

The Hunchback of Barrio Anita

by

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During the passing period, the stairway at Tucson High was clogged with bodies, and no matter which side Billy was on, he seemed to be going against the flow. Turning his slim shoulder into the crowd, he pressed through it like a blade. When he reached the top of the stairs, he listed down the hall, compensating for his natural gait, which veered to the left, by turning his head slightly to the right.

They called out to him, *cabrón!*, and even *Quasimodo!*, a name he despised. Still, Billy knew these were words of inclusion, so, raising his chin, he responded in kind. And always there was a slight smile on his face, which was pointed and fox-like, for Billy had achieved the fame reserved for the truly beautiful, the truly bad, or in his case, the truly other. Everyone knew Billy, *El Chueco*.

Billy swung into his favorite class, Algebra X, for boneheads. He knew it was a bonehead class the moment he passed through the door last fall because it was filled with homeboys, flojos, and clowns, and the same shy girls from Barrio Anita he had watched all these years expanding silently into lushness and beauty.

His narrow chest widened with delight. In this class, not only was he king of the boneheads and clowns, but he had one additional advantage. He was the smartest, which allowed him entry to the table where the shyest of the beautiful, lush girls sat. Her real name was Estella, but they called her La China for her Chinese eyes.

He slid into the seat next to hers and tried to think of something to make her lips, bow-like and full, lift in silent appreciation of his wit. “What’s up?” he said, pretending to look inside his shorts.

She didn’t laugh. China rarely laughed, but a single dimple set at the corner of her mouth deepened and her slant, green eyes became lively.

But making China smile was only a secondary pleasure. What pleased Billy most was lifting the shadow of uncertainty that fell across her face, watching the way it gradually lightened to concentration, then cleared at the ascent of comprehension. It was Billy who taught her in Spanish what the teacher was unable to communicate in English—a process that drew them much closer together than simply allowing her to copy the correct answers from his paper. No, instruction caused their heads and shoulders to brush, his fingers to rest for a moment on the smooth, coppery skin of her arm. A demonstration, which button on the calculator to push to achieve square root, for instance, could bring the back of his wrist in brief, but sure contact with a high, round breast. And there was always her smell, which was of coconut and sun-dried cotton.

So when the teacher announced the new seating chart, it was only reasonable that Billy would refuse to move, saying, “Shit, I ain't going nowhere.”

“Pardon me?” said Mr. Craig, the bald algebra teacher who was El Pelón behind his back and often to his face, not that it mattered, because in some important ways, he was a

greater bonehead than many of his students. In fact, he was such a bonehead, he thought Kiko Ornales was called El Cojón because he was from a city in California of a similar-sounding name.

“I said, I ain't moving. This is my place, ése. It even has my name on it, see?” Billy smiled and pointed to the words carved in florid cursive on the top of the desk. “El Más Chingón” he read in a clear voice.

It didn't matter that he was El Chueco or that his good friend, Kiko Ornales, who had only one nut, which was why he was known as El Cojón, had painstakingly carved those words into the desk last quarter with the point of his compass. Everybody knew this, but El Pelón.

Billy's face closed upon itself in concentration. Tonight, like many nights, he stood before the ironing board, his spine curving to the left beneath a shoulder blade that was round instead of sharp, as if a box turtle resided just beneath the surface of the skin.

Head phones in place, he took up a pair of boxers and ironed, setting creases along the paisley legs, while his head bobbed to hip hop. He folded the boxers over a hanger, which he hooked on the door along with his freshly ironed Dickies. Next, he chose a T-shirt. After ironing out the clothesline stiffness, he folded it along the vertical axis and again set the crease, giving the T-shirt the perfect symmetry his body lacked.

Billy contemplated the laundry basket. A single blouse, his mother's, lay at the bottom. She had worked a 10-hour shift in the radiation lab at St. Mary's that day and had

entrusted the ironing to him. Billy didn't mind this chore. It gave him time to think, and Billy had a lot to think about.

He adjusted the black nylon stocking wrapped tight around his forehead and knotted over the cap of his skull. It was supposed to train his black, sheenless hair back into a smooth unit of hair. But his hair, like his spine, was twisted and went where it would.

Billy took the blouse, a flowered one, from the basket and held it to his face. Breathing in its sun-dried fragrance, he closed his eyes and locked his mind on the single image of his longing, La China. Her beauty had inspired him through countless baskets of ironing. The memory of her warm breath against the side of his face as she studied his algebra paper gave him an immediate chubby. China. How he longed to do it to her, but there was no way, of course.

At that moment his mother emerged from the kitchen where she had been washing up after dinner, and his near erection disappeared.

"I still don't get it, Billy," she said, crossing slender arms over a nearly flat chest. "Why couldn't you just move like he told you."

"He had no right to make me move. I was doing good where I was. At least a B."

This was true, and if he started turning in the homework, he probably could still pull an A. He sprayed the blouse, front and back, with water from an old Windex bottle, then gave it a good shake before smoothing it over the ironing board. "He shouldn't have messed with me, Ma."

"So where did it get you? Now you're kicked out for three days."

Billy shrugged, thinking of China. Three days was a long time, but it had seemed like the best course of action at the moment. He turned the blouse over and quickly pressed

the sleeves and front, taking special care with the collar. His mother liked it ironed so it would lay flat and smooth on the outside of her white lab coat. "I'm finished," he said, hanging the blouse, still warm and damp, on the hanger. "I'm going out now."

"Oh no. You're kicked out of school, mijo. You can't go out."

"I'm going out. I told Kiko I'd meet him."

"Too bad. You're grounded. Besides, Kiko's a gangster."

The corners of Billy's mouth pulled down in disgust. "He's my compa."

"Yeah, and all your so-called compas are gangsters. They're going to get you shot in some drive-by one of these days. You can't go out."

Billy adjusted his stocking and tugged his Dickies in place so exactly four inches of his plaid boxers showed.

Shaking her head, she reached out and held his face between her cool palms. "What is it you want, Billy? You want me to wear a T-shirt in loving memory. Is that it, mijo? You want to get killed?"

Actually, it was one of Billy's favorite fantasies. His homies, China, everybody crying, and wearing T-shirts with his picture above the words, Billy Diaz, In Loving Memory.

"Because that would kill me too, Billy. Don't you know that? I swear," she said, pressing his face. "I'm going to send you to live in Las Cruces with your father and Nana Fufi. Don't think I won't, you keep doing what you're doing."

His mother had been making that threat for as long as Billy could remember. When he was little, he used to spend all his holidays at his Nana's. But now it was only for one week in summer when his father took him fishing, and again each fall when his father

and his tío took him deer hunting. His beeper went off. Billy jerked his face from his mother's grasp. "OK, Ma, chill," he said, checking the number.

"Thank you, mijo. You're a good boy, and thank you for ironing. It's perfect, like always," she said to his back and then positioned herself on the couch so she could watch both the front and back doors at once.

"I'm going to take a shower, well."

His mother clicked the television remote, then blew him a kiss. "Okay, I love you, mijo. You're everything to me. Never forget."

Billy closed the door to his bedroom and quickly dialed Joker's number. His friend picked up the phone after the first ring.

"What's up?" Billy asked.

"Where the hell you been, man? I've been waiting for the longest."

Billy shrugged. "I had some things to do, ése."

"Things to do! Oh really? Well, tonight is going to be your lucky night, dude, unless you got too many things to do. China's been jumped into West Side, ése, and she's gotta do you."

Billy was speechless. Just the words China and do you joined in a single thought reinstated his hard-on. Billy swallowed and rubbed his palm over the front of his Dickies.

"Well?" El Joker said. "You still too busy, fool, or you want to meet us at Los Betos?"

"Okay, well, cool."

He soaped his armpits, asshole and crotch. Billy couldn't believe it was about to happen at last.

“Me and China!” he whispered. Billy had not asked if he was to be the only, the first or the last. He didn't want to know the answer. In fact, he didn't want China to have to do him at all. He wanted her to fall in love with him and then do him. But how likely was that? This confusion was messing with his head.

A while back, Cuco, his compa, had told him: “If it's your first time, man, you should always jerk off at least once before, or you might come all over the chick's leg and look like a fool.”

Billy imagined China's leg, round and smooth. It seemed like good advice.

The Polo he slapped on his hairless face made his pimples sting. Billy's eyes were still watering as he combed mousse through his hair. Pressing his hair with the palms of his hands, he trapped it there while he counted to sixty. Finally, he brushed his even white teeth and made a cheesy smile at the mirror. Satisfied that this was the best he could hope for, he adjusted the gold crucifix around his neck, then inched open the bathroom window. Billy was certain his mother was asleep in front of the television by now, but wanted to avoid risking confrontation. No way was he staying home tonight, but why make the old lady all hysterical about it?

China was the first one he saw. She was surrounded by the other chicks, La Gordita, Roja Loca, Shy Girl and Lil' Chica, but she stood out as if they were moths and she the light.

After huddling with his homies, it was settled. Billy would use Joker's car, the '82 oxidized-blue Buick LeSabre his friend was always getting ready to chop and fully load. Kiko offered Billy a leño. He took a single hit to calm his nervous stomach.

At his approach, the other girls fluttered apart, leaving China alone in the acid light from Los Betos Taqueteria. Without a word he motioned, then turned and walked away, praying China would follow.

The Buick was parked on a dark side street. Billy was grateful to Joker for this unexpected consideration. The glow from China's white, sleeveless blouse was the only light in the back seat.

“What's up?” He asked, struggling to keep his voice deep and casual.

“Just kicking it.”

“Joker tells me you're down for West Side now.”

“I'm down.”

“You get hurt?”

“Na-ah. Just my lip.”

“Let's see.”

China stuck out her lower lip. Billy ran his index finger over it gently, feeling the swelling and beneath that, the slightest quiver, which traveled through his finger,

magnifying in intensity as it shot up his wrist and arm, over his shoulder and into his chest.

“Why you want to claim West Side?” he asked, forcing the casual back into his voice.

“Why you want to get into all this lame mess?”

She swatted a strand of long, crinkly hair from her face. “Why did you?”

He could tell her the truth, he supposed. Could tell her how lonely he had been in his otherness, how painful it was to stand in this body, but instead, he lied. “Because I'm a stupid pendejo, pues. But you, China—”

“I guess I'm a stupid pendeja too then. Besides, I live here; like they say, it's mi familia.”

“Tu familia? So how many of your hermanos y primos did you have to do?”

China was silent for a moment, then answered, head bent, barely audible, “All's I got to do is you.”

Billy considered this. Tried hard to see it as his good fortune to be so ugly, so unlikely, that to prove her loyalty to West Side, all China had to do was him. He should just go for it, que no? Any fool would. After all, there should be some compensation for being El Chueco.

“You ever done it before?” he asked.

There was another long silence, then a rush of pent-up air. “What difference does it make to you?” Her voice was impatient, hard.

Billy felt a hole open in his chest and fill with hopelessness. “You know, you don't have to. Like, it's against my code to make a chick do me. I only do the ones who want it.”

“If I don't, I'm not down,” she said.

“Like, I'm going to tell.” He could feel her considering.

“So you don't want me to do nothing?”

“Nothing you don't want to do,” Billy said, suddenly wondering if China was any more able to claim what she wanted than to refuse what she didn't. The hole in his chest grew wider. “Come here.” He looped his arm around her and pulled her head to his chest. She did not resist, and he settled back to study his choices.

He could make her do him, then China could tell her home girls all about what it was like to hump the humpback. Would that finally make her laugh out loud? If he didn't make her do him, he might remain her friend, continue to be her tutor, might still feel her hair brush his cheek, her breast on the back of his hand.

Either way, there was a lot to lose. And what about China? What, if anything, did China have to lose? “It's up to you, China. Like I said, don't do nothing you don't want to.”

He did not expect her to answer. For a long time they sat like that. Billy could feel her soften against him, feel her breath moisten a little circle on his T-shirt just above his heart. He breathed in the coconut scent of her hair and closed his eyes. At least, he would have this much of her.

Billy watched the moths circle and reclaim the light. Then, arranging his face into what he hoped was the satisfied expression of the freshly laid, he turned to join his homies. Joker, Kiko, Cuco, and Chuy rubbed his hump for luck as they walked, hip joints

loose, to the Buick. Billy started to get into the bitch seat, but Cuco, who was handsome and cool and could have any chick he wanted, took him by the elbow and shoved him into the shotgun position. Moments later, they spun onto South Sixth.

Billy stuck his head out the window. The March air, sweetened by the smell of hot grease from Los Betos, felt cool on his face. Tomorrow he would again be consigned to the bitch seat, but for tonight things were different. Tonight, he was different. He adjusted the bass on the speakers until every loose screw on the car buzzed to the beat, then touched the exact spot where China's breath had made its moist O. Though his T-shirt was already dry, he could still feel her lips sending little pulses of heat to his heart.