

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Junot Diaz

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Extract

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They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices. In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end, would call the Ground Zero of the New World), the Admiral’s very name has become synonymous with both kinds of fukú, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours.

No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since. Santo

Domingo might be fukú's Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not.

But the fukú ain't just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents' day the fukú was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in. Everybody knew someone who'd been eaten by a fukú, just like everybody knew somebody who worked up in the Palacio. It was in the air, you could say, though, like all the most important things on the Island, not something folks really talked about. But in those elder days, fukú had it good; it even had a hypeman of sorts, a high priest, you could say. Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina.¹ No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse's

1. For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality. A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery, Trujillo (also known as El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface) came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. Famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself (Pico Duarte became Pico Trujillo, and Santo Domingo de Guzmán, the first and oldest city in the New World, became Ciudad Trujillo); for making ill monopolies out of every slice of the national patrimony (which quickly made him one of the wealthiest men on the planet); for building one of the largest militaries in the hemisphere (dude had bomber wings, for fuck's sake); for fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women; for expecting, no, *insisting* on absolute veneration from his pueblo (tellingly, the national slogan was

servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*. It was believed, even in educated circles, that anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a fukú most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond. If you even thought a bad thing about Trujillo, *fuá*, a hurricane would sweep your family out to sea, *fuá*, a boulder would fall out of a clear sky and squash you, *fuá*, the shrimp you ate today was the cramp that killed you tomorrow. Which explains why everyone who tried to assassinate him always got done, why those dudes who finally did buck him down all died so horrifically. And what about fucking Kennedy? He was the one who green-lighted the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, who ordered the CIA to deliver arms to the Island. Bad move, cap'n. For what Kennedy's intelligence experts failed to tell him was what every single Dominican, from the richest jabao in Mao to the poorest güey in El Buey, from the oldest anciano sanmacorisano to the littlest carajito in San Francisco, knew: that whoever killed Trujillo, their family would suffer a fukú so dreadful it would make the one that attached itself to the Admiral jojote in comparison.

“Dios y Trujillo”; for running the country like it was a Marine boot camp; for stripping friends and allies of their positions and properties for no reason at all; and for his almost *supernatural* abilities.

Outstanding accomplishments include: the 1937 genocide against the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican community; one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere (and if we Latin types are skillful at anything it's tolerating U.S.-backed dictators, so you know this was a hard-earned victory, the chilenos and the argentinos are still appealing); the creation of the first modern kleptocracy (Trujillo was Mobutu before Mobutu was Mobutu); the systematic bribing of American senators; and, last but not least, the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state (did what his Marine trainers, during the Occupation, were unable to do).

You want a final conclusive answer to the Warren Commission's question, Who killed JFK? Let me, your humble Watcher, reveal once and for all the God's Honest Truth: It wasn't the mob or LBJ or the ghost of Marilyn Fucking Monroe. It wasn't aliens or the KGB or a lone gunman. It wasn't the Hunt Brothers of Texas or Lee Harvey or the Trilateral Commission. It was Trujillo; it was the fukú. Where in coñazo do you think the so-called Curse of the Kennedys comes from?² How about Vietnam? Why do you think the greatest power in the world lost its first war to a Third World country like Vietnam? I mean, Negro, *please*. It might interest you that just as the U.S. was ramping up its involvement in Vietnam, LBJ launched an illegal invasion of the Dominican Republic (April 28, 1965). (Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq.) A smashing military success for the U.S., and many of the same units and intelligence teams that took part in the "democratization" of Santo Domingo were immediately shipped off to Saigon. What do you think these soldiers, technicians, and spooks carried with them, in their rucks, in their suitcases, in their shirt pockets, on the hair inside their nostrils, caked up around their shoes? Just a little gift from my people to America, a small repayment for an unjust war. That's right, folks. Fukú.

Which is why it's important to remember fukú doesn't always strike like lightning. Sometimes it works patiently, drowning a

2. Here's one for you conspiracy-minded fools: on the night that John Kennedy, Jr., and Carolyn Bessette and her sister Lauren went down in their Piper Saratoga, John-John's father's favorite domestic, Providencia Paredes, dominicana, was in Martha's Vineyard cooking up for John-John his favorite dish: chicharrón de pollo. But fukú always eats first and it eats alone.

nigger by degrees, like with the Admiral or the U.S. in paddies outside of Saigon. Sometimes it's slow and sometimes it's fast. It's doom-ish in that way, makes it harder to put a finger on, to brace yourself against. But be assured: like Darkseid's Omega Effect, like Morgoth's bane,³ no matter how many turns and digressions this shit might take, it always—and I mean always—gets its man.

Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point. You live as long as I did in the heart of fukú country, you hear these kinds of tales all the time. Everybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story knocking around in their family. I have a twelve-daughter uncle in the Cibao who believed that he'd been cursed by an old lover never to have male children. Fukú. I have a tía who believed she'd been denied happiness because she'd laughed at a rival's funeral. Fukú. My paternal abuelo believes that diaspora was Trujillo's payback to the pueblo that betrayed him. Fukú.

It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these "superstitions." In fact, it's better than fine—it's perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you.

3. "I am the Elder King: Melkor, first and mightiest of all the Valar, who was before the world and made it. The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly and surely to my will. But upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair. Wherever they go, evil shall arise. Whenever they speak, their words shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them. They shall die without hope, cursing both life and death."

A couple weeks ago, while I was finishing this book, I posted the thread *fukú* on the DR1 forum, just out of curiosity. These days I'm nerdy like that. The talkback blew the fuck up. You should see how many responses I've gotten. They just keep coming in. And not just from Domos. The Puertorocks want to talk about fufus, and the Haitians have some shit just like it. There are a zillion of these *fukú* stories. Even my mother, who almost never talks about Santo Domingo, has started sharing hers with me.

As I'm sure you've guessed by now, I have a *fukú* story too. I wish I could say it was the best of the lot—*fukú* number one—but I can't. Mine ain't the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful.

It just happens to be the one that's got its fingers around my throat.

I'm not entirely sure Oscar would have liked this designation. *Fukú* story. He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in. He'd ask: What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?

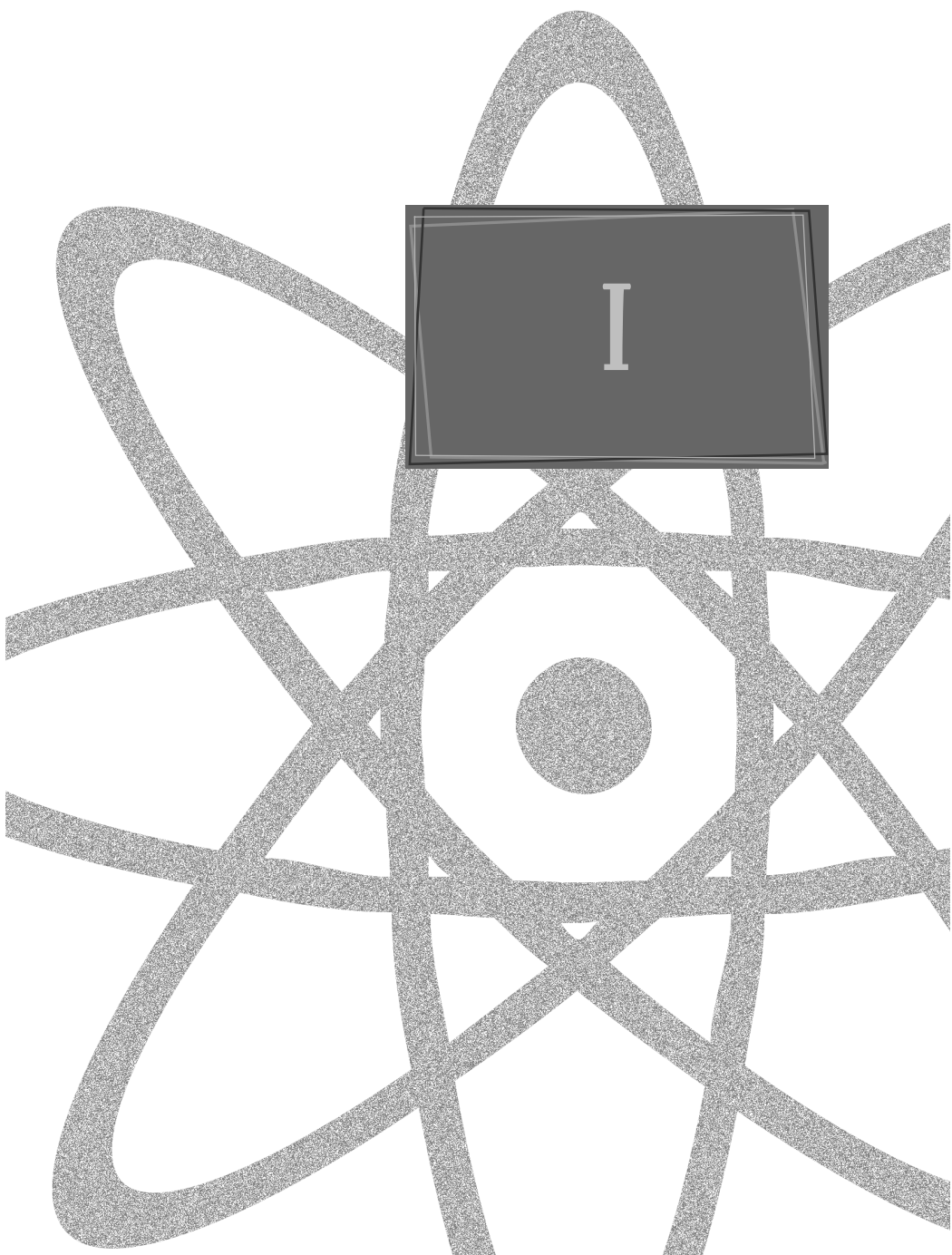
But now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more *fukú*?

One final final note, Toto, before Kansas goes bye-bye: traditionally in Santo Domingo anytime you mentioned or overheard the Admiral's name or anytime a *fukú* reared its many heads

there was only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word (followed usually by a vigorous crossing of index fingers).

Zafa.

It used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo. There are people, though, like my tío Miguel in the Bronx who still zafa everything. He's old-school like that. If the Yanks commit an error in the late innings it's zafa; if somebody brings shells in from the beach it's zafa; if you serve a man parcha it's zafa. Twenty-four-hour zafa in the hope that the bad luck will not have had time to cohere. Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell.



GhettoNerd at the End of the World

1974–1987

THE GOLDEN AGE

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock.

And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him).

He was seven then.

In those blessed days of his youth, Oscar was something of a Casanova. One of those preschool loverboys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a merengue and giving them the pelvic pump, the first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it any chance he got. Because in those days he was (still) a “normal” Dominican boy raised in a “typical” Dominican family, his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike. During parties—and there were many many parties in those long-ago seventies days, before Washington Heights was Washington Heights,

before the Bergenline became a straight shot of Spanish for almost a hundred blocks—some drunk relative inevitably pushed Oscar onto some little girl and then everyone would howl as boy and girl approximated the hip-motism of the adults.

You should have seen him, his mother sighed in her Last Days. He was our little Porfirio Rubirosa.⁴

All the other boys his age avoided the girls like they were a bad case of Captain Trips. Not Oscar. The little guy loved himself the females, had “girlfriends” galore. (He was a stout kid, heading straight to fat, but his mother kept him nice in haircuts and clothes, and before the proportions of his head changed he’d had these lovely flashing eyes and these cute-ass cheeks, visible in all his pictures.) The girls—his sister Lola’s friends, his mother’s friends, even their neighbor, Mari Colón, a thirty-something postal employee who wore red on her lips and

4. In the forties and fifties, Porfirio Rubirosa—or Rubi, as he was known in the papers—was the third-most-famous Dominican in the world (first came the Failed Cattle Thief, and then the Cobra Woman herself, María Montez). A tall, debonair prettyboy whose “enormous phallus created havoc in Europe and North America,” Rubirosa was the quintessential jet-setting car-racing polo-obsessed playboy, the Trujillato’s “happy side” (for he was indeed one of Trujillo’s best-known minions). A part-time former model and dashing man-about-town, Rubirosa famously married Trujillo’s daughter Flor de Oro in 1932, and even though they were divorced five years later, in the Year of the Haitian Genocide, homeboy managed to remain in El Jefe’s good graces throughout the regime’s long run. Unlike his ex-brother-in-law Ramfis (to whom he was frequently connected), Rubirosa seemed incapable of carrying out many murders; in 1935 he traveled to New York to deliver El Jefe’s death sentence against the exile leader Angel Morales but fled before the botched assassination could take place. Rubi was the original Dominican Player, fucked all sorts of women—Barbara Hutton, Doris Duke (who happened to be the richest woman in the world), the French actress Danielle Darrieux, and Zsa Zsa Gabor—to name but a few. Like his pal Ramfis, Porfirio died in a car crash, in 1965, his twelve-cylinder Ferrari skidding off a road in the Bois de Boulogne. (Hard to overstate the role cars play in our narrative.)

walked like she had a bell for an ass—all purportedly fell for him. *Ese muchacho está bueno!* (Did it hurt that he was earnest and clearly attention-deprived? Not at all!) In the DR during summer visits to his family digs in Baní he was the worst, would stand in front of Nena Inca's house and call out to passing women—*Tú eres guapa! Tú eres guapa!*—until a Seventh-day Adventist complained to his grandmother and she shut down the hit parade lickety-split. *Muchacho del diablo!* This is not a cabaret!

It truly was a Golden Age for Oscar, one that reached its apotheosis in the fall of his seventh year, when he had two little girlfriends at the same time, his first and only *ménage à trois*. With Maritza Chacón and Olga Polanco.

Maritza was Lola's friend. Long-haired and prissy and so pretty she could have played young Dejah Thoris. Olga, on the other hand, was no friend of the family. She lived in the house at the end of the block that his mother complained about because it was filled with puertoricans who were always hanging out on their porch drinking beer. (What, they couldn't have done that in Coamo? Oscar's mom asked crossly.) Olga had like ninety cousins, all who seemed to be named Hector or Luis or Wanda. And since her mother was *una maldita borracha* (to quote Oscar's mom), Olga smelled on some days of ass, which is why the kids took to calling her Mrs. Peabody.

Mrs. Peabody or not, Oscar liked how quiet she was, how she let him throw her to the ground and wrestle with her, the interest she showed in his *Star Trek* dolls. Maritza was just plain beautiful, no need for motivation there, always around too, and it was just a stroke of pure genius that convinced him to kick it to

them both at once. At first he pretended that it was his number-one hero, Shazam, who wanted to date them. But after they agreed he dropped all pretense. It wasn't Shazam—it was Oscar.

Those were more innocent days, so their relationship amounted to standing close to each other at the bus stop, some undercover hand-holding, and twice kissing on the cheeks very seriously, first Maritza, then Olga, while they were hidden from the street by some bushes. (Look at that little macho, his mother's friends said. *Que hombre.*)

The threesome only lasted a single beautiful week. One day after school Maritza cornered Oscar behind the swing set and laid down the law, It's either her or *me!* Oscar held Maritza's hand and talked seriously and at great length about his love for her and reminded her that they had agreed to *share*, but Maritza wasn't having any of it. She had three older sisters, knew everything she needed to know about the possibilities of *sharing*. Don't talk to me no more unless you get rid of her! Maritza, with her chocolate skin and narrow eyes, already expressing the Ogún energy that she would chop at everybody with for the rest of her life. Oscar went home morose to his pre-Korean-sweatshop-era cartoons—to the *Herculoids* and *Space Ghost*. What's wrong with you? his mother asked. She was getting ready to go to her second job, the eczema on her hands looking like a messy meal that had set. When Oscar whimpered, Girls, Moms de León nearly exploded. Tú ta llorando por una muchacha? She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear.

Mami, stop it, his sister cried, stop it!

She threw him to the floor. Dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if the little puta respects you.

If he'd been a different nigger he might have considered the galletazo. It wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies. (Unlike his sister, who fought boys and packs of morena girls who hated her thin nose and straightish hair.) Oscar had like a zero combat rating; even Olga and her toothpick arms could have stomped him silly. Aggression and intimidation out of the question. So he thought it over. Didn't take him long to decide. After all, Maritza was beautiful and Olga was not; Olga sometimes smelled like pee and Maritza did not. Maritza was allowed over their house and Olga was not. (A puertorican over here? his mother scoffed. Jamás!) His logic as close to the yes/no math of insects as a nigger could get. He broke up with Olga the following day on the playground, Maritza at his side, and how Olga had cried! Shaking like a rag in her hand-me-downs and in the shoes that were four sizes too big! Snots pouring out her nose and everything!

In later years, after he and Olga had both turned into overweight freaks, Oscar could not resist feeling the occasional flash of guilt when he saw Olga loping across a street or staring blankly out near the New York bus stop, couldn't stop himself from wondering how much his cold-as-balls breakup had contributed to her present fucked-upness. (Breaking up with her, he would remember, hadn't felt like anything; even when she started crying, he hadn't been moved. He'd said, No be a baby.)

What *had* hurt, however, was when Maritza dumped *him*. Monday after he'd fed Olga to the dogs he arrived at the bus stop with his beloved *Planet of the Apes* lunch box only to

discover beautiful Maritza holding hands with butt-ugly Nelson Pardo. Nelson Pardo who looked like Chaka from *Land of the Lost*! Nelson Pardo who was so stupid he thought the moon was a stain that God had forgotten to clean. (He'll get to it soon, he assured his whole class.) Nelson Pardo who would become the neighborhood B&E expert before joining the Marines and losing eight toes in the First Gulf War. At first Oscar thought it a mistake; the sun was in his eyes, he'd not slept enough the night before. He stood next to them and admired his lunch box, how realistic and diabolical Dr. Zaius looked. But Maritza wouldn't even *smile* at him! Pretended he wasn't there. We should get married, she said to Nelson, and Nelson grinned moronically, turning up the street to look for the bus. Oscar had been too hurt to speak; he sat down on the curb and felt something overwhelming surge up from his chest, scared the shit out of him, and before he knew it he was crying; when his sister, Lola, walked over and asked him what was the matter he'd shaken his head. Look at the mariconcito, somebody snickered. Somebody else kicked his beloved lunch box and scratched it right across General Urko's face. When he got on the bus, still crying, the driver, a famously reformed PCP addict, had said, Christ, don't be a fucking *baby*.

How had the breakup affected Olga? What he really was asking was: *How had the breakup affected Oscar?*

It seemed to Oscar that from the moment Maritza dumped him—Shazam!—his life started going down the tubes. Over the next couple of years he grew fatter and fatter. Early adolescence hit him especially hard, scrambling his face into nothing you could call cute, plotching his skin with zits, making him self-conscious;

and his interest—in Genres!—which nobody had said boo about before, suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with a capital L. Couldn't make friends for the life of him, too dorky, too shy, and (if the kids from his neighborhood are to be believed) too *weird* (had a habit of using big words he had memorized only the day before). He no longer went anywhere near the girls because at best they ignored him, at worst they shrieked and called him *gordo asqueroso!* He forgot the *perrito*, forgot the pride he felt when the women in the family had called him *hombre*. Did not kiss another girl for a long *long* time. As though almost everything he had in the girl department had burned up that one fucking week.

Not that his “girlfriends” fared much better. It seemed that whatever bad no-love karma hit Oscar hit them too. By seventh grade Olga had grown huge and scary, a troll gene in her somewhere, started drinking 151 straight out the bottle and was finally taken out of school because she had a habit of screaming *NATAS!* in the middle of homeroom. Even her breasts, when they finally emerged, were floppy and terrifying. Once on the bus Olga had called Oscar a *cake eater*, and he'd almost said, Look who's talking, *puerca*, but he was afraid that she would rear back and trample him; his cool-index, already low, couldn't have survived that kind of a *paliza*, would have put him on par with the handicapped kids and with Joe Locorotundo, who was famous for masturbating in public.

And the lovely Maritza Chacón? The hypotenuse of our triangle, how had she fared? Well, before you could say *Oh Mighty Isis*, Maritza blew up into the flyest *guapa* in Paterson, one of the Queens of New Peru. Since they stayed neighbors, Oscar saw

her plenty, a ghetto Mary Jane, hair as black and lush as a thunderhead, probably the only Peruvian girl on the planet with pelo curlier than his sister's (he hadn't heard of Afro-Peruvians yet, or of a town called Chincha), body fine enough to make old men forget their infirmities, and from the sixth grade on dating men two, three times her age. (Maritza might not have been good at much—not sports, not school, not work—but she was good at men.) Did that mean she had avoided the curse—that she was happier than Oscar or Olga? That was doubtful. From what Oscar could see, Maritza was a girl who seemed to delight in getting slapped around by her boyfriends. Since it happened to her *all the time*. If a boy hit *me*, Lola said cockily, I would bite his *face*.

See Maritza: French-kissing on the front stoop of her house, getting in or out of some roughneck's ride, being pushed down onto the sidewalk. Oscar would watch the French-kissing, the getting in and out, the pushing, all through his cheerless, sexless adolescence. What else could he do? His bedroom window looked out over the front of her house, and so he always peeped her while he was painting his D&D miniatures or reading the latest Stephen King. The only things that changed in those years were the models of the cars, the size of Maritza's ass, and the kind of music volting out the cars' speakers. First freestyle, then Ill Will-era hip-hop, and, right at the very end, for just a little while, Héctor Lavoe and the boys.

He said hi to her almost every day, all upbeat and faux-happy, and she said hi back, indifferently, but that was it. He didn't imagine that she remembered their kissing—but of course he could not forget.