap, turned toward Lupe and offered his hand so that she could

steady herself once she jerked to a stop at the bottom of the embankment. They smiled at each other quickly, and Lupe said *gracias*, and together they peered at the pole and the raft creeping over the sheet of still blackness toward them. The river Styx of the Americas. The *pasamojado* took their money as they climbed onto the raft, waiting patiently on this side, his pole stuck deeply into the river's mud. Only after the other *pasamojado* had reached their embankment, did Lupe's raft begin to push over the murky current.

Underneath their raft, the water gurgled against the rotting timbers. Once in a while, black water splashed over the side and trickled across the top plank and disappeared into a bead of water. The raft itself rocked gently from side to side, yet Lupe did keep her balance. Her feet apart, she would drop to one knee if she felt unsteady, and wait out the rough rocking motion. For the most part, the river's current was lazy and smooth. The *pasamojado* pushed the raft diagonally across the river, getting the water to help him and not worrying about the aesthetics of his own haphazard effort to drag the raft across the water. Lupe could smell the earthy sweat of the young man struggling with the pole. She could see that his feet were anchored inside two slots that had been carved into the wood. As soon as the raft jammed against the weeds and the grass on the other side, the couple jumped out and ran up the embankment. Lupe jumped out too, but she slipped on the loose sand and almost fell back into the water. She steadied herself before standing up and trudged up the dirt toward the hole in the chainlink fence. She looked up, but the couple on her raft had disappeared.

"¡Allá viene la migra! ¡La migra!"

A shot of fear from her innards almost choked her. Lupe peered back at the *pasamojado* on the other side of the river. He was pointing to the west. Lupe began to run. Trying to leap through the hole between the guardrail below and the chainlink netting above, Lupe smacked her left shin against the rail's metal edge. The utter sharpness of the pain exploded in her head like a bomb of white light. She stumbled over the guardrail and onto the ground, her purse flying in front of her and embedding itself in a tumbleweed. She pushed herself up and ran toward the freeway in front of her, turning her head toward the Franklin Mountains. Instead of headlights, she found only the glint of amber streetlights reflecting off a darkened windshield still so far away that the truck would disappear now and then in the dips in the pavement. Her heart almost burst inside of her chest. Her legs were numb with pain. She couldn't breathe. She was gasping for air, she was running with everything she had, she was running and gasping and falling forward. In front of her, across the westbound lanes, a few seconds away, Lupe saw an opening, an irrigation ditch that separated two backyard rock walls abutting the freeway. Just a dilapidated chainlink fence stretched across the ditch. The fence's metal mesh had a hole the size of a refrigerator. On the other side, she would be in Ascarate, safe. Her eyes were transfixed on the hole in the fence. She ran across the freeway. Her eyes were dilated and shimmering in amber. She turned her head to find the truck in the distance again. Her eyes were wild. She was dead.

The tires of a gray Camry screeched and slid on the black pavement and finally settled to a stop on the red gravel of the right shoulder of the westbound lanes. A man in a white oxford shirt and a red tie leaned over the empty passenger seat and peered out the window. His face seemed terrified at what he saw: the twisted body of a woman lay just beyond the shoulder. Her legs were bloodied over the thighs. The skirt she had been wearing was pushed up to her chest. Her head was swollen and crushed on one side such that it seemed just a distorted black mass above her torso. She wasn't wearing any shoes. She didn't move. He looked through his rearview mirror and found a pair of headlights miles away, like two tiny jewels floating in empty space. In front of him and also in the distance, he saw only the faint outline of an INS truck, with its siren and searchlights perched atop the cab. The truck veered off the highway and onto a dirt road in a cloud of dust, apparently on its way to the river. The gravel suddenly spun out from the Camry's rear wheels. Soon it was cruising west again at exactly 55 miles per hour. The face of the driver was angular and pale. The small blue eyes stared blankly at the road in front of him. He took his right hand and wiped the thick sweat off his forehead, held his throat for a moment, and then vomited a spurt of yellowish vomit on the passenger seat. Having switched hands on the steering wheel, the man shoved his left hand into his back pant pocket and yanked out a billowy cotton handkerchief with his fingertips. He wiped his mouth clean, collected the viscous liquid on the seat, and wrapped it up in a neat little ball of white, which he tucked into the leather pocket of his car door. The gray Camry bounced over the pavement dip just before the Paisano exit. Even the trees and the mountains now seemed suddenly inert.

Helen Rogers hoisted her son onto the changing table and pulled off his pajamas. Her brow was sweaty while her blue eyes darted around his bedroom. The sheets had been thrown on the rug, the large plastic fire engine was upended, and a brownish red mark had been smeared across the closet door.

"Brett, if you kick me one more time, I'm throwing Mr. Frumble into the trashcan," she said, an edge in her voice. This morning she was just one more spark from a catastrophic explosion. She was doing her best to check her temper. Where the hell was she? At least Sarah was asleep. Or maybe the baby was screaming her head off, and she couldn't hear her. Last night, Helen had dreamed that Sarah couldn't breathe, that she was suffocating quietly in her crib, that somehow, inexplicably, her tiny little chest had stopped rising and falling in that slow and precious rhythm. Helen had jumped out of bed. She had peered at the baby and looked and listened and even gently placed her palm on that tiny chest. And everything had been fine.

"I don't want that one! I hate that one! Mama!" The muscular little legs kicked at the navy blue shorts and sent them flying against the wall. The three-year-old, like a tuna on the dock, flailed and squirmed and rolled on the changing table.

"That's it! No more videos for you tonight, young man! I'm calling Aaron and giving him all your videos!" Helen said, one hand on his chest, the other gripping the shorts tightly. "He never kicks his mother!"

"No! Please! No!" Brett squealed, suddenly still. He sucked his thumb pensively and stared at his mother and knew that was it. Her eyes glared at him in that especially ferocious way.

"Are you going to stop kicking me?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, mom."

"Okay," she said, choosing the faded blue denim shorts instead. "You have to listen to me, honey. I'm just trying to get you dressed. Okay, up you go. When Lupe gets here, you'll help her do the laundry. She'll let you turn the knob on the machine. And if you find any quarters, you can get ice cream at Big Boy's."

"Nieve."

"That's right."

"Nieve de chocolate."

"Is that what Lupe likes?"

"No. She likes 'ganilla.' I like nieve de chocolate."

"Chocolate ice cream for my very good boy," Helen said and kissed her son.

"Nieve de chocolate."

"Okay. But no more yelling or kicking. I want you to behave yourself. Today, mommy's taking little Sarah to see the doctor."

"Does, does, does, mom, does Sarah have an ouchie?"

"No. It's just a checkup. To see how much she weighs. To get her first shots. It's just a checkup. Not an ouchie. Don't worry. Little Sarah's okay. We'll only be gone for a few hours," Helen said, stroking his cheek as he climbed onto the sofa and lay down. He sucked his thumb quietly again. The phone rang. Helen stared at her watch. It was almost ten o'clock. What now?

"Yes, this is she."

"Yes, what about her?"

"What? Where? My God! Yes, yes. Lupe Pérez works for me. I was expecting her about an hour ago. What? I just can't believe what you're telling me!"

"Mama! Mama! Mom! Look! I found an hormiga! A big one! Mom!"

"Please, Brett. Officer, please. I have to sit down."

"Mom! Mom! Look over here!"

"Brett, something's happened. Please, honey. She was in an accident on the freeway? Oh, God! That's horrible! My phone number was in her purse? Yes, that's right. I always told her to keep it there in case she forgot. No, no. I don't know about her family. Yes, in Juárez. No, no address. No, she didn't have one. Are you sure it's her? Are you absolutely sure?"

"Mom! Mom! What is it? What did you say?"

"Brett, please. Here, honey. You can watch Mr. Frumble now. It's okay." The little boy rushed to the rocking chair and jumped into it. His face was beaming. He waited rapturously for his mother to start the VCR. "Officer, please just one minute," she said, wiping away a tear, her back to her son. Suddenly she was having trouble breathing. She thought she heard a soft whimper from her bedroom. Maybe Sarah was waking up.

"Officer, can you please give me your number? Okay, go ahead. I've got it. Tony Hernández. Okay. If you need someone to go to the station, my husband will go. I'll tell him to call you right away. We knew her for almost three years. My kids loved her. I don't know, I just, I don't know what I'll tell them. We trusted her completely. She was a part of the family."

"Okay. Anything you need. Yes. He'll call you in a few minutes. Listen, Officer Hernández. Please, I can't help it. Yes, I'll be okay. It's just so horrible. It's, it's, I don't know," Helen said, sobbing, holding Sarah in her arms now. The baby was still asleep, but she held her close anyway. Tears rolled down her cheeks and blinded her. "Listen, Officer. Just a second.

Okay. I want you to take care of her. Please. I want you to make sure you take care of her. We'll be responsible for her. Okay? I want you to take care of her. She was a part of this family."

"Goodbye."

"Mom, mom. What, mom?" Brett said from the doorway, the TV showing the 'Play It Safe!' interlude between stories. The little boy stared at his mother, who was crying with the baby in her arms. He started to suck his thumb again. "Mom, what mom?"

"It's okay, honey. Something's happened. I have to call your father now. Please, Brett. Go watch Mr. Frumble. It's okay. Mommy's just a little sad. But she'll be okay. I'll tell you later. It's okay, honey. I love you, you know. Do you know mommy loves you?"

"Yes."

"Does she love you a little bit or a whole lot?"

"A lot!"

"That's right. I'll be there in a few minutes. Run quickly! It's Captain Willy and the Pirates!" Helen walked to the bedroom doorway and watched him climb into the rocking chair again and tried to smile when he glanced back. But her head was spinning. She stared at the red and blue clown whose floppy feet you pulled to start a gentle Brahms's lullaby. The dinosaur printouts on the butcher block by the kitchen. The door where Lupe always walked in with a half-smile. There seemed a new and awful space between these things. A very cold and frightening space. Quietly she pushed the bedroom door and left it ajar a few inches, just enough to hear what happened on the other side. So many parts of this world seemed important and irrelevant at the same time, in a sudden, almost nauseous flux.

He kept thinking of her face. He kept thinking of her eyes. They had been wide open, almost welcoming. They had been surprised. If she had smiled the slightest of smiles just then, it would have been a look he had seen dozens of times. That look a woman gave you when she suddenly detected that she was being appreciated from afar, not in a lustful way but aesthetically, as the beauty she secretly wanted to be. But of course, she had not smiled at all. Hers had simply been a look of utter astonishment. Now it was a picture in Michael Ochoa's mind.

He tried at least to remember this picture instead of the image of the bloody mass atop a torso. He tried to focus on certain things that he knew to be true. He had not seen this woman

run in front of his car. Yes, he had been trying to shove the change tray back into place after it stubbornly refused to click shut. His eyes had momentarily left the road. But in those two or three seconds when he stared at the metal clip to figure out how it worked, she appeared in front of him, with that look. It was an instant he would never forget.

What was she doing in the middle of the freeway? Why was she running in front of his car? The early morning road had been practically empty. Why the hell did she run in front of his car? How could he have stopped in time? How? Please, dear God, why did these things happen? Nothing made sense anymore. It was simply the bad luck of having been in that awful moment. She had stepped into it and dragged him inside. He had been as utterly shocked as she had. Why did this happen? Why? His stomach churned again.

Michael felt a little dizzy. He stared at the construction schedule he had to complete today. Dozens and dozens of rows of numbers which signaled when the grading for the Rosa Linda Project would be finished, the plumbing, the foundations, the frames, the electricity, the masonry, even the landscaping. Everything for nearly one thousand 'housing units' of the federal government. Sometimes he had imagined the armies of plumbers and electricians and bricklayers who would follow each other from one house to the next. As soon as one T-joint was dry, the sawdust would fly from a 2x6. After the nickel-like outlet covers clanged to the floor, the sheetrock arrived in massive stacks. Hundreds and hundreds of times, until a small town, with streets and trees and sidewalks, arose from the desert. But now, he couldn't imagine anything beyond these rows of numbers. He could only see that startled face. Her brown eyes.

The entire morning Michael Ochoa had been sick to his stomach. It was the thick red blood that made him sick. It was the worry. He had killed a human being. He had killed her, and then escaped without anyone's noticing his crime. Had it been a crime? It was certainly a crime now, he told himself. Maybe if he had stayed and notified the police and explained how she had come out of the bushes, like a frightened rabbit, maybe they would not have blamed him for this accident. Maybe. But he panicked. He saw no one there, no other witnesses, and he panicked. It was a breathless leap into nothingness, into a world of your very own making, into a world where you were the only witness. He really felt sick to his stomach. What the hell had he done?

He remembered the woman's face again. Her smock of a dress. The darkness of her skin. The whitish spots on her thighs. Her jet black hair. The thin ankles. His mother would have probably called her "just a poor Mexican woman." He had never liked her way of saying things, especially those things. It was really distasteful in a way. But that was what came to mind just now. Just a poor Mexican woman. It would have been the way his mother would have dismissed the tragedy, and defended him. She would have said his life was at stake now. His accomplishments. His marriage. His children. Why would he throw it all away because a poor Mexican woman had sprinted in front of his car on the Border Freeway?

His father would have laughed at him for being so weak. His father, Mr. Chicano. In many ways, the old man had been worse than his mother on those things. At least his mother had had an excuse. She had not known any better. But Juan Ochoa, the great Juan Ochoa, had always known what to say in public about Mexico and illegal immigrants and la raza. That's how he had gotten elected so many times in El Paso County, from the school board to the city council to the county commission. But Michael had also remembered what his dad had said at dinnertime, when he had been there. "¡Que se vayan a la chingada! ¡Pinchi Juarileños! Who the fuck do they think they are?"

It killed his father that the Mexican politicians saw him as an inferior Mexican, that somehow they felt sorry for him. Michael also remembered how ashamed his father had been when once, at a big picnic at the Chamizal, one of them had asked Michael a question in Spanish, and he had not quite understood. Mr. Chicano turned beet red, and the veins in his neck almost erupted. Michael immediately recognized the glare; he understood that quite clearly. It meant pendejo.

That, and many moments like that, had convinced Michael Ochoa of certain things in his life. He did not want to be a politician, and he did not want to be a lawyer. He would not hate Chicanos or things Mexican, but he would try to discover his own way to this part of his heritage. Maybe it wouldn't be outright love, but it certainly wouldn't be outright hate either. He would also try to get his pride out of the way of the most important decisions in his life, and he would never be a social climber. He wanted to learn better Spanish.

His head ached, yet he finished the project schedule and handed it to John Cooper just before 3:00 p.m. He had felt weak all day, and as soon as nothing was immediately hanging over his head Michael Ochoa shut his office and came out only to throw up in one of the private executive bathrooms on the first floor. He was shaky and faint. He kept imagining that sickening thump against his car. The flash of her body flying through the air. That thick red blood. In an hour or so, it would finally be time to go home.

Little Sarah burped sitting up on her mother's lap, and her small white head lolled to one side. The baby was finally asleep. The house was finally quiet. Helen thought about removing the three small bandages on the baby's plump thighs, but then just carefully lowered the child into her crib. Helen needed the peace; she needed to sort out the storm inside her head; she wanted to cry. It had been hellish taking Brett to Sarah's checkup. He had sprinted from the doctor's waiting room into the hallway at every turn. He had refused to listen to her, and even screamed when she had tried to talk to him. Her attention had been on Sarah. They had been in a public place. And Helen had been busy listening to the doctor's explanation of the DPT shots

and how much infant Tylenol she could give Sarah in case she reacted badly to the vaccinations. Brett had probably smelled his mother's weak position. It had simply been a miracle that Sarah had gotten her shots, that Helen had paid the bill on her way out, that Brett had not been lost or had not killed himself. Strapping him into the stroller, restraining him, had felt absolutely wonderful. That had been, until now, the best moment of this terrible day.

Helen snapped her bra shut and peered into the crib again and listened. The house remained dead silent. With any luck, Brett would nap for another hour and a half. With any luck, she could start to put all of these shattered pieces in her mind together. With just the tiniest bit of luck, she might think about Lupe Pérez for a few seconds before the rush of life swept this poor young woman into oblivion. It all seemed so brutal. The way Lupe died. The way she could hardly be remembered. Maybe even the way she lived. This last fact at once terrorized Helen Rogers, and she hid her face in her pillow and sobbed. She had never known where Lupe had lived. She had never known her address. There was nowhere, yet, to send the body. Lupe's place now was a dark vault in a funeral home. It was simply too much to bear.

It was so hard to remove yourself from this world. It was just so hard to think about who you were, and who were the people you saw almost everyday. There was no time to think about anything. There was no time to react thoughtfully, to arrive at grand conclusions, to find the truth before it slipped away forever. Helen could barely wipe the slobber off the baby's onesie before she heard a loud crash or a squeal or that dreadful, unexplained silence. This world, my God! It twisted this way and that, and threw everyone about, and left those who still possessed a bit of sense to organize the chaos into, into . . . what? A dream better than this reality? A hope more attractive than this brutality? It was better just to keep living and not think too much. It was better to keep your fingers crossed and pray that this brutality would never visit you or your family. It was better, then, simply to cry.

After a while, she called her husband's office again. The police had found Lupe's address, through a government health card that was also found in her purse. The Juárez authorities were probably on their way there right now; it was somewhere called Colonia Loma Linda. Her husband had the exact address. He had told the police that as far they knew Lupe had lived with her mother.

"I'm going there tonight," Helen said immediately. "I need to be with her. Her daughter has just died." Her husband almost protested aloud, but in the end said nothing. Helen knew she was pushing him, especially after she had insisted that they pay for the funeral and whatever else was needed. Yet she also knew her husband. He would do the right thing whenever she demanded it, and there would be no negotiation over this today. "I'll call my mother and she'll help you with the kids. I need to see her. It's really the least I can do. As it is, it's hardly enough. I just can't believe our Lupe's gone."

The car was clean. That was the important part. The car was clean, and nobody had seen him. No one knew. He was the only person who knew. That was the fact he focused on as he drove home on I-10. Michael Ochoa had finally inspected his car just before he left for home. It had not occurred to him before, and he had been lucky. He had found only a small dent next to the left front headlight. He had found no blood. It was simply a small dent that happened at a gas station while he was pulling in, a bump against the metal rail protecting the pumps, a careless mistake Just the slightest of dents. It was amazing that a human body could do so little damage to a car.

Michael drove slower than his usual speed, and stayed to the right. It would all get easier after a while. Occasionally he'd glance at that left front corner when no cars were directly in front of him. He once imagined her eyes in front of him for a split second again. He raced right through her again. Behind him, the diesel trucks and motorcycles and sedans also punched through this selfsame freeway roar. She was just the whirling air now, the backwash of traffic. There really was no use torturing himself anymore. Anything he did now could only hurt him. Nothing could be done about what happened, about her. Wasn't that the truth?

What would Mr. Chicano do here, eh? He'd laugh it off. He'd go fuck one of his bitches and laugh it off. He'd think about it, maybe, and he'd be happy he's alive. He'd have a beer and piss in the back porch. He'd comb his hair and look so pretty, and tell his reyna he'd be back in a while. Another meeting. Another rally. A strategy session. One of those goddamn fundraisers, you know? And he'd be gone, happy, oh-so-happy he was the one who lived and not the one who died.

It'd be a victory for him. That's how he'd see it. He'd see it as not being him. Another narrow escape. The luck of the gods who walked the earth. The gods who didn't fail. The gods who didn't die until they wanted to die. A fucking poor Mexican woman wouldn't bring Him down! Not one of those goddamn Juarileños! They'd never touch Him. They couldn't touch Him. Mr. Chicano wouldn't let them. It'd be His secret victory over them. It'd be what made Him smile confidently when they laughed in His face again, when they wouldn't give Him the goddamn respect He deserved. Sure, esta pobrecita had died, an innocent. She had really nothing to do with His fight against those cabrónes. That was true. But she stepped into it, and made herself a symbol. She had simply become a symbol of La Chingada. We were all fucked, weren't we? Mr. Chicano would just be the one doing the fucking this time. Those were the breaks, he'd say.

Again, a certain thing became clear in Michael Ochoa's mind. He suddenly took the next exit off I-10, at Yarbrough. His small blue eyes stared at the road in front of him, and his stomach at once felt better. He first stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts and called his wife and talked

to her for a while. It was a good conversation, he thought, and he was glad that she was always practical and supportive, even if she did cry now and then. She was a very good woman, and he was damn lucky. Michael Ochoa got into his car and drove north on Yarbrough, to where he thought he had seen it once before. Yes, there it was. For the first time in a long time, in what had seemed a day composed of years of childhood and years of lonely struggle and years of this cursed history all around him, he felt good again. Before he opened the door to the Eastwood police substation, his eyes caught a glimpse of a billboard for Spanish lessons at night at El Paso Community College. It was time to start again, even if some of his friends might laugh at his accent.

It was now dark outside, and Helen Rogers was a little frightened. No stores were opened on this dusty two-lane highway anymore. There were no streetlights, no sidewalks, and hardly any street signs. Just the highway between downtown Juárez and Zaragoza, an occasional car or truck, and half-dirt roads snaking into neighborhoods that also seemed dark and desolate. She had sometimes driven into downtown Juárez, especially with visitors who wanted to go shopping at the Mercado Juárez or to a fancy dinner in Mexico. She had not been the stereotypical jittery gringa who never crossed the border. But she really didn't know this part of town. She didn't know these poor hamlets which dotted la frontera between the big city and the next port of entry on the Río Grande. She was lost.

Helen pulled off the highway and slowly drove to a street corner that seemed one of the entrances to this neighborhood. She knew she wasn't far away, yet Colonia Loma Linda could be anywhere within the next two or three miles of road. As her car stopped, the wheels crunched the gravel and chunks of dirt underneath. She was looking for Calle Venustiano Carranza, which according to her map would go from the Zaragoza highway to Colonia Loma Linda and eventually to Plan de Ayala, Lupe's street. The small blue metal sign on the grocery store's wall was hard to read. Part of it was bent, and a slash of rust obscured the lettering. She clicked on her brights for a better look. Aha! It wasn't the right street, but it was one on her map, not too far away from where she wanted to be. Soon she found Carranza and slowly eased into what seemed a pitch black cave with distant yellowish lights, like candles, and an unpredictable, even ominous terrain.

The house at the end of Plan de Ayala didn't seem like a house. It was impossibly small, the size of a garage, and the roof seemed oddly tilted, as if it had caved in or was about to cave in at any moment. There was an abandoned car on cinderblocks next to it. Helen could smell chickens, and hear them clucking, but in this darkness she could not see them. It was also one of the last houses in this neighborhood, on its outskirts, and almost not a part of it. This house was at the edge of what seemed a vast plain of nothingness. Only a faint aura glowed in the horizon, probably El Paso. But here was where the old woman pointed to when Helen asked her, in her

broken Spanish, for "la casa Pérez." Only this old woman had opened her door, and she seemed to have been expecting Helen too. "Es la casa del color del mar." It is the house the color of the sea.

"Me llamo Helen Rogers," she said to the dark figure in the shadows behind the door, "Busco a la Señora Pérez." He was an old man, an ancient man, who waved her inside. Helen could hear faint murmurs just in front of her. A candle flickered in one corner. But it was too dark to see their faces very well. Somebody gently led her by the arm to the threshold of another room. Here she could distinctly hear three or four women's voices. She could see a bed. They were huddled around a bed. A crucifix was on a box or a crate next to the bed, and candles had been placed around it in a semi-circle. They did not know she was there, and she did not yet make a sound. The bed was a foam mattress on a bare concrete floor. Helen could smell the heavy burning wax of the candles, the wetness of the earth, these adobe walls, old wood. She heard heavy sobs coming from the bed, and these voices that responded and chanted and seemed to surround this black grief with beckoning little angels.

As Helen stepped forward to the bed, she was overwhelmed by the sense that she was passing through a wall in the darkness. She felt as if she had stopped breathing and time had been suspended within this thickness. One of the women noticed her and stared at her as if Helen had been a shocking apparition and finally ceded her place slowly in this human circle around the bed. Helen kneeled and found Doña Rosita's anguished face and these unrelenting tears and a pain so powerful that Helen almost gasped. In a very raspy voice that turned every head in that room and reached deep inside this pit of grief, she said in her Spanish, "I am Helen Rogers, and we loved Lupe very much. She will always be a part of our family." Then Helen Rogers grasped the old woman's trembling hand, and her own tears gushed out, and they held each other in a moment beyond this world.

Discussion questions for *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories* (University of Arizona Press: 1999, ISBN: 0-8165-1961-7), by Sergio Troncoso.

<http://sergiotroncoso.com/tortilla/questions/index.htm>

1. In "Day of the Dead," why do you think Michael Ochoa turns himself in? Does he do the right thing? Describe Michael's relationship with his father, and how important it is when Michael has to make this crucial decision. What do you think the author is saying about those like Mr. Chicano, and how some Mexican-Americans see themselves in relation to Mexicanos?

2. How do you think Lupe's death causes her employer, Helen Rogers, to cross cultural, class and, perhaps, human borders in "Day of the Dead"? Describe Helen's relationship with Lupe before her death. What is and is not praiseworthy about this relationship? Describe the decisions Helen makes after she hears of Lupe's death. Are they the right decisions? Why does she make them? Do you think these choices change Helen Rogers in a fundamental way?

3. In "Day of the Dead," describe and analyze the complex relationship between dreams and death. How does Doña Rosita, for example, use the death of Don Joaquín to give her something to hope for beyond her bleak existence? How is the 'dream' of Helen's prosperous existence shattered by Lupe's death? Is there a difference between an immediate death and a death long ago in terms of how it affects your dreams? Why might a poor person and a rich person see death differently? Or do they ultimately see it the same way?

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