

The Body by the Canal

By David Bowles

September of 1987 wasn't much different from September of 1986. My dad was still gone, we were still living on food stamps and welfare, I was still the lone freak at my high school, trapped in this conservative border town, unusual even for the circle of outcasts that had formed around me. Every girl I dated dumped me. The teachers thought I was too smug for my own good. I crossed out the days on my calendar, counting down toward graduation. Escape.

Then the neighbors moved in downstairs, and everything changed.

It was a Saturday. Luis, Javi, and I were across the street at the Pharr Civic Center, taking turns falling off a beat-up skateboard we'd scammed off a rich white kid from McAllen.

"Is that a dude or a chick?" Luis asked.

I looked over at the thin, elegant figure struggling to pull a box from the trunk of an old sedan. Longish hair teased wildly. Knee-high boots with one-inch heels. Bangles, bracelets, and a bright pink Swatch on the left wrist. A satiny black shirt with a frilly collar. Lips bright with color. Eyelids shaded.

As out of place in this shitty neighborhood as a peacock among chickens. I knew the feeling.

"I dunno," I said. But my stomach did a pirouette as the newcomer turned to look at us.

Boy or girl, the kid was beautiful.

And from my own experience, this town would do all it could to destroy that beauty.

"Only one way to find out," Javi said, stamping on the back of the skateboard so it popped straight up. Snatching it from the air, he gestured with his chin. "Let's go say hello."

I was strangely conscious of my own appearance as we walked back across Kelly Avenue to the Section

8 apartments, where I lived with my mom and little brother, Fernando. Torn Levi 501s. Turquoise canvas high-tops, off-brand. A random white T-shirt with purple blotches that had seemed gnarly when I bought it but now made me feel like a total poseur. Since it was Saturday, I hadn't bothered to curl the bangs of my bi-level hairdo, which reached my shoulders in back.

I figured I looked a mess. Still, I got out in front of Javi and Luis, anyway. They were a little *ranchero*, always putting their feet in their mouths when meeting cool people, even though they meant well.

"Hey," I said, waving as we approached. "Need any help?"

"Nah," the newbie said, and I could tell he was a guy though his voice was soft. The homophobes at our school were going to have a field day. "I've got it. Thanks."

"My name's Oscar, by the way," I added. "I live right above you, in 211. These are my friends Luis and Javi. They live . . . elsewhere."

I waved my hand vaguely, and he smiled. Glints of amber in his eyes caught the morning sun, sparkling like gold. My palms began to ache.

"Ariel," he said, pronouncing it in Spanish: ah-RYEL. "Ariel Ortega."

A glance told me that the box he was balancing on the bumper was full of records.

"Cool look," said Luis, who sported a crew cut because of JROTC. "Like a little punk, a little hair metal . . ."

"It's gothic," I said, and Ariel's honey eyes widened. "A bit more Siouxsie Sioux than Ian Curtis, but still."

Ariel tilted his head, and something fluttered in my chest. "Try Robert Smith. What was your name again?"

"Oscar," I said. "Oscar Garza."

There was a strange pause. Somewhere a whip-poor-will gave its plaintive cry. There was a skull ring on Ariel's right hand, I noticed. His fingers were slender and manicured.

"Welcome to Pharr, Texas, bro," Luis said. "We're sort of the outsiders at the high school, so, yeah. You'll wind up with us eventually."

“Pardon me?” Ariel asked.

Javi gestured at the newcomer’s clothes. “Let’s just say you’re not the typical student.”

“But that’s okay,” I interjected, narrowing my eyes at my friends pointedly. “It’s a backwoods rancho, but it’s survivable. Just make sure the counselors put you in college prep classes with me.”

“With us,” Javi corrected. I heard him sigh, though I didn’t look away from Ariel. Couldn’t. There was a jingle as Javi fished his keys from his pocket. “Come on, Luis. I’ve got an afternoon shift at Starlite Burger. I’ll drop you at your uncle’s place on the way.”

“Wait, what about . . .” Luis began, but Javi had already walked over to el Moco, his dad’s green Impala. Luis glanced at Ariel and me. He took a knowing breath and nodded. “Órale, I’m coming. Nice meeting you, Ariel.”

I ended up helping Ariel set up his stereo after his mom, Gloria, found us talking music outside and invited me to lunch. She was pretty open about their situation: they’d been living in Austin, but Mr. Ortega was a drunken son of a bitch who wouldn’t leave her precious boy alone. Rather than returning to California, where her family lived, she was trying to throw her abusive husband off the scent by coming to the Rio Grande Valley.

I had seen a couple of Cure videos on MTV, but I’d never listened to a full album, so Ariel lowered the needle on their latest: *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me*.

“When they toured with Siouxsie and the Banshees,” Ariel explained, “Smith ended up taking over as guitarist for the other band. Being a Banshee changed him, I think. If you listen to their earlier music, it’s kind of fake. Like he didn’t know who he was. She opened his eyes. And now just listen, Oscar. Just listen.”

I did. It was otherworldly, beautiful, haunting.

Smith started singing “Why Can’t I Be You?” and Ariel, who had been sitting cross-legged on the floor, couldn’t contain himself anymore. He leapt up and started to dance, his limbs lithe and balletic even amid all the frenzied post-punk moves.

I watched him, spellbound. His eyes caught mine, and he laughed, pulling me to my feet against my

will.

I was a rocker. We don't dance.

But I did. I danced with absolute abandon, laughing at the joy of it.

We fell back on his bed, breathless, as slower songs followed. He talked to me about the lyrics, about the band's journey, the other groups I'd never heard of whose influences he swore he could distinguish.

"I play the guitar," I said out of the blue. "Javi, Luis, and me, we're trying to start a band."

Ariel propped his head on his palm as he turned to look at me.

"What kind of music?"

I tried not to notice the feel of his breath on my arm.

"Don't know yet. Rock, definitely. Metal, we've been thinking. But this . . ."

He laid his other hand on my arm.

"I know! I'm going to record you a mixtape, Oscar. Only the very best from my carefully curated collection. I am *certain* you'll find inspiration."

"Órale," I said. "And I'll show you the ropes at PSJA High School. I, uh, used to get bullied a lot, but I've figured out how to navigate the bola de rancheros there."

"We'll be each other's guides, then," he said, and there was something in his voice that made my pulse quicken.

As I had imagined, the usual suspects had all kinds of nicknames for Ariel. None were quite as creative as güero cacahuatero and mariposón, as I had been dubbed by the wannabe gangsters on campus. But I took Ariel to our counselor, Ms. Simpson, and helped him get the same schedule as Javi and me. Since he lived in government housing like I did, we rode the same bus, listening to music on his Walkman.

For a few weeks, life in those shitty apartments was actually a delight. Mom still worked her two jobs, Fernando still spent all his time across the breezeway with Speedy Espericueta, playing Super Mario Bros. on Speedy's NES. But instead of stewing in my room alone, reading the bleak German and Russian novels that had been keeping me company in the depths of my depression, I now had a fellow freak to help while

the hours away. Unabashedly, I spent time every afternoon with my new friend.

When I wasn't hanging out with Ariel, listening to his amazing collection of LPs and reading the darker of the DC comics, I was up in my apartment, learning to play post-punk songs on my battered, knockoff Fender. Javi and Luis still came to visit on the weekends, but the dynamic had changed. I could see that Ariel's presence disconcerted them.

"Is there anything you want to tell us, dude?" Javi asked one night when we got on the phone together using two-way calling.

"About?"

Luis cleared his throat. "You and Ariel, Oscar. Feels weird, the way you keep shutting us out. We figure . . . maybe you like him. As, uh, more than a friend."

"What?" I said, getting indignant to cover the panic welling up in my chest. How could they see through me like this? Was I that obvious to everyone? "Y'all never change. Always with your snide little comments about my clothes and hair."

"No, Oscar," Javi broke in. "That's not it. Yeah, we've teased you, but if you really like him, that's cool with us, carnal."

"Whatever. Pinches rancheros. You just can't handle a cool gothic kid from California."

They hung up on me. I deserved it, I guess. But I couldn't be honest with them. Better to pretend our little clique was being broken up by Ariel.

I wasn't about to exclude him.

I was growing to need him.

After Ariel's third week in Pharr, I grabbed my guitar and my sputtering amp and headed downstairs. As if he could sense me at the door, he opened before I knocked.

"¿Y esto?" he asked. "Are you planning to serenade me, Oscar Garza?"

I could feel my pale skin blushing beet red. "I just wanted to show you," I said. "I learned it."

"What?"

Before I could stop myself, I blurted, “Our song.”

Pausing only briefly, he gave me a sweet smile.

“Come in, then. This calls for something special.”

I went into his room and plugged in my guitar, sitting on the edge of his bed. He pulled the curtains closed and snapped a steel lighter open. I’d of course noticed the candles on his shelves before, but now he lit them, along with a stick of incense.

“Open your chakras, Oscar,” he said, giving a soft laugh. “Let the music flow from the All.”

Shaking my head and chuckling, I checked the tuning of my guitar and started to play. I’d slowed the tempo down and lowered the key to match my baritone better.

I couldn’t bring myself to look him in the eye as I sang.

Everything you do is irresistible

Everything you do is simply kissable

Why can’t I be you?

I didn’t even finish the song before Ariel stopped my hands on the strings, kneeling in front of me. His face was so close to mine, those lips that seemed to smile only for me, tears trembling in his eyes.

It had been months since my last kiss, back before Diana Alaniz had broken up with me.

And I had never kissed a boy before.

But I felt safe, safer than ever in my life.

I leaned forward and pressed my mouth to his. Sweet and warm, like mango just plucked from a tree.

We took our time, savoring that taste.

Over dinner that evening, my mother shared gossip from work.

“There’s this drama teacher,” she said. “From Mission or McAllen or somewhere. He’s gone missing.”

Fernando shrugged. “One less teacher in the world? I’m not gonna cry.”

“Nando!” she scolded. “That’s a terrible thing to say. But you’re not letting me finish. They say he has the AIDS. That he’s a homosexual and kept meeting his lovers even though he knew he could get them sick too.”

I set my glass down, fuming in irritation. My mother was super religious. Ever since my uncle Samuel had come out of the closet back in 1980, she never missed an opportunity to mention how sinful his lifestyle was, how dangerous promiscuity could be, with AIDS and all the other “venereal diseases” that she liked to list like some sort of weird Rosary.

“Mom, we really don’t want to hear this crap.”

“Hey, some respect!” She glared at me. I already knew I reminded her of my deadbeat dad, the man she’d just divorced for abandonment. Every time I failed to live up to her expectations, she accused me of being just like him. “Anyway, they’re saying that his lovers found out and came up with a plan to kidnap him.”

Fernando looked at me, one eyebrow raised. “Mom watches too many telenovelas.”

“I have no time for soap operas, Fernando Tomás Garza! I work myself to the bone long hours every day because your father ran off on us. So you boys just stay away from such sinful stuff, do you hear? Don’t make me worry any more than I already do about you two being here alone.”

I gave her a thumbs-up. “You bet, Mom. It’s all copacetic.”

It was her favorite word. Like a magic spell, it always calmed her down.

She crossed herself and kept eating.

After dinner, Ariel and I chatted on the phone for a while. He kept making vague references to our kiss. Part of me wanted to flirt too, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the missing teacher. Couldn’t get my mother’s stupid voice out of my head. So I told Ariel the gossip.

“Of *course* it’s a teacher,” he grumbled. “Sleeping around like a slut. That’s not what it’s about, Oscar.”

“No?” I said, though I had strong feelings about being faithful. I’d had several girlfriends since junior high and had never cheated on any of them.

“No. It’s about following our hearts. When your heart is drawn to someone, how can you give it to another? Or your lips? Or your body?”

For a moment I imagined him, elegant and beautiful, unbuttoning his shirt . . .

“You’re right. It’s just a sore subject in my stupid family. My uncle’s gay, and the rest of them, well, you know how Mexican men are about that shit.”

There was silence on the other end. Then: “Yes, Oscar. I’m very acquainted with it. My dad beat me enough times. I don’t think I’ll ever forget how Mexican men are toward folks like us.”

Folks like us.

My stomach flip-flopped. What was I? What was I doing with this boy?

Why now? What was it about Ariel Ortega that made me risk discovery?

“Oscar? Say something.”

“Ah, Ariel. I’ve, uh, I’ve got to hit the sack.”

“There’s no school tomorrow, sweet boy. It’s a holiday. But okay. Get your rest. Maybe we can hang out in the afternoon, yeah?”

I swallowed heavily, my mind a jumble. “Yeah. Sure we can.”

“There’s a dead body by the canal.”

I glanced up at Fernando. A couple of hours ago I had let him go across the breezeway to Speedy Espericueta’s apartment, just to get him out of my hair. Since there was no school, I was stuck babysitting an eleven-year-old who relished getting himself in trouble.

Now here he was, sweaty and out of breath, feeding me a ridiculous line of crap.

“Nando, what the hell, man? I told you not to leave the complex. Mom’ll kill me if she knows you went to the canal again.”

“Did you hear me? There’s a body there, Oscar. A dead one.”

“Yeah, sure there is. Why don’t you take a shower or something? You stink.”

He shut the door and walked over to the sofa. I dog-eared my book and really looked at him. There

was fear in his eyes, genuine horror like I hadn't seen him show since Dad left.

"Dude," Fernando said, his voice hoarse, quavering, "I'm not messing with you. We went down to go fishing, me and Speedy. Then we saw them—a guy's legs, sticking out of the weeds."

That final detail convinced me. Trying to stay calm, I grabbed the phone and dialed 911. I rattled off a summary of the situation, and the dispatcher said the Pharr PD would send someone by.

There was no way I was going to let the cops show up at this government housing complex, full of all sorts of marginalized people and criminals.

"I'm calling from a pay phone. We'll meet you at the canal," I said, hanging up.

Fernando looked at me, dumbfounded. "You don't have a car."

"Yeah, but Ariel's mother does. Come on."

"We shouldn't call Mom?" Fernando asked.

"No. Last thing she needs is more stress. Don't want her freaking out and leaving work. She'd probably call in sick at the other job too."

We need to get out of this place, I didn't say. And for that we need every dime she can scrape together.

My little brother just shrugged and went downstairs with me. I'd pretty much been his surrogate dad for the past four years, and though he preferred to act all independent, he tended to follow my lead.

A single knock was all it took. Ariel opened immediately.

"Can your mom drive us to the Ridge Road canal? My little brother thinks he saw a dead body. We're supposed to meet the police there."

Gloria Ortega was shocked, but she agreed. Fernando climbed into the passenger seat. Ariel and I got in the **back**.

As we drove away, I glanced at the block of Section 8 apartments, the last refuge of the disposed and discarded.

That's what we are, I thought as my eyes drifted over the motley assortment of clunkers in the pitted parking lot. Discarded. Left behind.

My heart was heavy. As if sensing my spiraling emotions, Ariel reached out and took my hand. I both

wanted to lace my fingers with his and to pull away; I did neither. I just let him cradle my hand like a baby as Nando guided Gloria down to Ridge Road and up the dirt path that led to the canal.

“There it is!” my brother finally shouted. The old sedan bumped to a stop, and the four of us got out. The lingering heat of early autumn made everything hazy, bled color from the vegetation, leaving the meager brush pallid and dead. The hollow whine of cicadas drowned out all other noise—an ominous, predatory rattle. I wiped sweat from my face and followed Nando as he took a few hesitant steps away from the car. Behind me came Ariel and his mother, dead weeds crunching underfoot. For a moment my eyes were overwhelmed by the dusty brightness, but I squinted painfully as my little brother froze up.

And then I saw it.

Thrusting out dumbly onto the hard-packed gravel were two lifeless legs: pale, thin, coated with wiry black hair. One foot was covered by a black nylon sock; the other was bare, and I noticed with a strange sort of nausea that the man had not clipped his toenails in some time.

Gloria gasped, hurrying to pull Fernando back. Ariel came to a stop beside me, his shoulder touching mine.

Trembling, he gave whispered voice to my thoughts.

“It’s him. The teacher.”

A squad car pulled up. I could sense Gloria guiding my brother toward the officer who emerged, calling out to us. She must have spoken to him, but I couldn’t be sure. As if from a great distance, I heard the officer call for an ambulance and backup. The dull hum of the cicadas filled my ears, thrummed in my skull like the low growl of some unseen machinery or massive beast.

I took another step. Ariel—arm around me, trying to hold me back, but I pulled away. I walked closer to the body until I could see more of him, nearly all of his torso. He was wearing black briefs and a white undershirt. Sickly weeds obscured his arms; his face was covered by the low, knotty branches of some thorny bush.

This is death. Abrupt. Meaningless. Dumb. A body, discarded, swallowed by the gaping jaws of the world. This is what they do to “folks like us,” Ariel.

With a superhuman effort, I turned my back on the body.

Tears were streaming down Ariel's beautiful face. I wanted to hold him, wanted him to hold me, wanted to collapse into an embrace that would blot out the world so that only he and I remained.

But we couldn't, could we? The world was watching, ravenous, ready to devour us.

There was no hiding from those predatory eyes.

My heart broke as I pushed past Ariel and stood beside my little brother. I avoided Gloria's eyes, her questions. In a few minutes the area was swarming with cops and EMTs.

The first officer to arrive—Acosta—let us sit in the back of his patrol car. Gloria drove her weeping son away.

Once detectives were on the scene, Officer Acosta took us back to the projects, jotted down Nando's statement.

Then he drove away, and that was that.

Ariel and I didn't speak again.

Only a few weeks later, Linda Pompa became my "beard." She was a rocker girl at PSJA High School. One of her teeth was rimmed in gold, she loved Joan Jett, and she had been trying to get me to go out with her since Diana had dumped me in front of the auditorium last school year. I asked her to be my girlfriend, started walking her to class. Made out with her behind the choir room.

Ariel watched from afar, eyes red with weeping, until one day he didn't anymore.

I came home to find that he and his mother had moved away. Back to California, I supposed, or maybe another small town beyond the clutches of his abusive father.

I broke up with Linda immediately. My heart wasn't hers.

For months afterward I couldn't sleep. I would close my eyes and see those legs, that dusty, weed-entangled torso.

Every night, the body would shudder and sit up.

I *wish* I could tell you that it was a zombie, hungering for my flesh. . . .

But it had the face of my beloved, eyes full of tears.

Beautiful flesh covered in gaping wounds.

Lying there in my mind, discarded and decaying.

I was trapped in the weeds of my cowardice, watching his features fade from my memory into silent oblivion.

To keep the undead shell of that love alive, I slowly fed it my soul.

Late one night, a week before graduation, the phone rang. I could hear Robert Smith crooning “Torture” in the background.

“Ariel?” I asked.

There was a sob.

“Don’t hang up, please,” I begged, my chest aching. “I . . . I’m so sorry.”

He cleared his throat. “You hurt me, Oscar. Bad.”

Clenching my free hand into a fist, I nodded though he couldn’t see me. “I was afraid to risk your life. Afraid to risk mine. As much as I wish I could, I can’t be you. I’m not brave enough. Not strong enough.”

Ariel sighed. “One day, Oscar. One day you’ll find the strength. The world will change, sweet boy. Hang in there.”

The line went dead. I hit *69 to call him back, but I got a busy signal.

Ariel had left my life forever.

But his words echoed in my heart. The nightmares ended. Not quite two years later, at UT Pan American, surrounded by other queer kids, I gathered the courage to be who I am.

And I fell in love with a boy again.