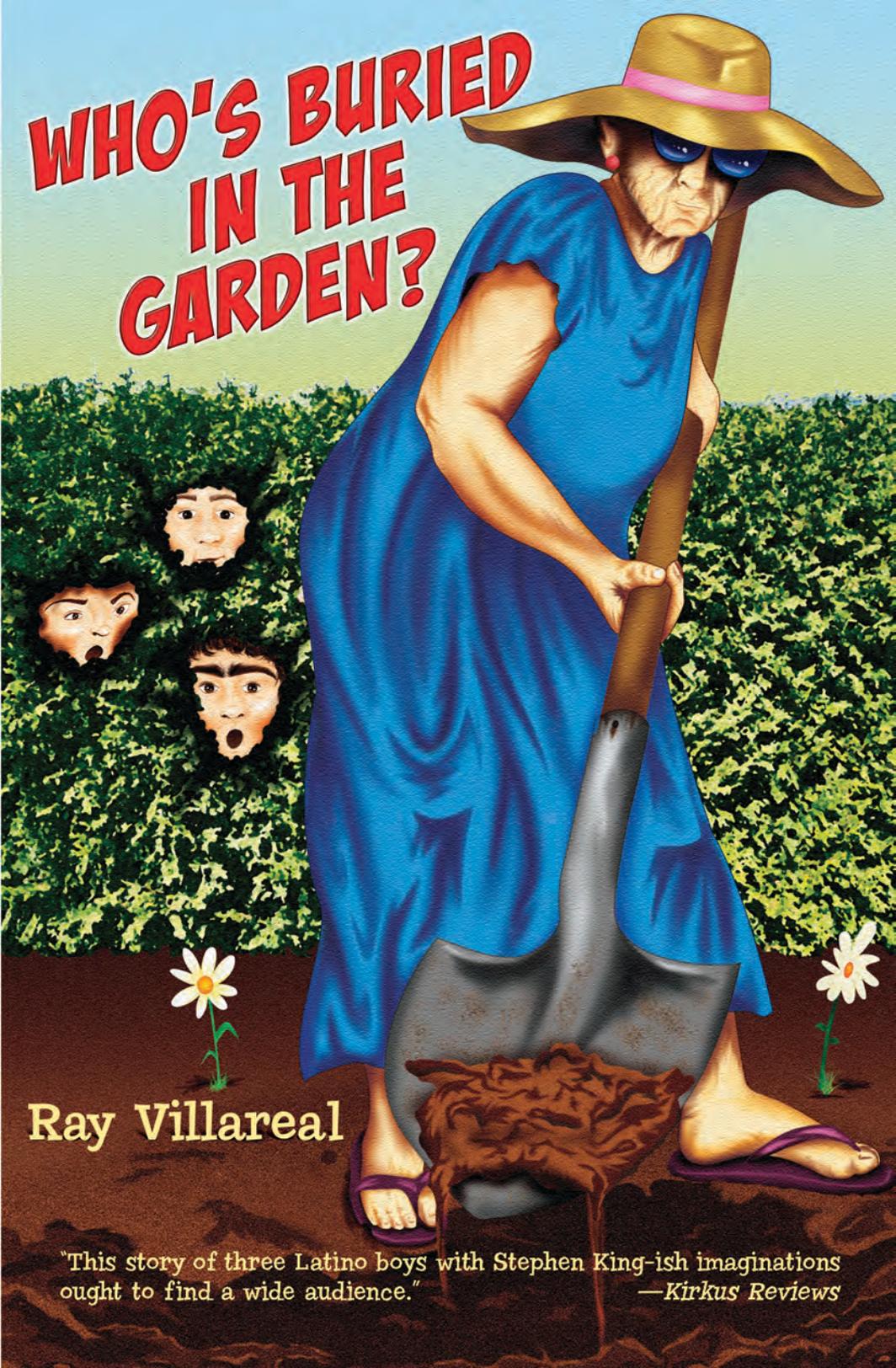


WHO'S BURIED IN THE GARDEN?

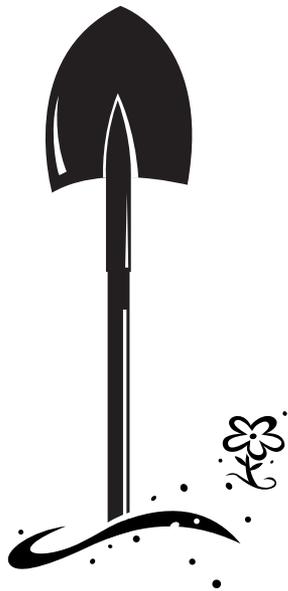


Ray Villareal

"This story of three Latino boys with Stephen King-ish imaginations ought to find a wide audience."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

WHO'S BURIED IN THE GARDEN?



Ray Villareal



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Summary: Even though he knows his best friend Artie is a liar, when the coincidences start to add up, seventh-grader Joshua starts to believe that there might be merit to his friend's idea of a body buried in the neighbor's yard.

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For Sylvia

ONE



ARTIE MENDOZA has got to be the biggest liar I've ever known.

No, that's not quite right. Artie isn't your standard, everyday liar who makes up stuff, either to keep from getting in trouble or to get out of doing something. Don't get me wrong. He does a lot of that, too. But Artie is more of a storyteller. He reminds me of Baron Münchhausen, a character we once read about in school.

Baron Münchhausen had a reputation for being an incredible fabricator of tales.

I learned the word "fabricate" from one of those state reading tests we have to take every year. To fabricate means to create or make up stuff.

And Baron Münchhausen loved to make up stuff. He claimed, for example, that he had ridden on cannonballs and traveled to the moon. No, he wasn't a circus performer or an astronaut. Baron Münchhausen lived in the 1700s. He also said he once escaped from quicksand by pulling himself up by his own hair.

Get the picture? Like I said, the baron was a fabricator of tales.

So is Artie Mendoza.

For instance, Artie once told the guys at school that the hamburgers being served in the lunchroom were made out of kangaroo meat.

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“I swear,” Artie said, making the sign of the cross over his heart to prove he was telling the truth. “I saw them unloading the boxes off the truck when I got to school this morning, and on each box was the Australian flag.”

Right then, I knew Artie was making up the story. I’ve known him since kindergarten, and he wouldn’t know the flag of Australia from the flag of Timbuktu.

“And under the Australian flag,” Artie went on, “in bright red letters, it said, *Kangaroo meat. Keep frozen.*”

Artie told his story with such sincerity that most of the kids actually believed him. The ones who’d already taken a bite out of their hamburgers started to gag and cough in an exaggerated manner, as if they’d been poisoned or something.

I don’t know. Maybe kangaroo burgers are all the rage in Australia, but here in Texas, we still prefer burgers that come from a cow.

If gagging and coughing was all they’d done, that wouldn’t have been so bad. I mean, some kids at my school look for any opportunity to act stupid. Most teachers know this, so they learn to put up with them and turn the other way.

But they couldn’t turn the other way when the hamburgers started flying.

Richie Lewis fired the first shot. When Artie told him what he’d just eaten, Richie got this real disgusted look on his face. He clutched his throat and began making loud *ack! ack!* sounds. For a second, I thought he was going to puke. But Richie didn’t puke. He grabbed his half-eaten burger and flung it across the lunchroom toward the trash can, angry that he’d just paid a dollar and a quarter for a burger made from a Winnie the Pooh character.

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He missed the trash can by at least six feet. No surprise there. Richie threw the hamburger the way he shoots when we play basketball — with all the accuracy of a blindfolded kid trying to hit a piñata at a birthday party.

The hamburger didn't connect with the trash can, but it still found a target. It hit Petey Sánchez, who was standing in the lunch line, flush on the face. Petey's head snapped back and a high-pitched yelp escaped from his throat. Petey swiped his hand across his face and swiveled around to see where the burger had come from. A slice of pickle was stuck to his forehead, and ketchup and mustard smeared his cheeks like Indian war paint.

Wolf Man thought what Richie had done was hilarious, so he picked up his hamburger and threw it, too. It crashed on the large blue star of Carlos Jiménez's Dallas Cowboys football jersey. Carlos hopped out of his seat, his eyes bulging out of their sockets, and stared around the room. He picked up what was left of his burger and threw it back in retaliation.

He hit Dora González, who hadn't thrown anything, on her chest. The burger slid down to her lap. Dora's face crumpled, and she let out a strangled cry.

Before long, dozens of hamburgers were zooming all over the lunchroom — like miniature flying saucers or an alien invasion from the planet Big Mac.

The two teacher assistants, whose job it was to control the behavior in the lunchroom, ducked under a table. They shrieked something about suspensions, but their voices were drowned amid the chaos of the food fight.

When it was finally over, about fifteen kids did receive in-school suspensions — including Artie. The punishment didn't bother him too much, though. Artie's a regular in-school-suspension customer. For him, it comes with the

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job of being a seventh grader at Marsville Middle School. What did bug him was the nonstop teasing afterward.

“Hey, Artie, been feeling a little jumpy lately? Maybe you should quit eating those kangaroo burgers. Ha! Ha!”

Only Wolf Man continued to believe Artie’s kangaroo meat story. But then, Wolf Man always falls for everything Artie tells him. In fact, that doofus once paid Artie five bucks for a “lucky moon rock.”

“My tío got it from a friend who works for NASA,” Artie said when he talked Wolf Man into buying the worthless rock he picked up off the playground.

Yeah, right, I thought. And Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy meet for lunch every Wednesday afternoon at McDonald’s.

The next time the school served hamburgers, Wolf Man said, “Hey, Artie, these kangaroo burgers ain’t *that* bad. They kinda taste like beef.”

That’s because they are, you moron, I wanted to say. But I didn’t. Wolf Man’s a little slow. I suppose that’s the polite way to describe him. Artie’s sister Christina, on the other hand, isn’t quite as polite. She calls him a retard.

Anyway, like I said, Artie Mendoza, like Baron Münchhausen, was a fabricator of tales. So as I’m sure you can imagine, I was naturally skeptical when Artie first told me about the dead body.