

Gardena

Today I touch my chin in retreat
and in these momentary trousers I tell myself:
So much life and never!
So many years and always my weeks!

Cesar Vallejo

Little Deuce Coupe
You don't know what I got.
You don't know what I got.

Brian Wilson

1. Eisenhower and John Glenn

Two Secret Service men were sitting on my mother's orange couch wearing grey suits in one hundred degree heat. I had come in from the public pool and was wearing red swimming trunks, a yellow towel around my neck and bright blue flip flops. There was an introduction in which my mother spoke for me and explained that I would never write a letter to President Johnson threatening to kill him. I sat down on a plastic dining room chair across from them with blue and green flower prints.

-What?

My mother spoke first and the Secret Service men finished the sentence in a chorus.

-They say you wrote a letter

-to president Johnson saying he should be killed because of the war in Vietnam!

-How do you feel about the war?

The older man asked the question as if he knew the answer. He resembled Eisenhower from the photographs of him just after that other war, and the younger man looked exactly like John Glenn, the American astronaut that had only recently traveled in space. The moon landing was two years away.

-I'm against it but I never wrote any letter.

-If you didn't just keep on denying it son, but if you did, we're going to find out sooner or later...

-We saw the anti-war posters in your room!

-So you might as well speak up now. It'll be easier on everyone.

The idea that Eisenhower and Glenn had been in my room made my head start to swim with paranoid fantasies of bugging devices and entrapment that made my mind a blank. The letter had been accompanied by a piece of toilet paper with the words "fuck you" scrawled with a marker. The toilet paper was the same brand that my parents had in the bathroom we all shared. Eisenhower and John Glenn asked me to spell some words and I misspelled them in the same way that they were in the letter. They asked

for a sample of my handwriting and it didn't match as the person who wrote the letter was left handed. Maybe I had tried to disguise my handwriting, but then why had I signed the letter with my own name? Eisenhower and John Glenn took me out to their car and explained what I had done. I got in the back seat of their Impala, with Eisenhower driving and Glenn seated shotgun. My swimming trunks kept sticking to the black vinyl seat and sweat kept pouring down my back.

-You can't threaten the President of the United States without there being some very serious consequences involved - such as prison!

-Such as juvenile hall!

-Such as deportation!

-Where's your father son?

-In Peru.

There was a pause in which both men communicated with each other without speaking.

-Do you like it here?

-Sure.

They both spoke in a monotone voice but John Glenn was understanding and friendly and Eisenhower was threatening and aggressive. Glenn spoke very slowly and as deliberately as my teachers in school:

-I want you to tell us - what do you think of Lyndon Johnson?

2. Gardena High

Gardena High School was located in the South Bay section of Los Angeles and was a Vo-Tech school which is short for Vocational Technical. These schools were spread throughout the working class areas of Los Angeles and going to them was mandatory if you lived in those areas. There were classes on car repair and air conditioning and refrigerator repair, shop classes where you learned plumbing and electrical work. You could, if you were ambitious, take your final year of High School working in “real life” (as we called any space outside of High School) and earn minimum wage as a typesetter or a carpenter. My specialty was car repair. For my final in auto shop I had to dismantle and re-assemble a brake cylinder from an old Ford. My father called us the Three Stooges: Steve Tibbs, Ed Anderson and I spent our lunch every working day for three years of Junior High School and three years of High School apart from the rest of the students in a short clearing made of cement, chain link fence and stucco between the cafeteria and the gym. We spent time together because we made each other laugh and because we felt that we did not belong there. It was not so much a sense of superiority as a sense of alienation that fluctuated wildly between egoism and self hatred. Ed developed the most acute sense of

ironic self-loathing I have ever seen. Funny lines were repeated like mantras and Ed had the best joke of all time:

Doctor (With the voice of “authority”): Mr. Anderson I have some great news for you. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you! You have fifty, maybe sixty years of life ahead of you. What do you plan to do?

Ed: Well - I guess I’ll have to see how I can stretch out two or three minutes of life into sixty years.

Doctor: How’s that?

Ed: Sleep a lot!

This was his response to “Run for Your Life” a popular television series starring Ben Gazarra which always started with a very young Ben being told that he has only one year to live. With appropriately fast music there was a montage of Ben racing cars in Europe, Ben wearing a Frank Sinatra tux while gambling in Vegas, Ben skiing on the Alps, (we knew it was the Alps because of the one second of stock footage), Ben partying with beautiful women in an exotic location in which everything screamed “foreign”, Ben sky diving, Ben snorkling. Ed pictured himself in a montage that was as elaborate but that would depict his situation as it was then: Ed working in a furniture factory near the house where his parents lived, where he was known as “Buzz Anderson”; Ed at a Mc Donald’s

ordering a Big Mac; Ed driving his father's Barracuda for groceries at the car's top speed of thirty miles an hour; Ed swimming at the local public pool surrounded by pissing children. We had tears in our eyes from laughter every time one of us repeated the joke with variations. In his first year in High School Ed was rejected by a girl he fell madly in love with (whom I no longer remember) and decided to become a recluse, using the philosophy which he read over the coming years, between odd jobs, to explain why he had no desire to finish College or to work or to find a mate. I shared a lot of his philosophical ideas. Schopenhauer, Camus and Nietzsche were our favorites. I expressed even more pessimistic and misanthropic views than Ed, but never took it as seriously as he did. He stuck it out in blue collar jobs while I moved to New York and got white collar jobs.

3. "Now that doesn't sound right..."

-He's just the President, I don't think about him one way or another.

Johnson was a part of the American landscape in those years, he was embedded in the consciousness of everyone in the same way that would happen in later years only to famous singers or movie stars. I think it was because we saw his old wrinkled face nightly between images of young men in combat and commercials with young women selling products. He

became an icon of father time coming back from the dead talking to us as if we were still children only partially awake. My mind was still a blank and I could not articulate all the mixed feelings I shared with so many others of my class and my generation about Lyndon Johnson whom we essentially despised because we saw that he was the chief ward in the plantation. It was an emotional gut response that was more powerful than any rhetorical explanation.

-Now that just doesn't sound right Mr. Porcari.

It was the first time I had been called that and it sent chills up my spine that they say you get when a person walks over your grave. Eisenhower wanted to leave because he said we were only wasting time.

-He knows the story I saw it in his eyes when he first saw us. You knew why we were there didn't you?

He was right I did know, but not in the way he imagined. The moment I saw those men in suits in the living room I knew it was the boss coming to check on an attitude problem. I didn't even write letters to people I loved such as my family because I didn't want to be hurt again by being separated once again, much less letters of hate. John Glenn gave me a card to call in case I wanted to talk and encouraged me to stick to my story if it was the truth. Eisenhower just grimaced and shook his head at his

partner's behavior. When they walked off they looked like twins from the back.

4. My Girl Has Gone

To be cool was the highest aspiration a boy could have. To be cool meant one had to impress girls by psychologically abusing people with as little effort as possible. Every boy had a sour look of contempt, that was a defense mechanism we wore not just on our faces but on our bodies.

Striding through halls lined with tan walls and grey lockers we all sensed that we were superior to our teachers because we had that glow from suddenly "knowing everything" that comes with adolescence. We sensed that the intelligence of our teachers came from having memorized received knowledge which was something that we instinctually distrusted. We didn't take the little academic exposure we were given seriously. The only thing that was worth spending some time with was our sexual feelings.

Our hormones combined with the boredom of High School turned everyone into a daydreamer passing shy notes and giving glances and then taking them back with a cool arrogance that we all saw through but that was still impenetrable. Girls wore short skirts of bright colored cotton fabrics and tight fitting tops with flowers or stripes. To boys, girls always seemed to be moving in packs, always in the same direction at the same time, the way

underwater plants move. I once saw a slow wave of beautiful arms moving to Smokey Robinsons' *My Girl Has Gone*. The down on their arms was visible in the intense desert light that baked the patio at every lunch period. That blinding white light made everything appear as if it could dematerialize at any moment. Masturbation was the subject of jokes and insults and everyone staunchly denied participating but one saw traces of it everywhere. Globes of dried sperm underneath desks and chairs in gym clothes and in notebooks. I masturbated at least once a day using my legs while staring at the back of a girl's neck, or a shoulder, or a face. Even though it was the height of the sixties music was prohibited, as was long hair, skirts that were too short, pants that were too tight, tennis shoes, blue jeans, sexual activity of any kind, smoking, running, screaming, spitting, fighting or kissing. The tension from these rules turned everyone into a monster.

-What are you looking at dork?

-Your mama!

-It's got a 396 Hemi with a pan head!

-What's a Hemi?

-Hemispherical Cylinder Head!

-What's a pan head?

-Your mama!

-What are you a beaner?

-That fucker just put his fingers in his ass and now he's smelling it!

-You ain't got no mama motherfucker!

-Did you write Kay Threthaway on your desk?

-The Boogalues did this chicken thing in the car you know where they put it in reverse and without looking slam on the gas and fuck man you're just going it was great!.

-Spaz.

-Don't you know what a beaner is? - God!

-Janet Soga thinks she's sooo bitchin' cool but she's just a square peg with a round hole!

-Football head.

-What you can't carry bury dude!

We spoke the argot of the farm and of small towns despite the fact that we were in Los Angeles because our parents were immigrants from small towns in states that we had never seen such as Wyoming and South Dakota and Michigan. I had come the farthest being from Peru - I was always explaining where Peru was and it seemed that to some the very concept of South America was so other worldly that there was not much to say after

that, but to congratulate me on my accent.

5. Tasaka

James Tasaka was caught one Friday night fucking a plaster cow in front of a drive through dairy. It became a legend that was repeated so often that after a certain amount of time one began to wonder if it was true. Tasaka - everyone only used his last name - was known as a wild man who ate shit for money and fucked whores in places where we would be afraid to drink a glass of water. He would go days without bathing, explaining that his parents had thrown him out of their apartment, and his appearance took on an American pioneer look that made him stand apart from everyone I had ever seen. His clothes were a mess except for one day a year when the school let everyone dress as they please, and Tasaka would come dressed in a black suit. Everyone laughed but the administrators, who normally wore suits and that day came in freshly pressed Levis and an open collar button down shirt. They knew what he was up to and gave him a look that said - "we'll get you sooner or later, you don't stand a chance". Tasaka would return that look with one of his own that retorted plainly: "fuck me in the ass NOW suit, I don't give a shit". Of course, Tasaka was doomed, which explained why he was so popular, he simply had nothing to loose so he was fun to be with. The legend as it was told to me that Monday

morning in the cafeteria went like this. Tasaka had made a hole in the plaster cow's rear end with some car tools and had stuck his penis inside while some friends of his looked on laughing hysterically and drinking beer. He had talked to the cow cursing it and "egging it on", calling it a bitch and a whore. After he was finished he tipped the cow over and broke it cleanly in half. They took him away to juvenile hall and they sent him to a psychiatrist. He returned and said that juvenile hall was much better than High School because you meet cooler people and you learn things that are actually going to be useful later in "real life". We agreed with him and we thought he was crazy at the same time. "Tasaka" became a code term for sex-crazy.

-He tried to "Tasaka" Kay after class!

-Sandy went to a "Tasaka" party! and she threw herself at Dennis Wilson; this guy thinks he's so cool just because he's with The Beach Boys!

-Liar liar! Your pants' on fire your nose is longer than a telephone wire!

-He pulled a "Tasaka" on the bus and got caught by a monitor!

-Gross! Tasaka me out!

6. Ascot Speedway

The prettier girls in the school went off to the beach and found college boys in bars or on the Strand, a three mile stretch of two-lane road with the

ocean on one side and fast food stands on the other. The guys went to Ascot Speedway in Gardena and watched dirt track racing. Many of us were car freaks, or “greasers”, and knew more about cars than about anything else in the world. Men who flunked every class they had could spot the kind of car and the year from just a glance at the corner of a fender; they knew the timing ratio of cars made before they were born; they could explain the kind of tire best suited to every kind of weather condition; they could look at the detailing job on a car and know the part of the country it came from; they could listen to an engine and tell you its history; they could spot talent in a driver by watching how his head moved when he drove; in short their knowledge was awesome because it was connected to passion. The kids would get pumped up from watching the races at Ascot and would then spend the evening racing in parking lots or in suburban streets.

- From Stop sign to Stop sign.

- No dude, from the Wienerschnitzel to that Dunkin’ Donuts.

- That’s chicken shit - From the Burger King to that Texaco...

You could always spot the” greasers” by their fingernails black around the edges, or from the bald tires on their cars, or from some finicky little detail on their car that would only be put there by a greaser and would only be

noticed by a greaser: Rims with counter weights. Raised springs so you could see the care taken with the differential. Customized functional air intake ports. Extra heavy duty struts and shocks to handle the overhauled engine. A roll cage inside the car. Fleck paint and decals from racing companies in the lower back window arranged in a row according to size, with the largest in the center. Custom tail pipes and a custom dash, but with the original chrome left intact. The guys with the best cars would take the lead cruising the Strand on Saturday night. The lesser cars followed as in some pre-arranged pecking order. People who owned apartments there would set up a bar-be-cue and drinks on their balcony and have a party every summer night, and other apartments would always be empty with the lights out; yet every so often you would see a mysterious human form walk around inside and occasionally come out to see what was happening, and then quickly go back inside. Who were these shy people who lived here but wanted no part of this party? The girls went dressed in tank tops and short shorts. The whole beach smelled of carbon monoxide and ocean and frying food and tar and human flesh that has been recently oiled and burned. The different music from the open cars would compete for volume, sometimes blending strangely into a single symphony that would at certain moments become transcendent, just incredible, but you had to

really listen. The car horns and car radios and screaming girls and power bursts from muscle cars lasted for as much as a tank of gas, which was about twenty trips up and down the Strand at about three miles an hour.

7. The Radium

At night we would go climb the trees near the Radium Drive In Theatre where they showed adult films after ten. From the trees you couldn't hear anything but the sound of crickets and the traffic of Redondo Beach Boulevard which was six lanes wide and full of used car lots, fast food take-out stands, gas stations, tire stores, banks and apartment buildings with names like Pacifica and Kahuna. I still remember a sequence from one of the films I saw at the Radium; a dark haired olive skinned woman comes into a house wearing a full-length fur coat which she takes off revealing that she is naked. As she throws the fur on the floor she opens her arms and throws herself on the man that has opened the door.

-I wish I were that guy!

-Look at the tits on her - the nipples are huge my God!

-I'd fuck her for sure!

-You haven't even fucked a fake cow!

-Shhh!

Two guards patrolled the area to make sure there were no fights, no drunks

destroying the equipment, and no kids sneaking a look at the films for free. We thought the guards were looking to beat somebody up to make up for the fact that they had ended up with such jobs. The idea of being up in a tree looking at pornographic films might sound vaguely interesting or even romantic but living it was not. The insects ate us alive and the fact that there was no sound was so alienating that we sensed our own loneliness more than we would just being alone. I remember the pain in my ass and in my balls from being up in that tree and just staying up there because there was nowhere to go. There was also the Park Theatre where I would ride my bicycle to see *Mars Needs Women* and *Roustabout* and *Dr. No* and *Mary Poppins* and *A Hard Day's Night*. I would often stay and watch the film again to not go back home and see my parents fighting. In the theatre there were other kids staying for the same reason and we became friends, getting drunk on beer smuggled in by Tasaka, and pounding on the chairs in front of us with our feet. The older kids pissed from the balcony. They were always thrown out and they always returned through the emergency exit next to the screen like champions. We applauded and screamed until the ushers came to threaten us with cops, but we knew that they were never going to call the cops.

8. Taco Hell

The black guys were all on the football team and would take cuts in line whenever they felt like it. It was protocol. All except for Alexander a very short black skinny boy who took the brunt of the hatred that the white boys were afraid to articulate to anyone but him.

-Why don't you go back to Africa sponge head?

-Why don't you go back to Europe white trash?

Whites would snarl the most racist abuse and love listening to Mowtown at the same time; The Temptations were Gods in Gardena. People lived those contradictions in their bodies. The black men who were brilliant at football were used up with alcohol and drugs by the time they got to college so they never made it into the pros. The violence was feigned, being a strange kind of ballet. They pretended to push and then would back away arms opening to make room for a fight and then would move in again, and then back again all the time staring someone down. But the only time I actually saw real violence was when a white man too old to be in High School shot another white student in the stomach leaving a little black hole the size of a small coin on his shirt. The student whom I did not know seemed to fall where he stood, his knees buckling under him, and to double up on the cement floor of the outdoor cafeteria. Everyone ran in a different direction.

Some girls screamed and boys jumped over tables. The principal, whom we had nicknamed Bluebeard, ran against us toward the shooting asking what had happened but no one stopped to answer him, we all just pointed in the same direction with our mouths open. The boy survived and the man who fired the shot was found to have been double crossed in a scheme to steal money from the local Taco Bell, known then as Taco Hell, a fast food stand between a Japanese supermarket and a Shell gas station. That was the same Taco Bell where one term earlier I had seen Lynda Martinez (Lynda with a “y”) a Mexican girl I was in love with, and her smirking boyfriend, a white biker with barbed wire tattoos on his wrists who was older and driving a Harley. He was saying in that wise ass “fuck you” way:

-Aren't you COMING?!

-Fuck me dead!

Lynda screamed holding a pink glob of gum with a tuft of black hair stuck on it. This was when we had first met in Junior High School and the hair was from the back of my head. She would expose her thighs while pretending to show me a run in her nylon stocking, but I had fallen in love with her earlier when I had seen her buying a milk shake in the cafeteria. She was in love with Bruce, a pale blond boy that became a contractor in Gardena. One time during a boring history class in which everyone was

half sleeping Lynda sat down in her desk curving her body making it slither in slow motion into the ridiculously small desks made for children in which we were all forced to sit. Suddenly everyone, boy and girl, was wide awake. It was as if she were making fun of the furniture and the very institution that was meant to hold us, and it was erotic. Having something be funny and sensuous at the same time was a new and liberating experience, a glimpse into another kind of life that everyone applauded, but we only succeeded in getting Lynda into trouble. The teacher was incensed with rage, his pink face red, screaming in a high pitch we had never heard. It seemed out of proportion to what had happened but we all knew that he was also aroused by Lynda. We never listened to what teachers said but looked at their faces and the way they moved. We looked for weaknesses, we assessed the strengths, and we absolutely never showed any mercy. It was obvious in this teacher's face that Lynda had used a power greater than his, and he had to teach her a lesson. It was as close as he would ever get to fucking her. I would see the same mechanism many times later in jobs between bosses and secretaries, administrators and workers, and later more subtly in University campuses and Art institutions; over and over, the refrain of the wars in Los Angeles in 1968.

9. Community Spirit

The letter to Lyndon Johnson caused innumerable trips to downtown Los Angeles and the Immigration Department and to the offices of the Secret Service. These offices looked exactly like the Employment Offices spread throughout the city that I would get to know a few years later. Everything was grey and tan. The metal chairs always faced a partition of posters promoting community spirit and drug abuse services. Women came with their children and fell asleep on the hard chairs that I could barely sit on. Men stared at the same piece of wall for hours turning their heads in a haze and getting up very slowly when their names were called by obese women who dragged their feet. Always last name first and first name last. The letter to the President had been written by a friend from elementary school that I had grown distant from whose brother had gone to Viet-Nam and been killed in an accident unrelated to combat; a casualty nonetheless he had used my name to get me into trouble so they would send me back to Payroo, which is how he pronounced Peru. He helped out his dependent mother financially so they never sent him to reform school. Soon after he moved out and I never saw him or Eisenhower or John Glenn again.

10. Mr. Murphy and Mr. Bartel

Mr. Murphy in the High School wood-shop had gone deaf from the

constant screaming of machinery and always replied to what people said with the same words:

-Sand it all over.

Students would hand him their projects and he would feel them and say those same words year after year. Making day-glow plexi-glass rings was all the rage then because girls were impressed by them so Mr. Murphy's class had become popular.

-Mr. Murphy World War Three has just been declared and I want to go home!

-Feels a little rough. Sand it all over.

-Mr. Murphy I just shit this - what do you have to say about it?

-Feels good sand it all over.

And there was Mr. Bartel, an older teacher who still wore suits to class and had a long thin pointer made of wood with a rubber tip. He taught photography showing us how to print negatives, how use a camera, how to measure time in fractions of seconds, how to arrange a still life so it conformed to something called "the golden mean" that all great artists from the past used. He emphasized that it was available to everyone "democratically", that this "golden mean is within your means". We were all bored to tears by it but we didn't hold it against all those artists as it must

have meant something to them a million years ago or they wouldn't have bothered. Mr. Bartel pointed with his pointer to the various ways that photographers used the golden mean to create their work. He showed us the photographs of the Work Progress Administration and I saw the portraits of Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee and Walker Evans for the first time.

11. This Is Not a Woman

For us the portraits and the landscapes were boring but nudes were always met with applause and whistles.

-Holy shit!

-This is not a woman! What you are seeing is not a woman! It's a photograph!

-Well sure damn looks like a woman to me!

-Take that and double it!

-It's an Edward Weston! A great photograph! You see how Weston used the golden mean to create his composition?

-That is not just a woman but a F I N E looking woman you understand?

-Right on - I wouldn't kick her out of bed.

After Tasaka let out a wolf whistle that bounced around the room Mr.

Bartel hammered his pointer on the table. He instructed Tasaka to get into a broom closet and shut the door as punishment. He did as he was told

with slow sarcastic deliberateness because for years he had routinely spent whole classes inside the broom closet. This was a bad teaching strategy because it was impossible after that to think of anything but Tasaka in that closet. What was he doing? Could it be?

-Enough! Can't you people see the art here? Look! It's right in front of you! Open your eyes!

-Was this Edward Weston's girlfriend?

We wanted to know more about this girl. How old was she? Did she live in the desert all the time? Poor Mr. Bartel just became very red and held on to his pointer very tightly.

12. The Coach and Viet-Nam

Across an overpass encased in chain link fence was "The Field" and "The Coach". He was always telling us that he was training us to go to Viet-Nam because:

-As things stand most of you boys would be killed a very short time after arriving in Nam! Why?

He paused for effect looking at each man in the eye.

-I'm going to make it short and sweet. Because you're pussy! It breaks my heart but you boys wouldn't make it out of there in one piece! You gotta get tough...

He would punch himself in the head and not flinch to show how tough he meant.

--so tough they can't hurt you. You understand me God damn it *they can't hurt you!*

We understood.

-Down in Danang or some shit hole some boys were killed when there was a fire on board their ship and these boys could not climb a rope! Can you imagine such a thing? Well that's not going to happen with you boys. No sir! All of you are going to know how to climb a rope like a fucking monkey before you leave here. Thomas Jefferson spoke up and asked the coach if he could climb that rope himself. Thomas Jefferson was a very large black football player who could have easily become a star player in College, and then in professional football, but he didn't have the drive, the killer instinct, or as the coaches called it, "the eye of the tiger". Everything he said seemed to be ironic and meant to be funny but it wasn't. He was the only person to have the guts to talk to the coach in that way.

-No Thomas I don't have to learn how to climb that rope because I'm too damn old to be going off to Viet-Nam but you...?

The coach knew that we would all be cannon fodder if we did go, and some of us did, and we were. And he knew that dumb luck would be more likely

to keep us alive than knowing how to climb a rope, but that was all he could give us. He was an honest man so you could see all this written on his face.

13. Del Amo Mall

Five years after graduating from High School I ran into Lynda selling expensive men's clothes in a department store inside what was advertised as the largest mall in California the Del Amo Mall. It was winter and I was shopping for Christmas presents and she looked very different. Her long hair had been cut short and there was something demure and almost apologetic about her body her voice and her manner. The glow was gone. It was as if she had been beaten regularly for as long as it took to break her spirit and suddenly it was gone. Had it ever existed? I remembered Lynda's clenched fist as she was escorted from class for wearing too much make up or for wearing skirts that were more than three inches above the knee, or for laughing at teachers right to their faces. She would dance by herself in the cafeteria without music and sometimes with her friends they would sing a cappella the Aretha Franklin song with fists in the air: "R.E.S.P.E.C.T. find out what it means to me. Sock it to me sock it to me sock it to me..."

She was arranging men's clothes on tables that did not need arranging as

they were in perfect order.

-Lynda!

- George? Oh my God! What are you doing here?

-Nothing much. How about you?

-I'm Okay. You remember me?

-Of course I remember. Lynda with a "y". Can't forget that ever.

-I'm just working here for now until something better comes along.

-This place is kind of creepy.

-Really!

-I tried working in a mall too - selling photo equipment but it didn't quite work out.

-You don't seem like the salesman type to me.

-No?

-No. I'm not either though and here I am I guess...

-Your boss looks like Mr. Bartel!

-Seems like a long time ago.

-Only five years.

-A lot can happen in five years. My attitude was soooo bad.

-No!

Lynda explained that she had gotten a job during High School in a place

called Clark Drugs as a cashier, had then moved on to Music Plus, a record store that catered to top 40; she then got a job in a warehouse assembling plexi-glass cabinets for cosmetics with adhesives that made her nails and hair smell like plastic. Finally she had become a cashier again at Robinson's, a fashionable department store, where she had been promoted to sales. I had heard from other students at Gardena that she had worked as an exotic dancer but she didn't mention it and I didn't ask. I told her about some of my job experiences unloading trucks but she didn't find any of the stories funny that I was sure would make her laugh. The conversation seemed to die quietly and the silence became a little uncomfortable. She finally broke it by asking me what I was shopping for. I told her that it was a present for my father who was in Peru with the rest of my family.

-I never knew that you were from Peru!

14. Lynda

After that she started to speak in Spanish saying that I was so quiet and always showed such respect to teachers that I seemed very polite and boring. In Spanish she seemed to get some of the old fire back and she laughed that laugh full of anarchy and comradeship like a sailor on leave who's just starting to get a little drunk. I laughed too and told her she was right but that was all just a front because I was afraid. She said that it was

like that for most people. Her family came from brick layers in Chiapas and that they were all afraid. It was funny that we were talking now between stacks of men's clothes. The boss that looked like Mr. Bartel came snooping by and I pretended to be shopping for something but it was obvious from the way I looked that I wasn't going to be spending any money. I still dressed like a kid with tennis shoes and blue jeans that were too big for me and a shirt that my mother had chosen for me.

-What size is your father?

-What?

-What size sweater does he wear?

I told her and she picked out the most expensive sweater that size and put it in a bag handing it to me without being careful about being seen by Mr. Bartel who was still snooping. She whispered:

-Feliz Navidad compañero.

She couldn't look me in the eyes but stared down at the floor, her neck slightly bent as if she were afraid of being hit, and with a resignation that I could never have imagined coming from her. I felt that she was embarrassed by me and wanted me to leave. But her eyes looked as if they were indicting me personally but for what? I remembered that she could stare anyone down in games of looking that would go on for whole lunch

periods and have to be postponed until after school. Face to face no one could match that gaze. It struck me that I was still a kid in the presence of a woman even though we were exactly the same age. I looked down at my old tennis shoes and felt a sting in my throat that made my stomach knot up and my eyes burn. You were “never going to change” - but that’s not true. You see – it happened just like that. We said more in a mall in ten minutes that we ever had and ever would and it wasn’t that much. I was burning up as if I had a fever because I felt just as trapped in that store with Lynda and Mr. Bartel as I had with Eisenhower and John Glenn but I sensed that now everything was my fault. She spoke in English again in a whisper without looking at me.

-You better go.

She moved her head in the direction of her boss. I took the bag and hurried out of the store as if being chased. I looked back as I left and Mr. Bartel was standing over her saying something but her head was turned to me and her mouth open as if saying something.

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