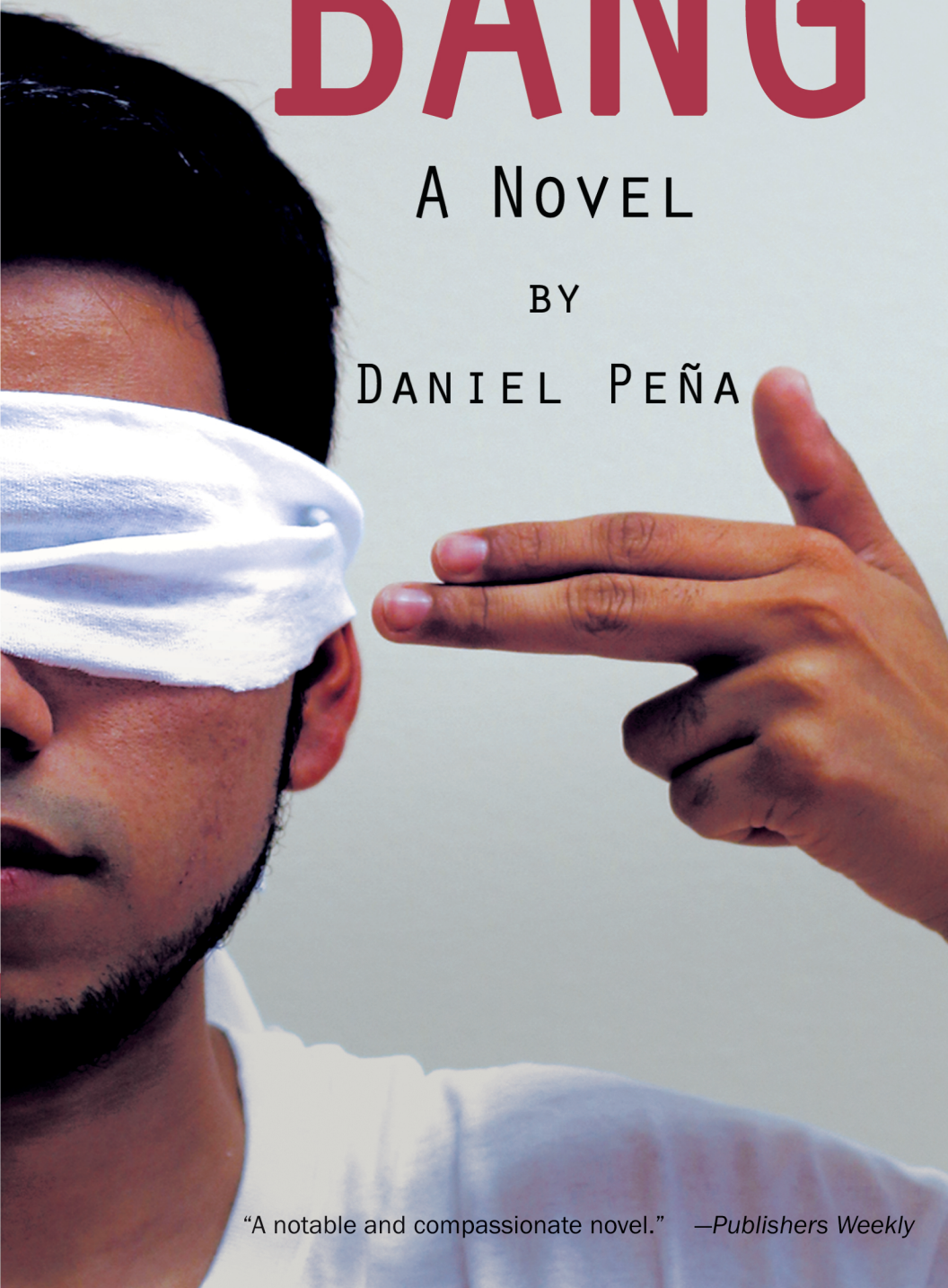


# BANG

A NOVEL

BY

DANIEL PEÑA



"A notable and compassionate novel." —*Publishers Weekly*

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*For my wife, Sophia.  
I wrote this for you. But then again,  
I wrote everything for you.*

"What thing is the body when it's lost?"

—Sara Uribe, *Antígona González*

## FLYING MEXICANS

MISPLACED IS THE WORD Araceli would use. Like her husband was a lost set of keys or a good pair of scissors she doesn't want to return to the neighbors yet. *Misplaced*. First in the spring when he was deported, when the earth was full of holes and the air was spiced with baby citrus trees starving to be grounded. Then in the summer when the rattlesnakes multiplied at the end of the great drought, when the rains brought the crops back from the dead and still her husband hadn't arrived.

He told her he'd return today, just like he said he'd return back in the spring. And so Araceli waits at that spot on the culvert where he was picked up by the police. That's the place he said he'd be. She said she'd meet him there.

In her hands, she holds a portable transistor radio that she's modified to pick up police radios, EMT radios, border patrol radios and twangy, redneck rag chew coming in over the CB airwaves. She listens for any news of her husband, trying to make sense of the garbled English blaring from the transistor's speaker. The radio cuts in and out. Static.

The jagged, kinked lengths of copper wire from her modified radio jangle out over Araceli's knuckles as she tries to fix what's wrong. Araceli is good with electronics, gears and generally anything that can be broken and fixed again. She can make or repair anything. She's frustrated with the failing radio, though she's just as frustrated with the general situation of things. She gets that way sometimes—if one thing goes wrong

in her life, everything goes wrong in her life and she has trouble making sense of anything at all. Everything gets tainted by that feeling, by that frustration too.

Out by the road, she takes the positive end of a wire and circuits it through a capacitor that's hooked to a spool of copper wire wound around a rolled up, glued up mess of refrigerator magnets. She flips the radio off, then flips it back on to amplify the signal again. She tunes into the 5,000 kHz band. Nothing. She takes a step to the left, does it again. This time she hears something.

She turns the volume up high. She listens to the rag chew coming in over the airwaves, listening for any news of her husband. She listens so hard, trying to make sense of the English. She can't tell if the voice coming in is a cop or a truck driver. She understands very little of what's being said—it all sounds the same to her. *Fuck this*, she says to herself in perfect English. Nearly twenty years in Texas and the one thing she's mastered is *fuck this*. She loves to say it. It feels good.

She wraps the loose, kinked copper around the busted transistor radio and throws the whole mess out into the road. She waits for a car to run it over, crush it into a million, little pieces, but there's not a single car in sight. Her little creation just sits out there in the road, taunting her. She gets busy ignoring the radio by staring past it, thinking of her husband. He said he'd come today. For all of her husband's lies, she still believes in him.

Ten minutes go by. The radio remains uncrushed. Araceli can't stand the sight of it. She turns toward the milk jug behind her, the same jug her husband dropped the day he got deported. It lies where it was originally dropped in the culvert. Araceli remembers that he'd bought the milk from the Texaco on the corner. The earth grew brown around where the milk spilled when they took him away. Araceli thinks about moving the jug

but then thinks against it. *Might be bad luck.* She believes in those kinds of things.

She wears a Catholic scapular around her neck to ward off evil, though she stopped believing in God after her first child, Cuauhtémoc, was born. Her change of heart wasn't informed so much by disbelief than by her incredible belief in luck, both good and bad, and the way those forces had always ruled her life.

She carries her lucky wool Zapotec purse across her body, under her clothes.

Araceli remembers that her mother gave her that purse before she died. She said it was full of treasures but Araceli found it filled with only five square fabric samples ripped from a salesman's binder advertising for Quinceañera dresses: bengaline silk, lace tulle, organza, satin, chiffon. She feels a slight pang when thinking back on the simplicity of her mother, that woman she was trying so desperately to escape. Her mother's family in Guerrero pushed her to Texas as much as her husband took her. Her mother loved the bengaline silk (Araceli's least favorite), but her husband loved the satin (her favorite).

She was sixteen when she met her future husband, thirty-two, at a horseracing track in Guadalajara. She thought he was American by the dumb, bleached Panama hat he was wearing. She remembers he was rangy—long arms and no paunch. He was slightly sunburnt, his skin a glowing bronze.

She was selling *tejuíno*, a fermented, corn drink, from a cart and brought him one to slurp down. He paid her and only once he opened his mouth did she realize he was Mexican, from the north.

"Where?" she asked, refusing to leave his side.

"Chihuahua."

"Are you visiting?" she asked.

"I'm betting."

From under her dress, she unlatched the wool purse and brought out her lucky, satin square. She rubbed it, and he rubbed it. His horse won. And from this mutual love for the same square of fabric bloomed a marriage, a home, two children and work in an orange grove in Harlingen, Texas, all before she was twenty-three. She's thirty-nine now.

She holds on to that little square of satin now and looks at the milk jug, looks out into the road. To the right, nothing. To the left, the bright red, LED display over the Texaco with the digital American flag glowing between gas prices. Ninety-two degrees tonight. Seven o'clock. Monday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Her youngest son Uli's birthday. She takes the chiffon patch from her purse and rubs that too between her thumb and index. She remembers Uli loved chiffon as a baby. Her oldest son Cuauhtémoc, too, though he loves anything lush, it seems: alcohol, cigarettes, salty foods. Everything bad for you.

She looks for him, too, out in the road in his father's blue pickup truck, which her husband left behind. She was supposed to go with Cuauhtémoc to the Texaco to buy Uli's present but she never steps past the milk jug these days. After her husband was deported, she couldn't take the risk. She's close enough to the grove property where she could jump back behind the fence, even with her hobbled foot. She wonders, sometimes, why her husband didn't do the same. He's the one that taught her the rules of private property in America. He taught her about warrants and police and calling the ACLU lawyer from that little pre-paid Cricket phone she always forgets to carry.

She gets stir crazy standing out there. She looks out to the left again, then the right. She looks at her mistake of a creation out on the road—that shitty transistor radio turned scanner.

She knows her husband is coming from San Miguel, which is in Chihuahua, which is in the northeast part of Mexico—right next to the thumb of Texas. He'd drive south and then

east toward Harlingen, which is west of the milk jug. Araceli creates a map in her head to figure out which side of the road she should be staring down. She decides to stare down the right side of the road. She sees nothing. She wishes she could lie down in the middle of the road, next to that radio, and wait for whatever luck comes her way.

She gives up once the stars come out, though she lingers a bit more after that to wait for her sons, her tiny frame bolted to the place where her one good foot rests on the earth, the three remaining toes of her bad foot sloped up on her ankle. The big toe and the small one are gone, lopped away with gangrene, though the rest of her is healthy. Slim fingers and slim toes, a healthy belly and a healthy face that's constantly flush. Apple face, almond eyes. Along with the fabric squares, she carries a damp rag around in her wool purse that she touches every now and then with her hot and pink little hands.

Uli, her youngest, should be home from high school track practice right now. Cuauhtémoc should have been home from the Texaco too, but knowing Cuauhtémoc, he's out for a drink with Ronnie, the grove boss' son.

Ronnie is the one who taught Cuauhtémoc to fly planes. Cuauhtémoc learned after Ronnie's older brother crashed his Pawnee on a stall. After he died, the grove boss looked to train Cuauhtémoc because he was undocumented and a high school dropout, which meant he was disposable.

Like Uli, Cuauhtémoc was a track star once—he had a college scholarship lined up anyway. But Cuauhtémoc had to drop out of school three months short of graduation when he killed a boy.

Cuauhtémoc was playing basketball in the high school gym. He checked a boy hard in the chest, and the boy's heart stopped. Cuauhtémoc busted the boy's sternum with chest com-

pressions trying to start his heart again, but the boy's blood pooled on the underside of his body. The coach had to pull Cuauhtémoc off him. Said it could have been a birth defect, could have been drugs, could have been anything. But Cuauhtémoc knew, in his heart, that it was him. It was a hard check, a mean check—the kind he'd been meaning to give someone for a long, long time. And that anger turned to shock turned to sadness.

The sheriff sent out some folks from the county to investigate, and being undocumented, Cuauhtémoc couldn't go back to school the next day or the day after that. He went to work flying crop dusters in the groves illegally with the grove boss' blessing. Ronnie taught Cuauhtémoc everything about crop dusting, and with Ronnie, Cuauhtémoc let his mean streak grow.

Araceli thinks you pick friends you secretly want to be like. And that's why Ronnie and Cuauhtémoc are so close, she thinks. Cuauhtémoc wants to be American and Ronnie wants to be free, like all libertarian rednecks in Texas want to be free. Ronnie wants to "live off the grid." Ronnie wants to keep out of the watchful eye of the federal government, and Cuauhtémoc just wants to be a part of anything American (or what he perceives to be American, anyway): see Cuauhtémoc with a twelve-string singing "Free Bird"; see him shoot two guns with one hand; see him douse a shop rag in aviation fuel and watch it burn blue; see him throw a coke bottle, a Molotov cocktail, into a drain tunnel by the tracks; see the flames roll across the ceiling like a thousand burning hills inverted and curling with a whoosh hot enough to draw the slack skin tight over your face.

In the red glow of the Texaco station, Cuauhtémoc appears about a mile down from Araceli's line of sight. He's driving the blue Ford Lobo pickup with cancer patches over the hood. The headlights of the truck shine weak in the pale twilight.



A calm comes into Araceli's heart as she watches the pick-up lumber toward the grove. One son back, one to go. Her husband too. Being that she's isolated in the groves—undocumented, and therefore always afraid to leave for fear of being caught—family is the most important thing for her. She does everything to keep it intact, even if all she can do is wait.

She takes a step back from the spot on the road with the milk jug in the culvert and pivots on her good foot, making her way back to the house. She throws up a hand to wave at her son. She stops. She notices the headlights on the truck flip between high-beams and low, the difference between the two just dim and dimmer. The headlights flip once but then they keep flipping. As the pickup nears, Araceli hears that the engine's been cut. Steam pours out from the edges of the hood. Cuauhtémoc's driving off momentum. Just the sticky sound of the tires over asphalt and then dirt as he glides onto the grove property from the shoulder of the road to park the truck in its spot on a bald patch of earth next to the trailer where they live.

Araceli takes the warning and moves out of the way as he glides past her, riding the momentum from the road onto the grove property. Pivoting herself to follow the truck, Araceli loses her footing on a loose patch of dirt and slides into the culvert. A thud in her ears from where her butt hits the dirt. Her own momentum slides her down a foot or two. It's then that she's glad for the drought. No water in the culvert. Just that milk jug behind her. She reaches around and picks it up, cradles it while she catches her breath.

Araceli's official position on Cuauhtémoc's drinking is that she's opposed to it (she says that to him, anyway), but she also knows the booze mellows him out, makes him less like who he's becoming: older, sober, but angrier these days. Secretly, she thinks, *if only he drank a little more booze*.

He was an athlete once and he's trying to get there again. Between flights, he runs the length of the groves in his worn out Lucchese boots. He's dropped weight, gained muscle. Cuauhtémoc says he's faster than his brother, though they've never raced. Araceli won't have it. His soft edges have all gone hard. She knows he's trying to make something of himself. Trying to decenter his life from what it is, or at least what it's been so far. Cuauhtémoc tells Araceli he'll run track for Mexico—long distance. Nothing that requires speed. He'll medal but not too well. Bronze maybe. He'll be known as *the Olympian*. Not the boy killer, not the illegal boy who flies the illegal planes over a grove in Texas.

The pickup door swings open and there's only the smell of too-strong cologne and the smoke-soaked vinyl over the bench seats. She drops the milk jug about the same time his Lucchese boots hit the ground.

Like his father, Cuauhtémoc has a flat head of curly hair. He's rangy and lean and tall. He's got his mother's almond-shaped eyes but his father's small, serious mouth. Tiny ears and no chin. His head almost slopes into his neck so that when he smiles, there's a slight wrinkle in his chin just like he's got now.

He's in a good mood. It's only when he shuts the door that Araceli sees he's got a puppy tucked into the crook of his arm. An ordinary mutt. Black and brown fur. Something between a schnauzer and a dachshund with an orange bow on top of its head.

"You got him a dog?" Araceli says to her son, completely sidestepping the fender of the smoking pickup. She only sees her son and the puppy.

"We've never had one," says Cuauhtémoc with his crooked, little smile.

"For a reason," says Araceli. "They cost too much money."

"It's chipped. It's got all of its shots."

"You can't bring that into the house," she says firmly.

"It's potty trained."

"You mean housebroken."

"Whatever," says Cuauhtémoc.

"You've never had a dog. Neither has your little brother. It's too much responsibility. Take it back before he comes."

"Why?"

"Because your brother hasn't seen it yet. He can't get attached."

"I don't have another birthday present," says Cuauhtémoc.

"Get one," she says.

"How?" he says and nods to the steaming truck. Araceli takes the dog from her son's arms. She searches the collar for a name tag but there's nothing.

"It's a girl," says Cuauhtémoc, rounding the back of the pickup to search for the water hose in the grass. He finds it and unwinds the broach faucet that feeds that hose from the side of their trailer home, a modified school portable with a '4' stamped on the side. The water slicks over the ground as Cuauhtémoc walks toward the truck cabin with the hose in hand. He unlatches the hood and pushes it up above the windshield.

"Does she have a name yet?" asks Araceli.

"I was thinking Roo," says Cuauhtémoc, putting his thumb over the hose and spraying down the engine. A cloud of steam escapes from under the hood as the water sizzles over the cast-iron block.

"Where'd you get that name?" asks Araceli, waiting for the steam to clear, but it never does, just sits there and hangs for a while.

"Roo. Kangaroo. She jumps a lot. She's still teething," says Cuauhtémoc. "Could also be Cajun or something. I don't know."

At this, Araceli imagines the near future: ripped blankets, chewed up wiring, frayed wooden table legs, shredded shoes.

"If she doesn't have a name, she's not ours yet," says Araceli as if to settle the matter.

The dog squirms in her arms. She jumps up and licks Araceli across the lips. Araceli arches her head back, disgusted, before spitting into the grove dirt.

"Dog's mouth is cleaner than your mouth," says Cuauhtémoc laughing. "It's science."

"I don't eat my own shit," says Araceli, feeling the dog's saliva drying tight over her skin.

She looks the puppy in the eyes. No denying, now, how cute it is. Even Araceli can admit this. The puppy yawns and then digs her nose into the space between Araceli's arm and her ribs.

"Let's go inside," she says, turning toward the cabin with Roo in her arms.

She waits for Cuauhtémoc to follow, but he stays where he is, spraying down the engine block.

Araceli sets Roo down just inside the threshold of the door. The puppy sniffs around where she's been placed. Roo does a circle and lays on her paws. Araceli looks into her sad, sleepy eyes as she hobbles toward the stove. "Roo," she says to her. The dog doesn't respond.

In the kitchen, Araceli fills a pot with hot water. Above the sink, she looks out the window at Cuauhtémoc trying to cool the pickup. She wishes he'd come inside but she knows he needs to be alone sometimes, just in the way her husband needed to be alone. She wonders, occasionally, if her husband planned to get deported on purpose. But she always shuts those thoughts away almost as soon as they come.