

The Throw. La Tirada

~By Juan Scheuren

Edgar placed the JUUL e-cigarette between his lips, drawing in the citrusy essence of the orange-flavored pod. The vapor tingled as it coated his throat, settling in his lungs before he exhaled a thin plume into the thick, humid air of Miami. Leaning against the damp alleyway wall, he let his mind drift—back to his mother, father, and family in Latin America. A full year had passed without their embrace. His mother’s basket of freshly made arepas came to him vividly—the scent of warm cornmeal escaping through the fabric cover, teasing his senses. His mouth watered. Then, the sharp roar of his father’s motorcycle echoed in his memory, a sound that once served as his weekend alarm clock. The images consumed him, growing more real with each passing second, muting the honking cars beyond the alleyway.

“Edgar, ya se acabó tu recreo.” The sharp voice cut through his thoughts. Mario, the manager of Pan y Miel, stepped into the alley, watching him. Edgar’s stomach clenched as he straightened up, slipping the JUUL into his pocket before approaching Mario.

“Tienes que tener buena cara aquí en la panadería, Ed. Te lo digo con cariño,” Mario said. Edgar nodded, brushing past him into the building. “Sé que no ha sido fácil para ti en adaptarte en EE.UU.”

Mario locked the backdoor behind them as they walked through a dimly lit hallway, its darkness softened by sunlight streaming through skylights overhead. Slowly, as the clouds shifted, the red-tiled floor reflected the daylight. To the side, blue water crates stacked against the wall leaked onto the tiles, the stray droplets trickling toward a floor drain. A silver refrigerator hummed near the kitchen entrance, its steady vibrations adding to the medley of subtle sounds. For a fleeting moment, the interplay of light and shadow on the floor reminded Edgar of his grandmother’s house in the hills of his homeland—the way sunlight passed through the striped glass of her kitchen window.

“Esos túneles de sol me recuerdan a la casa de mi abuela,” Edgar said, pointing up, a small grin forming.

“Ah sí, mis padres también tuvieron un techo así en mi país de origen.” Mario glanced up at the skylights, his palm resting on Edgar’s shoulder. “Siempre me trae buenos recuerdos.”

They stepped into the kitchen entryway, where the air buzzed with activity. Cooks flipped eggs on sizzling pans, dishwashers clanked plates together, a mop swished across the tiled floor, and the rhythmic thump-thump of a coffee machine filled the space. Shouts echoed from every direction.

“¿Está listo el café para la mesa uno?”

“Necesito otro plato para la mesa cinco.”

“Orden para la mesa tres.”

Above the stove, a Bialetti coffeemaker whistled as steam curled from its spout, signaling that the coffee had risen to the top. The aroma of espresso intermingled with the scent of fried eggs and freshly baked bread. Edgar’s gaze landed on a cook tending to a near-perfect sunny-side-up egg. For a moment, he was transported back to Sunday mornings in his childhood home—his mother at the stove, flipping eggs with effortless grace, the golden yolks glistening as the oil crackled around them. He could almost hear the murmur of family conversations, the laughter, the clinking of silverware against plates, the smell of freshly baked sourdough bread filling the room. His chest tightened. Those mornings felt like a lifetime ago. A sharp snap of fingers jolted him back to reality.

“Ed, apresta atención. Mira hacia la puerta. Hay un cliente,” Mario said, gesturing toward the dining area. “Ve a atenderlo y anota en el cuaderno lo que quiere ordenar.” Edgar grabbed a notepad and pen near the sink before pushing through the single bypass door into the restaurant.

The ceiling was adorned with banners representing every Latin American country, their colors vivid against the warm lighting. A large HDMI TV mounted on the wall displayed a live Venezuela vs. Mexico soccer match. The customers—most of them deeply engrossed in the game—erupted in animated shouts whenever a player missed a goal. Celia Cruz’s unmistakable voice boomed from the restaurant’s stereo system, her rhythmic salsa melodies rising above the chaotic din.

“¡Azúcar!” Celia cried through the speakers as Quimbara played, her voice electric with energy.

Edgar approached a man seated at table number six. He wore a light blue polo and dark gray pants, his arms crossed firmly on the table. His legs, also crossed, bounced impatiently. A pair of dark aviator

sunglasses obscured his eyes. The man's broad-shouldered build made Edgar's palms sweat. His skin prickled with heat.

"Stay present. He's just a customer," Edgar reminded himself. He took a deep breath and approached the table, forcing his nerves down. Directly in front of him, a black-and-white portrait of Gabriel García Márquez rested against the salt shaker, the famous writer staring dryly at the camera—his expression mirroring the cold, unreadable gaze of the man in front of him. Edgar's breath quickened, his chest tightening slightly. The man tilted his head.

"So, young man, are you going to take my order, or are you just going to stand there looking lost?" he asked dryly. "I don't know if they ever taught you how to be a waiter, but I know you can't just stand around looking clueless."

Edgar exhaled, brushing the comment aside. He let out a quiet laugh, but the subtle smirk that flickered across his lips didn't go unnoticed by the customer. The man's expression darkened.

Edgar straightened his posture and held his notepad steady. "What woul' yu like to order?" he asked, his Spanish accent thickening slightly.

The man studied the menu for a moment, flipping between breakfast and lunch options. The breakfast section offered reina pepiada, empanadas de queso, cachito de jamón, huevos rancheros, tequeños, huevos fritos con tostada. The lunch section was filled with traditional dishes—pabellón criollo, arroz con pollo, frijoles negros, tacos con carne asada, quesadillas, sopa de pollo. The kitchen clattered behind Edgar, the noise filtering into the dining area. A few customers peeked toward the counter to see what was going on, but the overall commotion was nothing out of the ordinary.

Finally, the man shut the menu and set it aside. "Desgraciado," he muttered under his breath. The word hit Edgar like a slap. "Please bring me, if you can remember, two cachitos de jamón and huevos fritos con tostada. Also, an espresso," the man said, his tone clipped. Edgar quickly jotted down the order, but before he could step away, the man wrinkled his nose and leaned slightly toward him, sniffing. His brows furrowed. "What's that smell?" he asked. His gaze sharpened as he studied Edgar. "Inmigrante desgraciado, do you have a cigar in your pocket? Drugs? What is it?" His voice turned sharp. "You better go back to wherever you came from. We don't

want the deplorables here in the USA.”

A wave of heat rushed to Edgar’s face. His mind raced with responses. “Should I report him to Mario? Say something back? Stay quiet?” His heart pounded. He swallowed hard, his throat dry. For the first time since entering the restaurant, he realized that he couldn’t smell the kitchen anymore—only plain, scentless air. His teeth clattered as he fought to compose himself. He exhaled slowly. “Your order will be ready in a few minutes,” Edgar said calmly, meeting the man’s stare. “Other than that, sir, I’m not a *desgraciado*. I came to the United States for a better life, away from tyranny.”

The man’s lips curled slightly, but something flickered in his expression. Edgar squinted. A moment ago, when the man said *desgraciado*, something about his pronunciation had seemed... familiar.

“You said *desgraciado* earlier,” Edgar continued, his voice steady. “The way you said it—you have an accent.” He tilted his head, studying the man now. “I bet you were an immigrant yourself, years ago.”

The man’s nostrils flared. Edgar turned to leave, walking toward the kitchen. Before he could step through the door, the man called after him.

“I’m no immigrant like you, boy.” His voice was clipped, but there was something rigid in it now, something unnatural. Edgar turned back, catching a glimpse of the man’s hand pressing against the table. “I’m an American.” He patted the wooden surface gently, raising an eyebrow.

Edgar lingered, his grip tightening around his notepad. He could feel the weight of something pressing inside his mouth—anger, frustration, the urge to retaliate. But instead, he forced himself to smirk. “I appreciate the comment, sir,” Edgar said lightly. “But you can’t hide your accent. No matter how much you try.”

With that, he turned and walked through the kitchen door, leaving the man behind.

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The moment Edgar stepped into the kitchen, a deafening roar erupted from the dining area.

“GOOOOOOOL!” The Venezuelan team had scored. A group of customers in burgundy and yellow jerseys leaped from their seats, raising their beer bottles high in celebration. They clinked them together, shouting in Spanish, their voices drowning out the speakers blasting Quimbara.

Meanwhile, the Mexican fans groaned, some spitting on the floor in disbelief. A few patted their teammates on the shoulder, urging them to push forward. Edgar ignored the noise. He tore the slip of paper from his notepad and handed it to a coworker.

“Necesito esta orden lista para la mesa seis.”

He moved swiftly through the crowded kitchen, weaving past the cooks, heading straight toward the manager’s office. The black door was slightly ajar. The moment Edgar stepped inside, the sharp contrast between the hot, chaotic kitchen and the cool, air-conditioned office made his skin tingle. Mario sat at his desk, his fingers tapping at the keyboard. Above him, a small security monitor displayed split-screen footage of the dining area and the kitchen. Edgar’s eyes locked onto table six. Antoni sat there, alone. A bitter taste spread in Edgar’s mouth. His lips curled slightly as he stuck his tongue out at the screen, directing it at the man who had insulted him.

“Desgraciado es ese señor, jefe,” he muttered under his breath.

Mario didn’t even look up. “Ah,” he said. “So you attended to my friend, Antoni.”

Edgar froze. Mario’s friend? Mario finally glanced up, raising an eyebrow at Edgar’s expression.

“Is there a problem?” he asked. “Antoni is a good man. A businessman. A sharp negotiator with a lot of money.”

Edgar felt his stomach drop. His fingers curled into his palm, forming a tense fist. Does Mario not know what just happened? He sank into a chair, slouching as he crossed his arms. The air conditioner hummed quietly, blasting cool air onto his skin. He tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling vent as the cold breeze cascaded over him. It was the first real relief he’d felt since stepping out of the alleyway.

“No tengo ningún problema con él,” Edgar said finally, his voice steady. “Ni con cuánto dinero tenga. Pero atenderlo fue una gran frustración.” He leaned forward, his elbows pressing against his knees.

“Obvio, no le enseñé que estuve enojado con él,” he added.

Mario studied him for a moment. “Si estás enojado es por algo,” he said. “¿Qué te enoja?”

Edgar met his gaze. “Antoni me llamó desgraciado,” he said. His jaw tightened as he continued, “Y me dijo que me fuera del país.”

Mario’s forehead creased. “Pero, Mario...” Edgar paused. “Él también fue un inmigrante.”

A flicker of something unreadable passed over Mario’s face. He exhaled sharply, straightening in his chair. “¿En serio?”

Edgar nodded.

Mario pushed back from the desk. “Déjame hablar con él,” he said, his voice tinged with curiosity. “Eso es muy raro de su parte.”

With that, he stood up and exited the office, leaving Edgar alone. The door clicked shut. Silence.

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For the first time since the start of his shift, Edgar was alone. His thoughts churned. ¿Por qué Antoni reaccionó así? Had wealth corrupted him? Had he abandoned his past to fit into an American ideal? Or was he just another man who had climbed to the top and pulled the ladder up behind him? Edgar sighed. He reached into his pocket, fingers closing around his JUUL. He lifted it to his lips and inhaled. The orange-flavored vapor filled his lungs, the slight acidic tingle coating his throat. He held his breath for a few seconds—one, two, three, four—before exhaling, watching the smoke dissipate into the air. His eyelids fluttered shut. For a fleeting moment, he was back in his hometown, racing bicycles with his friends down narrow streets lined with colorful stucco walls. He could hear their laughter, feel the warm rain hitting his skin as they skidded over wet pavement. They’d fall, scrape their knees, and still get up, laughing. Then came the principal. A sharp reprimand. A warning. Their laughter faded as they dragged their bikes toward the school entrance.

Edgar opened his eyes. The office walls stared back at him. He sat up abruptly, rubbing his face. His gaze shifted to the security monitor. There was Mario, standing at table six, talking to Antoni. Edgar leaned forward, watching closely. They were... laughing? His stomach twisted. Did Mario even ask Antoni about what

happened? He clenched his jaw, gripping his JUUL tighter. Uno, dos, tres, cuatro. He inhaled. The vapor filled his lungs. He exhaled. The frustration inside him drifted out with the smoke. But it didn't disappear completely. He got up from the chair and exited the office, tired of seeing what he saw on the security screen.

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Edgar appeared out into the busy kitchen. "Para la mesa número seis," a coworker shouted.

Edgar turned. On the counter sat a plate of huevos fritos con cachitos de jamón, alongside a freshly brewed espresso. Mario reappeared from the dining area and stepped into the kitchen. His eyes landed on Edgar. Edgar stared back.

"¿Algo pasó?" he asked.

Mario raised an eyebrow, cupping a hand to his ear. "¿Qué dijiste? No te escucho con este ruido."

Edgar narrowed his eyes. "¿Algo pasó? ¿Qué le dijiste a Antoni?"

Mario exhaled through his nose, glancing at the plate on the counter. "Simplemente, le dije que tratara a mis trabajadores con respeto," he said. "Le recordé que él también fue inmigrante una vez."

Edgar studied him. That was it?

A coworker suddenly shouted, "¡Orden para la mesa número seis!"

Mario clapped Edgar on the shoulder. "Dale," he said. "Llévale la orden y tranquilo. Él entenderá." He walked past Edgar, disappearing back into the office.

Edgar smirked slightly. "Lo dudo," he thought. But he picked up the plate anyway.

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Edgar stepped into the dining area, heading toward table six. Antoni was still seated, but something was... different. His sunglasses were off. His eyes, once hidden, were now visible—and they weren't as hard as before. If anything, they looked... exhausted. Shaken. Edgar placed the plate and espresso in front of him.

“Gracias, Edgar,” Antoni said. The Spanish rolled off his tongue effortlessly.

Edgar blinked. “Ah,” he replied automatically, his voice wary. “A la orden, señor Antoni.”

Silence stretched between them. Antoni picked up his fork, cutting into the fried eggs. He ate slowly.

Edgar hesitated before speaking.

“Mi jefe me dijo un poco de usted,” he said. “Se lo digo con respeto... ¿Usted era un inmigrante hace años?”

Antoni set down his fork. He wiped his mouth with a napkin, exhaling as he looked up at Edgar.

“Siéntate, si quieres,” he said.

Edgar hesitated, his stomach twisting. But he pulled out a chair and sat. He reached into his pocket, feeling the JUUL between his fingers. Antoni’s eyes darkened.

“No,” he said sharply. “No fumes eso, joven. Especialmente frente a mí.”

Edgar looked at him, surprised. Antoni’s voice softened.

“Es muy malo para los pulmones,” he said. “Perdí a mucha gente por fumar.” A pause. “Bótalo. Hazme caso.”

Edgar stared at him. For the first time, Antoni didn’t seem like an enemy. Just a man. A man with regrets. And maybe, just maybe, a man who had been exactly where Edgar was now. Edgar stared at the JUUL in his hand. Antoni’s words echoed in his mind. “Perdí a mucha gente por fumar. Bótalo. Hazme caso.” His fingers tightened around the device, his grip firm yet uncertain. For a moment, neither of them spoke. The sounds of the restaurant—clinking silverware, bursts of laughter, the commentators shouting over the soccer match—felt distant, muffled. Edgar took a slow breath.

“Bueno, señor... Yo he estado aquí en este país desde el año pasado. Trabajo en Pan y Miel para ganarme la vida,” he said, voice steady. “He estado estresado por varias responsabilidades... y uso esto para distraerme.” He lifted the JUUL slightly, his thumb resting against the pod.

Antoni sighed, shaking his head. “Yo también usaba eso como distracción,” he admitted. “Cigarros, drogas... lo que fuera para no pensar.” His fingers traced the rim of his espresso cup. “Pero eso solo me hizo perder tiempo... y gente.”

Edgar swallowed, his throat dry. Antoni reached into his pocket and pulled out a twenty and two five-dollar bills. He placed them on the table, sliding them toward Edgar.

“Este es el total,” Antoni said. “Ya hablé con Mario sobre lo que debía.”

Edgar hesitated. He didn’t know what he had expected—maybe another insult, another jab—but not this. Not kindness.

“Gracias, señor Antoni,” he said, nodding. Antoni didn’t respond right away.

Instead, he turned his chair slightly, eyes drifting toward the television screen, where the soccer game was entering its final minutes. A yellow card flashed on the screen. The Mexican fans in the restaurant groaned in unison, their frustration vibrating through the air. But Antoni remained still. His face, once hardened with contempt, was now unreadable. For the first time, Edgar wasn’t sure what the man in front of him was thinking. And maybe that was enough. Edgar stood up. He glanced at the money on the table one last time, then at Antoni.

“Que tenga buen día, señor,” he said. Antoni nodded, but he didn’t look away from the screen.

And that was the last time they ever saw each other.

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Edgar pushed open the back door and stepped outside. The afternoon sun had finally broken through the clouds, washing the alleyway in warm, golden light. He exhaled, feeling the heat press against his skin. Above him, a flock of birds circled the sky, weaving in and out of the tangled power lines before disappearing beyond the buildings. Edgar reached into his pocket. The JUUL rested against his palm, familiar and small. He lifted it, staring at the two holes where he had taken countless drags. He brought it to his lips. “Por última vez.” The pod met his mouth. He inhaled. The orange flavor tingled against his tongue, coating his throat. He held it in. Uno, dos, tres, y cuatro. He exhaled. The smoke drifted upward, curling into the warm Miami air, rising higher and higher until it faded completely. Edgar lowered the JUUL. He stared at it for a long moment. Then, without hesitation, he pulled his arm back and threw it. The black device spun through the air like an arrow, cutting across the afternoon light. It sailed far, becoming nothing more than a dark speck before finally “vanishing into the distance. Edgar exhaled one last time. Then, without looking back, he stepped inside.”