

FORTUNATE MONSTERS



A novel by
Manuel Luis Martinez

Martinez's "characters, almost all working poor, are treated with dignity and respect not always seen in fiction."

—*Booklist*

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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For my daughters, Cora and Hannah

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The vast majority of macro mutations can only be viewed as disastrous—called monsters. But every once in a while, a macro mutation might, by sheer good fortune, adapt an organism to a new mode of life, a “hopeful monster.”

Richard Goldschmidt, *The Material Basis of Evolution*

It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account shall we be more attached to one another.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

CHAPTER 1

Real Father

Virginia didn't remember much about him at all. Not even his name. A visit once when she was only four, her mother telling her that she was going to meet her *real* father, a terrible fight, a stuffed dog. The toy dog was still around somewhere. At some point, its eyes had gone missing, first the right, then the left, after a couple of years of her dragging it around everywhere she went.

The visit was mostly a memory of a memory implanted by her mother before the man who raised her, who insisted on calling himself her father, a trucker named Benny-Boy Lopez, came on the scene. Benny-Boy was terrible jealous and he didn't want the ex-husband's name mentioned in his house. He'd even objected to the stuffed animal when he'd found out its source. That suited her mother just fine, and so she'd taken it from the little girl and "put it away," telling Virginia she could play with it when Daddy, that is, Benny-Boy, wasn't home.

That didn't mean her mom *never* brought up Virginia's real father. When Celia got to feeling lonely and angry, she'd tell Virginia that men were for shit. Benny-Boy was no kind of man, but he was better than the sack of shit her real father was. That's what she called him, her *real father*, as if using his

given name was beneath contempt. She'd say, "your real father was nothing but a no-account druggie, wife-sluggin', whore-mongerin', sonuvabitchin' jailbird. And if he'd had been able to just keep his nose clean for ten minutes, the two of us wouldn't be beholden to Benny-Boy Lopez."

Her mom wanted Virginia to know that all failure, all suffering, could and should be attributed to Real Father. But to young Virginia, Real Father was a godsend. A powerful, mysterious figure who would have rescued her from her horrible life if only he'd known she was suffering. He'd have taken her away from her indifferent and bitter mother, who looked the other way when Benny-Boy graduated from hugging her a bit too tightly as she started to develop her formidable *chichis* to coming into her bedroom at night and doing way worse. She loathed him so much that nightly in the mirror in her room she looked fearfully for any subtle resemblances that might have possibly asserted themselves not through genetics, but through some horrible osmotic exposure.

Benny-Boy would wake her in the middle of the night, dragging her from sleep, the one place of refuge in her miserable teen life, and tell her that she needed to 'preciate just how much old Benny-Boy had done for her. She was a little ungrateful bitch. He'd sit there, recounting how hard he worked and how bad his ass hurt from all the driving, and how his shoulders cramped all over on the countless thousand miles he had to drive, and nobody waiting at home to give Benny-Boy Lopez the small favor of a goddamned shoulder rub, and wasn't she goddamned ashamed of how she was turning out like that bitch of a mother of hers? Well, where was that bitch of a mother of hers, anyway? Out on the town with a horde of other no-account bitch mothers who should've had the goddamned decency to be home giving their husbands a goddamned shoulder rub, that's where!

It went on like that for years, until one night when Benny-Boy came into the room, drunk and rubbing his crotch, Virginia clubbed his staggering ass with a souvenir bowling pin that Benny-Boy had won at the Holy Ghost Creole Festival that past November. He went down like a sack of potatoes rolled off the back of a pickup truck. But that didn't stop Virginia by a long shot. She wanted to hurt Benny-Boy bad. Maybe even kill him. She beat on his head like Moses beating the rock at Horeb. She wanted to see the bastard leak. And leak he did. He lay there moaning and blubbering, trying to get the strength to pull his hands up to his bruised, bloody scalp. Virginia grabbed him by the ankles and, using all the leverage she could muster, pulled him down the hallway, facedown, blood and slobber trailing as he muttered and pleaded and cursed. She tried to kick him down the stairs, but lying as he was, prostrate and compact, it proved too difficult. She left him on the stairs, his head a mass of lumps, leaning awkwardly on the top step, his feet pointed towards the bottom, his pants drenched in cold piss. Virginia looked at him, one of his boots in her hands, having come loose as she dragged him. She spat on it and tossed the boot downstairs so her drunken mother would have a path to follow. And then Virginia got the hell out and headed for her best friend Carmen's house. She stayed a month.

When she came home, making sure Benny-Boy's rig was gone, her mother told her that he was gone for good. As Celia wept on her shoulder, Virginia started to laugh and not gently or in an embarrassed, muffled way. The laugh was from the belly, and it shook her body so that her shoulders convulsed and Celia was knocked from the drunken, self-pitying embrace.

She stared at her daughter and finally said, wiping the tears away, "Just what's so funny? What's so funny!" She yelled when Virginia couldn't find the breath to answer. "Huh? What's so funny?"

It took all Virginia could muster to halt the laughter and ask an even more important question. “Am I yours? Maybe you stole me from a truck stop. Tell me you stole me from a grocery store when my real parents were looking at a box of cereal or somethin’.”

At this, Celia took a drunken slug at her daughter, but Virginia dodged it easily. She’d developed a talent for dodging things.

Virginia walked out and got drunk with Carmen, her only friend. She told her, “Boy, Virginia, you’re lucky, so lucky that at least Benny-Boy Lopez isn’t your flesh and blood. Try living with my pop!”

“I don’t care how long it takes, I’m gonna find my real father.”

The two best friends were sitting on a stone bench at the little shit-assed park in their shit-assed neighborhood on the shit-assed outskirts of shit-assed Opelousas, Louisiana, drinking the cheap wine Virginia had taken from the fridge, the last thing Benny-Boy Lopez was ever to provide her.

Afterward, she went back home. There wasn’t anywhere to run. Her mother had fallen down the rabbithole long ago and didn’t give a damn about what she did or where she went. Celia finally broke down but she’d been looking for a reason to break down all her life. Virginia didn’t blame her much. She’d learned that people are meant to break down. Some of them last longer than others, and Celia had spent a lifetime trying to find somewhere to lie down and get it over with. Thank God for food stamps and Walmart, where Virginia got a job as soon as she was allowed and brought in just enough to keep the lights on and water running.

For the next two years, she found out what she could about her real father. She didn’t expect a ton. All he had to be was the guy who’d cared enough to bring her a stuffed dog

that one time. At most, maybe he could explain things and give her the answers she needed.

Having no help from her mother, Virginia became a sleuth, looking through her mother's things, her drawers, her clothes, trying to find the secret place, some place where she might have hidden things from Benny-Boy: money, pictures, a letter or two, maybe even a diary. But she found nothing. Her mom wasn't the type to keep a diary. She was more the type to blubber it out in fits and starts while she sank into her grimy chair, looking as if she wanted to be swallowed by it, as she pitied herself and finally got to the juicy parts, the parts that Virginia might be able to use to find Real Father.

When Celia was drunk enough to mention him, she'd manage to catch herself, almost as if it were a game, and clam up. "It's for your own good," she'd tell her. "I haven't been much of a momma to you, but at least I can keep you from more heartbreak." She'd say this as if more heartbreak weren't the soup du jour.

She kept getting fatter and fatter, as if she were feeding on all that heartache, sipping on her dark little secrets, the choice ones, the meaty ones, the cheese-stuffed crust of her dark secrets.

One night, she was drunk as usual, calling Virginia all sorts of names, telling her how she was going to wind up just like her, pregnant from a sonuvabitch like Saturnino. Virginia didn't say anything. Her heart was racing because now she had a name, *his* name. Real Father's name wasn't Joe or Juan or Carlos or Bob. It was the stately *Saturnino*. The sound of it was a hell of a lot more intoxicating than a bottle of Benny-Boy's cheap wine. Four bountiful, insistent syllables, Sa-tur-ni-no, like a name out of a history book. The name of an ancient god. Maybe like a writer or philosopher. Or a soldier, a general in a foreign army. Maybe Saturnino was out there

waiting for her to break out and come join him. That's all she could think about. She googled his name.

She read the mythology of the Roman god, the lord of renewal and liberation. His pagan festival became Christmas, with its gift-giving, merriment, revelry, feasting and celebration of peace and plenty. This wasn't a man who would stop at a stuffed dog. Not with a name like that. Something or someone had chased him away or lied to him!

The day before Virginia turned eighteen, Celia finally got out of Opelousas. She took a couple of handfuls of some pills she used to fall asleep, pills she picked up from some shit-ass at the bar she practically lived at. Virginia found her in the afternoon, shrouded in dirty sheets, her hair streaked with oily, yellow vomit.

The ambulance came. The Fire Department too. It was a mess she'd left. The cops asked some questions, took some notes. All the while the EMS and coroner were taking vitals and pronouncing her dead and taking some pictures for what only God knew. They took her in a gurney, pulling a yellow body bag over her huge carcass. They didn't pull a white sheet over the body like they did on TV. Just hoisted her away like a bag of garbage.

A cop, a muscle-head with a mustache, asked her, "You got kin? Anybody we can call? How old are you anyway?"

"I'm eighteen." The number sounded strange because it was new.

The cop told her he could call child services, but she said she had an aunt in Baton Rouge who'd come down and get her. The cop looked a little uneasy about that, but he let it go. Just as quickly as the house had got crowded, it was empty. Nobody but her in the house, her and the stink her mother had left behind. There was no denying it, *the stink*. Her sweaty bedclothes, her dirty bed sheets in which she'd taken her last shit when the sleeping pills had kicked in.

Virginia moved like a zombie, moving outside her control, not herky-jerky like a movie zombie, but like a slowed-down robot, kind of retarded-like. She went into her mom's room and stripped off the shitty sheets and wrapped up her gown and slippers in it and then grabbed all Celia's personal things, her cheap perfume and Walmart makeup, her pink acrylic hairbrush with the clear, plastic bristles tangled in a nest of black-dyed strands. She tried to count the items for some reason, the smell of her mother's shampoo and hair-spray radiating a vague, mild nostalgia.

Virginia swept it all into a pillowcase and wrapped the ball up in the shitty sheets. Then she dragged the bundle into the garbage can outside. It wouldn't fit, so she packed it in the broke-down '98 Grand Am they'd shared and drove the stinking bundle to the Walmart distribution center backlot to chuck it into one of the enormous, green dumpsters.

She was trying to chunk the stuff into the dumpster, but the side of the bin was so high that she had to get some real momentum going to get the bundle over it. She was swinging the shitbag back and forth, each swing getting higher and higher, and just as she let the thing go, one of those cop spotlights went on, and she turned right into its blinding glare. The bundle, not having been thrown high enough, hit the edge of the dumpster, and its contents came raining down. She couldn't make out a thing until a shadow came through the light, walking up slowly, taking its time to look in the car to see if there was anyone else in there. The guard got up to the window, and it was then Virginia noticed he was just a skinny kid.

He knew she worked there because of the parking decal on the back of the car. "Dumping stuff here will get you fired, you know."