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Raimundo

Sometime after midnight Raimundo wakes to the thump of a heavy bass outside his window. He has been dreaming about the first woman he ever made love to, a housewife who lived next door to him as a boy in Mexico City. Something was always baking in the oven when they had sex, filling the house with the sweet aroma of baked bread or cookies, so that to this day he can’t step into a bakery without getting a hard-on. He was about to kiss her and unhook her bra when his eyes popped open.

The sound is coming from two cars, low riders, parked in front of his house. Wearing only boxers and a ribbed undershirt, Raimundo barefoots it across the sidewalk and taps on the passenger side of a restored, sky blue, 68 Buick. A man with a shaved head rolls down the window. Tattooed on his neck is a dagger stabbing a heart with a trail of blood running down his neck.

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Go back inside, papi,” the man says.

“I have to be up in the morning. I can’t sleep in all day like some people.”

The man pulls up his shirt. Tucked inside the waistband of his shorts is a shiny black revolver. “Go back inside, papi.”

Raimundo’s face blanches. He turns around and his feet carry him back to his house, up the front steps and into his bedroom. Lying down on his cot, he tries to think about the housewife from Mexico City. But as much as he tries he can’t picture her. He’s too scared.

In the morning he calls the police. The dispatcher says the same thing he always does. They will be sending an officer over shortly. But they never do. They’re too busy pulling over speeders or patrolling the malls. What about his street? Instead of waiting around for the police, a year ago Raimundo built a chain-link fence around his front porch and put bars up on his windows. His home looks like a prison now, but at least he feels safe at night.

Next time he should try calling when the crime is underway, not the day after, the dispatcher says. Day of, day after, what difference does it make? Raimundo hangs up.

Last month a police cruiser was parked in front of his house. “Finally,” Raimundo thought. “They’re taking me seriously.” He went outside to greet the officer. The officer was in street clothes and was getting something out of his trunk. Raimundo thought it was evidence, but it turned out to be a black trash bag. The cop tossed the bag into the vacant lot next to Raimundo’s house.

“Hey! You can’t do that. This isn’t a dump,” Raimundo had said.

The cop looked at him as if he was a small dog yapping at him, and drove away.

Because of this business with the police, and because he overslept, he is running late. He dresses, locks up the house and catches the bus to work. The bus is full. Anyone lucky enough to find a seat is sleeping. Everyone else keeps moving to the back to make room for more passengers. Hanging from a roof strap, Raimundo watches a woman apply makeup to her face with the aid of a compact mirror. She applies blush, eyeliner then lipstick by smacking her lips together. This reminds him of the housewife from Mexico. She used to redo her makeup after they made love. He
liked watching her from the tangled sheets on the bed while she sat at her vanity, painting her face. It made him feel like her husband.

At one of the stops a woman in a wheelchair is waiting. To let her on, the bus driver has to get off, wheel her chair onto a loading ramp, activate the ramp and strap her in so her chair doesn’t shift during the bus ride. The whole process takes a solid ten minutes. Raimundo wonders why a woman in a wheelchair has to take the bus so early in the morning. Does she have a job? The only people in wheelchairs he has ever seen working are the greeters at HEB, and all they do is sit there and blink at you coming into the supermarket. He resents her for making everyone on the bus late. But at the same time he feels sorry for her. It isn’t her fault she’s in a wheelchair. But then again maybe it is. Maybe she is someone who tried to kill herself by walking into traffic or jumping off a balcony and only ended up paralyzing the lower half of her body.

By the time the bus drops off Raimundo in front of the Seven Eleven, he is fifteen minutes late. The parking lot is full of Ford F-150s and day laborers looking for work. Raimundo finds his foreman and his work crew, who are already piled into the back of a truck.

“We almost gave your job to someone else,” the foreman says.

“Sorry boss. There was this woman on the bus…” Raimundo starts to say but realizes there’s no point going on. He gets in the back with the others. No one says anything to him, not even Carlos. Raimundo pulls his cap over his face, crosses his arms and tries to get some sleep before their first job of the day.

At the apartment complex, they unload the mower, weed-whackers and leaf-blowers off the trailer. Raimundo hates apartments. There’s always a lot of grass and a lot of dog shit no one bothers to pick up. Dogs chained to balconies bark at you. You can forget about anyone ever offering you a drink, either. People who live in apartments don’t care about anyone but themselves. They certainly don’t care about their neighbors. When Raimundo first moved to San Antonio from Mexico, before he cashed in his savings to buy a tiny ramshackle corner house, he shared a three-bedroom apartment with seven other men. Everyone worked during the day. They only slept, ate and showered in the apartment, so they got along. But Raimundo would never want to live like that again. The neighbors were loud and rude and if you complained they’d threaten to call INS. Kids played in the stairwell and there was always a party at the pool so you couldn’t swim unless you wanted to tread water with twenty other shouting and screaming kids.

At noon they break for lunch. They sit in the shade on the cut grass, eating whatever their wives packed for them that day. Raimundo doesn’t have anything to eat. Usually he makes a few tortillas for himself before leaving the house, wraps them in tin foil and stores them in a cooler, but not today—he was in too much of a hurry. So everyone breaks off a piece of their lunch and gives it to him.

Raimundo likes all of them sitting in the shade, eating the lunches their wives made, talking and laughing. But it also saddens him because he doesn’t have a wife at home to make him lunch. He wanted to marry but never found the right person. No woman he ever met reminded him of the housewife in Mexico City. She was something special. Sometimes he likes to wonder what the housewife is doing now. She would be an old abuelita by now, with grandkids and dentures. What if he tracked her down after all these years? Would she still give him a boner when she wore an apron and bent down to pull a cake out of the oven?
Their next job is in Alamo Heights. There are no cracks or weeds in the sidewalk, no potholes in the street. People bring in their trash bins after collections, as if a bin sitting in plain view is a source of shame. The houses don’t have bars on their windows. No dogs are chained to stakes in the front yards. People don’t let their grass grow until they have to wade through their yard with a machete to get to the front door. Raimundo would’ve have liked to have bought into a neighborhood like this. But all he could afford was a fixer-upper on the south side of town. He bets that when people on this street call the police a squad car arrives within minutes. He bets the officers are polite and respectful and don’t dump their trash into the vacant lot next door.

The foreman reminds everyone to do a good job today. This is an important account. No skimping or napping. That means you Carlos. Everyone laughs. Carlos can sleep anywhere. He can sleep riding a mower, he can sleep in the bed of a pickup, he can sleep on his own two feet, wielding a weed-whacker.

They pile out of the pickup and fan out across the neighborhood, like soldiers on a search and destroy mission. A weed-whacker slung over his shoulder, Raimundo sizes up a one-story ranch style home with a Spanish-tile roof. Its number is spray painted on the curb in perfectly stenciled letters. A leaning oak tree dips over the driveway, cooling the pavement. A green garden hose is coiled neatly around a peg on the side of the house. He starts with the hedges. A woman waves from the big picture window in the living room. He waves back, wipes his sweaty brow on his sleeve. After he’s circled the house, after he’s trimmed the hedges and curb, she comes out bearing a tall, sweating glass of ice tea on a tray. In it a lemon wedge is floating in a sea of ice cubes.

“Thanks,” Raimundo says, taking the glass. He gulps it fast so she can go back inside. Standing in her apron, she reminds him of the housewife who once lived down the street from him as a boy. In fact, they could almost be the same woman, same height, same build, same dark hair, same everything, except Raimundo is no longer that spry sixteen-year old. He’s old and wilted. His back aches from bending over all the time. His hair is ashen, his face bears more lines than a map. Even if they were one and the same—which they aren’t—what could he do? He can’t marry her, can’t support her. Her husband is probably a doctor or a lawyer. And who is he? He’s a man who mows lawns.

Downing the last of the tea, ice cubes rubbing up against his lips, he pictures her spotless kitchen, a jug full of halved lemons and tea bags sitting on a windowsill, soaking up the sun, her mother’s recipe (one tablespoon of sugar for every cup of water) posted on the subzero fridge. He hands her back the glass, smiles and gets back to work.

At the end of the day, the workers ride in the open back of the foreman’s pickup. The sun has dipped below the tree line, yet glares every so often through a break in the branches. The wind is whipping through their hair. They are too tired to talk. A feeling of accomplishment, of a day seen through to its logical conclusion, settles over them. Carlos cracks open a cooler, reaches in past his elbow and fishes out a can of Tecate. The ice in the cooler has all but melted and floating in it are twigs of grass. Carlos holds out the beer to Raimundo. But he shakes his head. Next time. Carlos shrugs, tilts back the can. Everyone is quiet.

In the parking lot at the Seven Eleven, they line up beside the pickup while the foreman counts out their wages. When it’s Raimundo’s turn in line, the foreman hesitates.

“That woman said you did a real good job on her house.” The foreman pauses. “Did you fuck her?”
Raimundo shakes his head.
“Good.”
Raimundo pockets his pay, a thick wad of bills, ones and fives mostly. He needs this job, but
doesn’t like the foreman telling him who he can and can’t fuck.
On the bus, it’s stop and go all the way to his house. The bus driver is new and has a brick
for a foot so the bus lurches forward and comes to a halting stop every few seconds.
It’s pitch black by the time he swings open the gate to his yard. He stops at the mailbox,
which is crammed full of utility bills and Smart Shopper ads, stuffed willy-nilly by the letter carrier.
As he stands there, going through the mail, a police cruiser pulls up behind him. A car door slams.
Through the fence Raimundo can see a young, clean-shaven officer with a buzz-cut stride up
to the house.
“Evening. Do you live here?”
Raimundo nods.
The officer pulls out a pen and a note pad. “We’re responding to a call about a possible
narcotics deal committed here last night. Did you happen to see the suspects?”
Raimundo stares into the officer’s blue eyes. He doesn’t see a fresh recruit who, while in
the Police Academy, wrote a twenty-page paper extolling the virtues of community policing. He
doesn’t see an Anglo married to a Latina. He doesn’t see a man who once pulled a drowning boy
out of a swimming pool. Instead, he sees the foreman telling him who he can and can’t fuck.
He shakes his head. “No me recuerdo. I don’t remember.”
The officer puts away the pen and paper. “Did you see any identifying marks such
as a tattoo?”
“No,” Raimundo says.
The young officer hands him his business card through the fence. “If you remember
anything, give me a call. My cell phone number’s on the back.”
Raimundo accepts the card and looks at it as if it was a hundred-dollar bill. When he turns it
over, there is indeed a series of hand written digits.
“Have a nice night,” the officer says.
Raimundo nods and sits on the porch of his house. The cop pulls away from the curb.
Raimundo tucks the card under some old magazines. He leans back and shuts his eyes. The
enveloping darkness presses up against his eyelids as he waits, waits for the housewife to appear in
his dreams.
About the Work

*Dan Moreau’s fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Farfelu magazine, Word Riot and Clapboard House.*

About the Work

Last year I read an article in my local paper about a Mexican immigrant who lived in South San Antonio and who was complaining about drug dealers in his neighborhood. From what he told the reporter, however, the cops weren’t doing anything about it. He was a landscapist and inhabited a one-room shack so he wasn’t exactly a high priority.

One day I was in Alamo Heights. It’s a rich White suburb of San Antonio with beautiful homes, well-tended lawns, and I thought: What the landscapist was complaining about would never happen here.

Other things that helped the story along: I live in a sprawling apartment complex. Every few weeks a landscaping company shows up with a crew of laborers. They usually come early in the morning so they can finish their work before it gets too hot. One day I came home at noon and saw them sitting in the shade, eating their lunch. They seemed perfectly content and at peace, men who had worked and who were now replenishing their bodies. I thought of my landscapist from San Antonio and imagined he was among them. Of course, he wasn’t.

In this story, I tried to imagine my landscapist’s life from the little bits of information I had and attempted expand on them. I thought about the story a long time before I actually sat down to write it. Usually I labor over stories for days and weeks, but this one practically wrote itself. Which admittedly sounds like a cliché. But sometimes—if you’re lucky—it happens. I had a really good teacher in college who had this piece of advice for young writers, which went something like: When the muses speak in soft whispers, who are we not to listen.