

# A Necklace of Ears



Alberto Roblest

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# Part One





*I throw the dice on the table with contempt, my eyes and my tongue are on the line. All the other players, despite the elegance of their clothes, have no faces. Some wear masks. It's a peculiar place, perhaps an underground gambling house, a seedy casino ... I'm unsure. I take off the necklace that adorns my neck with disgust and put it next to the chips. There are ears, somewhat blackened and dry, pierced by a wire at the height of the lobe: one after the other, twenty human cartilages making the circle complete. I feel revulsion, most certainly, although I pretend to act natural. Something has happened and I don't know what ... The dice turn in all their possible mathematical combinations—everything has a price, including the heart. The stakes rise ... only the time stands still.*



# 1

Martina screamed first, then me. I rocked a bit more upon her beautiful body, bewildered by the sight of her face. I gave my hips a final push, slowly pulled out of her and threw myself down at her side. We both stared at the fan without saying a word. The sweat on my forehead rolled away with the back of my hand, a few kicks of my heels and the sheet hit the floor. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. She looked despondent, perhaps regretful, or maybe she just felt dirty. For my part it had been a wonderful thirty minutes floating in the stratosphere. She bit her lip, covering her breasts with her arm, my eyes she avoided completely. There's an old saying: *One sign to the wise is enough*, so I stood up and got dressed with little commotion. Honestly, I understood; what with her husband fighting somewhere in the Middle East and her having just traded easy passion with another man, I didn't dare do anything to interrupt her thoughts, or whatever sense of guilt might be perched there. I went out into the living room and drank the remains of the water she offered me before the ardent kisses and disruption of the bed sheet. I grabbed my jacket from one of the armchairs, my toolbox, gone cold with neglect, and eased the door shut behind me, that delicate scent of sex with me, on my skin, all the while. I couldn't help but smile.

I crossed the gardens on the way to the maintenance shed, went around the two huge halls that served as multipurpose



rooms—basketball, volleyball and tennis courts. Maybe that experience was a good sign ... of course it could just as easily have been a herald of worse to come, *Who knows?* The fact is that at that moment I licked my lips, still sweet with Martina's sex, that lone rose. She was about 5'5", very narrow of waist. Her hips opened down to two perfect, firm buttocks, which were supported by a pair of well-formed legs. Her breasts weren't very big, but their shape was perfect, full and supple as fruit trees in California. Although the most beautiful thing about her was the shape of her sex: it looked like a summer flower with thick petals, hardly comparable to the lips that decorated her mouth. She was married to a soldier who had been in Iraq for at least nine months, and I had been fortunate enough to cross paths with her just as the ache became too much. She wasn't waiting for me, I wasn't waiting for her; it was pure luck and a clogged sink that brought me to her door and as soon as I walked through it, my toolbox in hand, I could sense a need that had invaded everything. You could practically smell it in the whisper of the rooms, feel its shape along the surfaces of solitary living. I introduced myself as the new employee, I "have only been working here a few weeks," but I was "ready for whatever." Oh, no job scared me, any hiccups and it was as simple as calling the manager so he could give me instructions. She smiled. I asked about the problem. We walked together to the kitchen, her ahead, so I could admire the beautiful sway of her sports pants. She pointed to the sink; dishes floated in a stagnant, green water. Surely just a block somewhere, I explained to her. She looked at me indifferently and left the room as I opened the box; I took out pliers, a screwdriver and a wrench. I disconnected the parts, introduced a wire into the garbage disposal and cleared the blockage, completely focused on my task. When she came back, she leaned against the refrigera-

tor with a cup of coffee in her hands. Then we began to chat. She offered me a glass of water. I noticed that she wasn't wearing a bra, although I did my best not to be caught noticing; the job is the job and one has to respect it, especially when you've just started. I was three weeks in, not including the three days of training as a jack-of-all-trades; you know, cutting the grass, repairing washing machines, changing locks, windows, tightening screws and removing nails. Little fixes. From time to time I even helped the elderly neighbors with their shopping.

I asked her where I could put the waste that had been collected in the wire. She grabbed a plastic bag and handed it to me with a look of playful disgust. She was close enough that I caught the fragrance of her skin, light and warm. I took in as much as I could, looked closely at her hands, noticed a scar on her left arm. The T-shirt that covered her braless figure had the face of one of the Simpsons printed on it. I noticed her nipples were hard, but I went back to my work, ready to put the screws back in place, although out of the corner of my eye I searched her silhouette. The girl was hot, only an ascetic would have refused to look at her. The truth is that I had already watched a similar scene play out in at least two porn movies. The muscular plumber enters the house of the starlet, and within ten minutes she is already sucking greedily at his member. Nothing like that had ever happened to me, nor did I expect it to, although they say life imitates art at times, and a little fantasy helps the day go around. I'm no weakling, but I'm not a strong man with huge muscles like the men in the videos either. And Martina did not take it out of my fly to put me in her mouth, much less so. It did all happened in less than ten minutes, but only after I finished unclogging the sink, cleaning the drain elbow and replacing the gaskets.

While I worked, we talked about family, our origins and how we felt in that place in the middle of nowhere. We were both city dwellers. She told me that she was lonely, depressed and worried about a husband who could be shot dead at any moment. "I don't know if all this sacrifice is worth it. It bothers me to think that I could be widowed and helpless from one day to the next, with no options ..." I told her not to take it on that way, that nothing would happen to her husband anyway, that nowadays soldiers are very well protected with bulletproof vests, night vision goggles, satellite phones and armored trucks. She looked me in the eyes so long I thought I'd made her angry. Then she began to cry. I offered her my handkerchief and she started sobbing like a lost child. I pulled her toward me and hugged her without any bad intentions; I'm no monster, a woman in tears is something that still breaks my heart. She kissed me on the neck, then on the mouth and later, with dry eyes, she dragged me to her bedroom where we began our screaming.

## 2

I went into the shed, put the toolbox back in its place and went to the micro-bathroom; to bathe you have to embed the sink in the wall. I couldn't help but smile at myself in the mirror, it had been a very good morning and quite a surprise. Although, on the road you learn surprises can be double-edged swords. I just hoped there would be no bad repercussions, especially about losing the job and starting over the search for another one, in another state of this great country. Less than a month ago I had arrived in my Greyhound from Las Vegas, via Nashville, covered in a cloud of dust. I use the possessive, because I have changed cities several times in those old trucks, as I suppose a lot of people do in search of something, new or not, and someone should claim them for all they carry. I was after the job—I ended up being what my maternal great-grandfather always was after all; a migrant worker, a man in transit; perhaps until my last days, just like him. Anyway.

City: Albany, Georgia. Quiet place, friendly people.

Job: a complex where they cooked, or prepared if you prefer, the food served on passenger planes. No questions. That is, your immigration status didn't matter; you were hired on the spot, verbally.

Salary: four dollars an hour, a good deal compared to other places where they exploit us like beasts for less than two dollars a day.

I knew all this from my friend Pedro, who had already flown to another city. It was because of a fight, what else? According to Peter, a soldier had attacked him in a bar. It happens often, adrenaline, testosterone, punches, alcohol. Pedro is one of those who “doesn’t let you,” and he also knows how to defend himself. If he ran away, it was because the soldier must have lost.

Otherwise, Albany was passable and identical to countless small cities in the United States. What I didn’t know was that, in addition to the usual, the city was home to a huge military complex with two schools, a sports complex, a training camp, a residential area and a couple of supermarkets. Something like a city within a city. In fact, the military was the second largest source of income for the town, after the factories that processed airplane food. Military personnel went to the movies, to restaurants for dinner, to the mall and above all, to the bars that were packed every night. I had never been so surrounded by soldiers in my life. I thought about leaving a few hours after I’d arrived. Soldiers produce mixed reactions in me, not exactly fear, more anxiousness, caution, distrust—that with a certain aura of violence. I don’t know, it’s something I have; I can’t stand Sardinians, or the police, or the guards. Maybe because in all of Latin America they represent intimidation, dictatorships, covert crime, criminal association, institutional abuse, etc., etc. All the same, I went where my friend, the scrapper, recommended.

It was a few blocks from the bus station. The house belonged to an old lady with a lot of cats. She remembered Pete, although I think she confused him with an old boyfriend of hers or something. I just let her talk. She said that Peter was a simple man, modest, clean and not often given to drink; qualities that did not correspond to any Pedro I knew. She agreed to rent to me for a week first, with the possibility of

extending the lodging indefinitely. I explained my situation; I came to do a job in the kitchens of “Cooking on Air,” although it wasn’t entirely a lock since I did not have a contract. She got the impression that Pete was a chef specializing in burritos and quesadillas. He had a spot in the basement with access to the backyard. It turned out to be a damp room with a small window, a single bed, a small closet, an old plastic-covered chair and a yellowed bathtub that hadn’t seen bleach for several years. We went back up the stairs.

In the living room, the cats had decided to make their presence known. They stood waiting for us on the armchairs, the table, the dresser ... seemed like just about everywhere. Black, brown, white, grey and spotted cats. They looked at me with no small amount of distrust, as is their nature. Only one came and rubbed itself on my pant leg, purring about a thousand RPMs. We closed the transaction, a week and deposit in advance. She made me sign a paper and took a photo of me with a very thin digital camera; that was a new one, I must admit. She explained that it was something recommended by her niece. She gave me a key and took me through the manual. I couldn’t bring in girls or friends for drinks, I couldn’t turn up the volume of the radio too high and I couldn’t use the kitchen after midnight. Smoking was completely out of the question. “And another thing,” the upper floor, which was where she slept, was forbidden to guests—that’s what she called her renters. I could enter through the front door or the back as necessary. Once inside I just had make sure to lock up properly. We stood up and shook hands. She said goodbye to me and slowly made her way up the stairs, the cats forming a trail behind her. A couple of them looked at me curiously before disappearing in the blink of an eye.

I went downstairs, closed the door, emptied my suitcase and laid down on the bed for about forty minutes. I decided

to go out for a walk to familiarize myself with my new town and get something to eat. I also needed toothpaste, toilet paper, soap and a razor. I closed the garden door behind me. I walked around to the front of the house and stopped to look at the facade, memorizing the number because the house was identical to almost all the others on the block. Two floors, gabled, red brick, small windows. My eyes felt irritated; I sneezed a couple of times.

For a few years now it seemed I was becoming allergic to more things. I have nothing against cats, but something like twelve in one place is too much in my opinion. At home we had cats, Tabata the mother and her daughter, Garnacha. The latter was a super cool cat, grey with white paws and chest. Let me tell you the story of her name; she had earned it because of her father, like most everyone else I suppose. Imagine, a sweet kitten named Tabata, protected by her grandmother, wooed by the neighborhood's dirtiest tomcat, who, according to legend, had impregnated her in a state of animal rage. He was a black cat, evil, that Garnacha—an asado with nothing but bite; zero pedigree, like most humans on the planet I suppose. The whole pedigree thing, the pure breed, what a laugh. When will we humans get over our fascination with blood?

I walked several blocks, found the post office, three hardware stores, several grocery stores, a shoe store, the pharmacy, six restaurants, two gun shops and at least ten bars. A familiar sight in the several years I have been wandering this country. Mostly white people, a few black, few Asians and some Latinos. Large pickup trucks, American-made cars, narrow sidewalks and a few buses, which went around the center of the city and to other important places. The fact that there was public transportation at all was already a win, especially for those without a car, as in my case. I located a bus

stop. I had to budget the cost and investigate the stop times. Downtown, I stopped at a small restaurant that didn't look too expensive. I ate well and drank two beers. Moving around a lot, you realize you only get one evening to be a perfect stranger. I paid and made my way back. The drugstore had all the products I needed, plus two bottles of water. I entered through the front door with the key that Mrs. Robbins had given me and went downstairs to my room like a ghost. A white cat jumped up on me and meowed, welcoming me.

I turned on the light, closed the door and slowly undressed, thinking all the while about how boring it was going to be, packing food or cooking it. But hey, if you have a job these days you can consider yourself lucky. Work is money, and money is just about everything: shelter, food and the rest; no wonder we write GOD on it. I covered myself with the blankets and got ready to sleep, although I only dreamed halfway.

*Being in the port I see a black block floating in the sea, getting closer to land, a cube of pure granite that grows, swells, as the tide begins to rise, and the waves crash hard against the rocks. The presence of the gigantic block, the size of a ship, makes me feel uneasy. I wonder then: what does it contain? Who travels inside? How does that amorphous thing float?*



### 3

I got up early, bathed, shaved and dressed in my best clothes, thinking about the possible interview that awaited me. I went up to the kitchen, greeted by the cats and the undeniable look that meant I was invading their physical space. But they kept doing their thing as if they understood that I would be a familiar face for a while. Mrs. Robbins had made coffee, so I poured myself a cup. I opened the refrigerator, nothing much looked back at me. Some pots with food from several days prior. Three potatoes, two carrots, an onion. Jars of jam, peanut butter, mayonnaise and ketchup. There was a bunch of canned food in the cupboard, whose do you think? A couple of them meowed behind me, as if on cue. The thought crossed my mind that my landlady might also eat that every afternoon, surrounded by her children, as she had called the felines during the tour. I couldn't find any sugar, so I drank the coffee black—strong, yes, thank goodness. I had about an hour and a half before my interview, but since I didn't know the bus schedule, it was better to hurry. I left the house and walked to the stop, the only one waiting was a black girl with a double-wheeler. We stood next to each other there for about thirty minutes, although we didn't try to make conversation. It was obvious that neither one of us was up for that. There was a chill in the air, and I hoped it wouldn't get any worse since I didn't have a coat. I looked at my shoes, they were old, although they still had some polish left. They'd been with me

since about a month before I left Oklahoma City via the bus terminal. I was a little worried about what they would ask me, so I spent the rest of the wait getting the possible answers more or less memorized. Fuck I hate job interviews.

*How did you get started in the kitchen?*

First as a dishwasher, then as a grill cook and then as a line cook.

*What is the highest position you have held in a restaurant?*

Chef's assistant.

*Do you know the hygiene rules that must be observed in places that prepare food?*

Of course, wash your hands before entering the kitchen, wear a hat and a mask because of germs. Do not mix the meat utensils with the vegetable ones and wash them before and after use.

*What do you do when raw pork has been out in the open for more than forty-fifteen minutes?*

As a precaution, it should be put in the microwave to kill any possible toxins, and even washed, before putting it in the oil.

I repeated the spiel during the trip. I told myself to be sure and to answer with confidence on the test that they would surely give me.

*What foods do you know how to prepare?*

Some Italian food, some Mexican food and some Chinese food, which are the most common. Rice, grains, pasta.

I reviewed from memory the ingredients for rice with corn and haricots verts, the fancy green bean. I knew the recipe for chicken in sweet wine. I knew the one for spaghetti in red sauce. Becoming a professional chef was my big dream.

The bus passed through the city center, picked up a lot of people in front of the Greyhound station. I got my first glimpse of the public library — where I would become a member — and continued the stop-and-start journey, finally reaching the point where more people started getting off than on. And slowly we left the city.

The food factory was on the outskirts of Albany; it occupied a sprawling complex of twelve large warehouses, two huge parking lots and a six-story office building. The driver informed us over the speaker that he was approaching the last stop. The bus made a U-turn. The black girl, me and five others got out through the back door, which closed behind us with a snort. A group of people got ready to get on the truck, forming a perfect line. Probably the night shift. I just hoped I wouldn't be one of them. I prefer to work when the sun is out, plus I'm known to be very unreliable at night. I would have been an unlikely hire for a night watchman or a truck driver, although I do like to drive.

The guard separated the workers from the prospective employees at the entrance. The first to go in to interview was the black girl. I finished filling out the document in the fifteen minutes it took. She came out smiling. Maybe she had worked the system, appealed to the anti-discrimination law, which had been extended to the obese, to get the job. Whatever it takes for a little money, for a damn gig in this increasingly mechanized world. A rather serious secretary showed me into the office where the interrogation would take place. I sat down in an empty chair, looking around while I waited. A Latino appeared through another door, sat down behind the desk and looked through some documents. He asked me my name, where I lived, how I knew about the job, etc., all in English. I showed him my resumé, he read it as quickly as he could, handed it back to me and coldly told me

that there were no positions for sous-chefs. Good ol' Peter had told me too late, or I had landed at the wrong time, one of the two. *A whole useless, fruitless trip, a move in vain*, I scolded myself... But hey, no one can see the future. The guy seemed to read my thoughts, or my annoyance at least, because he offered me a position in the butcher shop of the same company. I was almost willing to accept the offer, but dealing with dead animals is a dirty damn business. When I did, I got skin infection, rough sleep and a low feeling. So I declined, thanked him and stood up. The man looked me over from head to toe, then said he had a friend, "A contractor. He's looking at people for a position at another site. It's called The Albany MC Logistics Base." I studied the new offer; he needed a handyman, paid expenses and had a room with the rent paid for two weeks in advance.

"Are you interested, kid?" The guy asked, scrutinizing me the whole time.

If there is one thing that gives you longevity, it is the ability to quickly read and understand. You could see that he was one of those who makes a business of exploiting other people. Poor people. He was the bastard "middleman" that is never in short supply on this planet; you know, the one who counts his bills in the dark and makes good leisure of it. He told me in a low voice, "Six dollars and fifty, and that's just to start."

I was left to decide.

"Sounds good, *really*. The problem is that soldiers make me nervous." I said sincerely.

"You wouldn't be very close to them, and besides, you'd also wear a uniform and a cap. Just concentrate on your work, the rest will go unnoticed. Don't open your mouth too much—be discreet—and they won't even see you."

He knew how to sell. In a way it was like sitting at a poker table.

“What do you say?”

I needed the job. I had come from so far to earn money, and putting up with soldiers was the sure way not to go empty-handed, back on another Greyhound with my tail between my legs.

“Okay, I accept the job.”

He smiled.

“Okay, I’ll charge 30% of your first paycheck to get you the job. Is this agreeable?”

I looked at him seriously, I knew his trick. He was going to screw me, even though he was selling it as if he was helping someone out. I thought about how it is precisely because of that that we Spanish-speaking people do not progress in this country, because we screw over each other. I accepted. In reality there was no other choice. The Venezuelan or whatever he was, he was happy. He picked up the phone, got up from his seat and spoke to someone, although I didn’t bother paying attention.

*One good thing about working in a kitchen is that you always have a full stomach ...* Never mind, I had already gotten my hopes up about continuing with what I thought could be a future plan: being a chef, head of a kitchen, educating my palate. The guy walked around me. “Excellent, boy. You will be given training,” he said, in Spanish. “You will be in charge of maintaining the residential area at the base with another friend. The work consists of making small repairs, cleaning, cutting grass, changing switches, locks and other things—you know—servicing the homes of the military and the higher-ranking bosses who live there temporarily. Nothing too complicated.”

I thought about it. I would be a gardener, a plumber and a carpenter, among other things, I was sure. It was another line of work that I had done for myself, and it was also a favorite. I had already done similar in Los Angeles and San Diego.

“Hey, I need the work,” I said, also in the language of Sancho Panza.

We shook hands. I was to introduce myself the following day at the base. The rest he would arrange over the phone. “Someone will be waiting for you.” I asked him how to get there. The base was also outside of the city, in the extreme opposite direction. The boss there was called Joel, and he was a Chicano. He would give me a credential with a magnetic strip and a locker key. I nodded. *No problem*. He wished me a good weekend.

I went out into the street more relaxed. I don’t know, being employed always comforts me; I have the security of being able to continue putting food in my mouth and having a bed to sleep in, for now in the cat house. I sat with other men to wait for the bus, it took almost an hour to arrive. I looked at the clock. I didn’t want to go back to the old lady’s house, it was still early. I decided I would take a walk around the town. I would stop by the public library, stop off at a bar for a beer. We all got on in a perfect line. On the way back I spent my time looking out the window. Field, trees, one-story houses, ranches. There was a tractor working, some cows grazing, pick-ups of all sizes. You could see, in general, it wasn’t a town with a lot of money; perhaps hit by the global economic crisis; by the recession that brings inflation; the flight of investments; the dying state of capitalism. Something kept it middling.

Downtown, I got off the bus and walked aimlessly for about twenty minutes. I found the public library, which was

closed. The city kept to its ordinary appeal, no heavy culture or art to speak of, except for a fountain dedicated to Ray Charles. They had it rigged so the water flowed like music from the piano; very nice. There was a bench to pass the time. Carried away by my eros and excited by all the women who passed by, I thought to myself: *what tits, what ass, what legs—look at that other woman's waist, mmm.*

It had been something like three months since I had slept with anyone. In Nashville I had been close to hiring a prostitute, but at the last minute I backed out. I missed Patricia. Somewhere along the way she'd made it to the room inside where I kept my obsessions. I couldn't get her out of my mind ... despite all the harm she had done to me, despite the money she had stolen from me, despite the face she gave me when she was acting stupid. Despite even the distance. Here I was, half a continent in between, and I still remembered her. I became melancholic. I asked myself again what the mistake had been. No, the solution was to get a girlfriend ... *fuck Patricia*. Quiet environment, nice houses, plenty of women. The bad thing, though, was that there were men in olive green damn near everywhere. It was a town of uniformed men.

I entered a watering hole that seemed cheap to me. The bell above the door sounded. A couple of men turned to look in the direction of the noise. I slipped over to the bar, stopping to clock my surroundings. *Eyes in the back of your head*, as they say. I asked for a dark beer. Most of them were young men with the same haircut, although there were some older men and women here and there, also military. I felt as vulnerable as a nail in a room full of hammers. I sipped my beer slowly, not wanting to appear like I didn't like company. And I was doing just that, when a soldier approached to refill his jar—it was that kind of place.

“Ordinance,” he told the barkeep. The amber liquid purred out easily. While he waited, he turned and greeted me with a nod. I responded in kind. They served him his beer and he started up a conversation, in Spanish no less. Turns out he was from Phoenix, but his parents were of Guatemalan origin. He made it clear he wasn’t out to be a big hero; he was actually going to war because he needed the opportunity to pay for an education, to gain citizenship. He liked guns, of course, adventure, and if he stayed alive, he could build a future for himself. “But only if I stay alive,” he made clear. We talked about Latin America in a general way. “The truth is, I don’t know much,” he confessed, although he didn’t rule out a visit to Colombia and Argentina, “where they say the women are beautiful—*big tits*.” He secretly admired Che, especially for his bravery and honor, although he had never told this to any of his soldier friends. We ended up drinking three beers together, the last one accompanied by a chubby girl who would be shipping out to Afghanistan in a few days. She was a freckled, simple-minded girl—and a compulsive drinker—who got into a dispute with my friend about whether an airplane was capable of destroying a Bradley tank. I said goodbye to them, paid and quietly slipped away to the exit. The minute I hit the sidewalk I took a deep breath, smoothed my hair and continued my Albany walk-through toward the cat house. The cinema was showing two new films. I looked at some shop windows, passed other bars, other shops. Once I was back at my accommodation, I really thought about whether I could last more than six months working at the base. Well, the contract was signed. *So be it, things are what they are.*