



When I was a child, my parents called me King.

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HOW TO HARBOR AN ILLEGAL



Jenzo DuQue

You stand outside one of your restaurant jobs as the cabs zip past toward the highway, blowing red lights and taking advantage of the empty lanes. The Loop has shut down for the evening. All the storefronts are black, and you like that. Simple things like closing your heavy eyes or having a wall to lean on bring you peace. The walk to your El station through the orange street lamps is a scenic one. Each night you get to see some of the city's best; the blinking façade of the Chicago Theater; a nice view of the river, still dyed green from St. Patrick's Day. Usually it's pleasant, but right now you're so tired you just want to unwind first.

Check your phone and reread the text message from your girlfriend wondering what time you get off work. Cecylia resents the double shifts, the sixty-hour weeks, but hey, you have bills. Savor your Marlboro after a hard day of waiting tables. Shake your head no at the man in his tattered jeans and stained shirt. Stare past him the way you do any homeless person on the street or subway, doing your best to ignore the smell. There's your fat manager, Jim, counting the day's money. Return his wave.

The man emerges from nowhere, dragging his filthy sneakers, panting like a dog. He asks if you speak Spanish and for a second, consider saying no. But you do and he can tell. Rev up your erre so he knows you're legit. Overdo the *elle* so he asks where you're from. Tell him the truth. That you're a first generation boy, but your parents were from Colombia. Don't respond when he asks what you mean by *were*. Hate his accent, his tanned skin, the garbled and lethargic way he talks. *Cansao, gracia, verda*. He drops letters at the end of words like they weigh down his tongue and he needs to lighten the load in order to speak.

“¿Eran legales?”

And though it's not information you often volunteer, say, “No.”

Like him, says the man, smiling. Then he asks, “¿Qué haces aquí?”

Point to the upscale business behind you, its lush interior, the blend of wood, stone, and leather. Say: “Mi trabajo.”

The man peers inside. He says he can cook, and clean, and he's never late, not ever.

Explain it doesn't really work like that.

“Tengo se,” he says, and he means it. Everything about him confirms this: his chapped lips, the reek of sweat. It's probably been hours since he's had something to drink, maybe days.

Decide he's a puro campesino, worth less than the dark spots of gum stuck to the sidewalk.

Buy yourself time, taking another drag.

“Por favor,” he insists, removing his Bulls hat. Whoever came across him before you had the good sense to try to make him blend in. He's younger than you thought, barely a year or two on you, Mexican.

Stomp out the stub and pull the water bottle out of your bag. The man sucks it all down, saves some to rinse his neck and face. He smiles gratefully when he hands it back to you, looks like he's about to speak, but thinks better about it.

He couldn't be more fresh off the boat. His back is probably still wet from crossing the border. Search for dried sand on his shoes. There isn't any, but still.

Inside, Jim asks if you've forgotten something. Tell him that you're afraid you'll piss yourself during the train ride home. Share a laugh as you make your way to the bathroom. Compared to the illegal waiting outside, it is so pristinely clean. Every morning, the only other spic at your job, Juan, scrubs the toilets for minimum wage. Sometimes the managers make him do things outside his job description, like harass loiterers near the patio or lift heavy kegs all by himself. It's bullshit, but who are you to complain? Juan doesn't complain neither.

Evaluate your options as you fill up the bottle. Avoid the mirror. Consider going out the back door and disappearing into the cool night. The illegal has no consideration for you, so why not reciprocate? Stare at your reflection. Trace a fingertip down your nose, along your thick eyebrows. More and more like your old man every day. You're as brown as he was when he first set foot in the States, maybe browner. Where would you be, if you hadn't been born here? In another life, you're the immigrant stumbling around the streets, losing hope, praying for a chance. You just happen not to be in this one.

Jim is assessing the illegal, who has his dark face pressed up against one of the many street-view windows. When the illegal sees you with your bottle, he pulls back and the outline of his face remains on the glass, a faint impression made of grime..

Jim gestures his head toward the man, his many chins jiggling.

"Is he with you?"

"My cousin."

Later, while waiting for the train, you exchange names.

"Me llamo Hector."

The illegal points to himself. "Miguel."

Miguel tries to give you back the water bottle. Tell him no, it's fine. Insist as you press it back into his calloused hands. He can keep it.

You? Well, you're not exactly a sentimental spic.

But it was different with Cecylia. When you came across her Tinder profile all those months ago, swiping right felt like a shot in the dark. Until then you'd had occasional success—if you can call it that—with the females. There was the Puerto Rican girl from Humboldt Park who talked like a mile a minute and called you her little coquí. Or la Ecuatoriana with skin darker than yours whose padres shamed you into speaking Spanish, even though they spoke perfect inglés. Even a few white women here and there, but usually it was some sort of fantasy lay. Suburbanites, only in the city for a weekend, looking for an ethnic time. Eventually, it dawned on you the less you tried the better. They'd ask you to call them linda or bella in the same voice that they'd ask you to pack up your shit and leave the next morning. It was enough for them. It was enough for you.

But Cecylia was something else. Born and raised in Irving Park, so Polish it was the first thing written in her Tinder bio. Taking night classes at Columbia College and working full time as a supervisor at H&M. Straight teeth, a slight frame, little dimples on her lower back that you glimpsed in a photo taken at the beach. Flawless, except for a small flurry of spots on her neck, red and purple marks that she covered with makeup or a scarf. Hard to see with the naked eye, but not if you stared, not if you really stopped to look.

She messaged first—*chodzić na rzęsach*—some Polish phrase you somehow didn't know after decades living in Chicago. You Googled it. To walk on eyelashes.

Sorry it means to be drunk which I am but also I mean it yours are so beautiful

You were raised never to show up at someone's place empty handed. Cecylia loves that bit about how you met, the bottle of cheap wine, abandoned on the counter as you made your way to the bedroom, fingers locked.

"Last thing I need is another drink," she hiccuped.

You expected the same song and dance, but instead you both fell

onto her bed, where Cecylia took off your glasses and kissed the bits of your face that go untouched, the skin and bone behind the frames. She'd been drinking Moscow mules all night, and the scent of ginger still takes you back.

After, you couldn't help but ask. "Sorry, but what are they?"

She tilted her head up and studied your face. "What are what?"

Sweat had washed off the makeup on her neck and the spots seemed to flare like welts. You grazed them gently, expecting her to flinch.

"Are they scars?"

"No." She smiled weakly. "Birthmarks."

"Why do you cover them up?"

"I don't know."

"You shouldn't."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," you said as you slowly kissed each one.

Miguel tells his own story with such ease, you wonder how many times he's had to tell it before. Born in the boonies of México. Just him and his mother for a little while, in a town that happened to be on the cartel's trade route. Then Michoacán happened and life in the pueblo got worse. People failed to understand that under the invading paramilitaries there were different rules. Take his mother: executed in broad daylight, for daring to photograph a mercenary posted near their home. From there the residents began to vanish. Anyone could become one of the many disappeared—journalists, citizens—even the mayor, though this wasn't known until later, when his head was displayed on the town hall steps for all to see.

"Pasó cuando era pequeño," he admits, indicating his height with an open palm. "No recuerdo mucho."

"Qué horror."

"Sí," he agrees as his eyes gloss over. "Un horror tremendo."

You don't ask for more details. How Miguel managed to survive years as an orphan in war torn Mexico is beyond you. Americans

know embarrassingly little about the situation, are too estranged. You don't want to confirm the stereotype.

Miguel wanted a better life and chased it, almost enjoyed the challenges and the risks. It can be done, he thought, sleeping atop freight trains bound for the border, clutching what little food he had, nothing between him and the Mexican countryside as it rolled past. At night, he was mesmerized by how many stars there were in the sky. More than he had ever seen in his pastoral town. More than there were people in the world, he was sure.

"Pero hay pocas estrellas aquí," he says, and he's right, you can't see any of them in the city, not with all the lights. "Y mucha más gente."

You both look out the window as the train moves down from the elevated tracks and the bright skyline disappears, swallowed by the subway tunnel. Earlier, Miguel had explained how disoriented he'd been from the moment he arrived. All the buildings were too tall for him to distinguish, and he had been wandering in circles for hours. You wonder if the darkness of the tunnel has the same effect.

"¿Estudias?"

This catches you off guard. Your schooling is a sore subject.

Say: "No, dejé los estudios."

For a minute, neither of you speak. There's a hole in Miguel's right sneaker and you watch as he periodically pokes a dirty toenail through it.

"No era lo mío," you add, defensively.

Miguel understands. He nods and says: "Cada tiene destino."

"Exacto."

Miguel asks where you're going. Explain how you want to help him but can't just bring him home, your girlfriend would kill you.

"¿Es güera?"

Show him the photo in your wallet of you and Cecylia sharing a turkey leg at the Taste of Chicago, where she dabs some barbecue sauce onto your face. In it, you both blink.

“Polaca,” you say.

Miguel whistles.

Tell him you’ll get off together and walk to a homeless shelter that will give him a bed for the night. Don’t meet his eyes when he gets excited. Settle for a handshake when he asks to give you a hug. Miguel knew you were a good person, he could feel it in his bones.

“¿Tienes fé?” he asks, and you tense up, worry he’s going to try to convert you.

Say sheepishly: “Creo en algo.”

This way he gets off your case. Show him the crucifix around your neck to seal the deal. You never really believed, but your parents did, and you owe them that much.

“Esto, lo que está pasando,” he says, gesturing between you two, “es un milagro.”

“Un milagro,” you repeat, dubious. A miracle.

He shows you his yellow smile. “Sí, un milagro.”

Miraculously, you arrive just before the shelter closes down. It’s a Christian shelter and a neon cross glows in the distance with *Jesus Saves* printed on it, guiding you two through the dark night. Something in Miguel stirs when he sees the cross, and you embellish the motion with a deeper meaning than necessary. His pilgrimage is almost over. You want to say that to him, but don’t.

You decide to see Miguel all the way to the door. You’ve spent over an hour together by now—what’s a few more minutes? There’s some light security, which makes sense, the shelter is in a rough neighborhood. You and Miguel stand in line, waiting to walk through a metal detector. The room you are standing in has a few guards and one is posted along the brightly colored wall with a mural of the lakefront on it. You notice a sign nearby explaining the shelter’s rules. First time guests can show up at any hour. Recurring guests must be inside the premises before 8:00 p.m., and then the doors lock. No exceptions.

Some of the color drains from Miguel's face. He looks unwell.

Ask if he's feeling okay. Has he eaten? Did he drink water to keep up his strength?

"Me pongo nervioso," he says, eyeing the guard coaxing people through the detector, and you can't help it, you laugh. Nervous? The carnage he's witnessed would make headlines.

"Te acompaño," you say and this surprises even you. You not only volunteer to stay, but to go ahead of him, so you can translate.

But you never get the chance. The guard takes one look at Miguel and tells you both to get lost.

Stay calm. Be polite. Try to explain that your friend is undocumented and needs a place to stay.

The guard asks if that's your only sob story for the night. His name tag reads Marcus L. His accent is Chicago born and bred.

"There's a misunderstanding—"

Marcus points to Miguel. "Look, man, we got rules."

Say: "I have ID, but he doesn't."

"What are you trying to pull, kid?"

Exchange a look with Miguel. His lips tremble but he keeps it together.

"He just needs a place to stay."

"Do I have to call the cops?"

"Jesus, will you just listen to me? He has nowhere else to go."

Marcus's hand moves to his belt. There's no way he's armed, but it's clear he's not defenseless. "He's been here before. Haven't you, kid?"

Shout obscenities as you and Miguel head for the street. Ignore your doubts. Miguel insists he doesn't know what Marcus—that racist son of a bitch—is talking about. Hear him out. He's riled up, scared, dark eyes vivid in the orange streetlight. He won't stop rambling and you can't think. Tell him to let you think.

There aren't many options:

A) Give him your phone number and hope for the best, he calls, it works out, and somewhere down the line his first born is named Hector.

B) Take him home with you.
Decide on B.

In the beginning, you and Cecylia made a game of your troubles. It had been so long since someone took an interest in you that you didn't know how to do anything but complain. Things always went wrong. You'd like a new restaurant job for a bit, but then the manager would turn into an asshole and you'd walk. Or the idea of going back to school seemed tempting, except the paperwork and money would overwhelm you. She always listened and held you and didn't judge and one morning, you felt safe enough to ask, "What's today's forecast?"

She put two fingers to her temples and hummed, pretending to gaze into the future. "I see at least two tables stiffing you. The train's going to break down before your stop, too."

"Thirty percent chance of a shit storm?"

"Maybe forty."

You pulled her close. "Wrong. I'm off today."

"Well, in that case—," she began, but you cut her off with your lips.

It became part of the morning routine, somewhere in between the sex and brushing your teeth and showering. Then little by little it lightened. The less you woke up alone, the more you started to ask, what could go right today? Cecylia's troubles seemed real compared to yours. Bills piling up and final exams and covering shifts, pressure from her parents to do more and to do good. There were times when she seemed ready to collapse, but you were there, remedies in hand, chipotle burritos and foot rubs. It was nice, to carry each other through things.

You bonded over a mutual love of weed, though she wasn't much of a smoker. Cecylia had been diagnosed with anxiety as a kid. Pills made her feel worse, so over the years she had become proficient in space cakes. Brownies, cookies, even carrot cake once, with homemade frosting and intricate carrot designs. Sometimes after a long shift, she'd stay up late waiting for you, dressed only in an

oversized T-shirt, her nipples hard under the fabric while holding a tray of baked goods.

“Let’s sail, baby,” she’d say. You used to call her the Marta Estewart of the Midwest. Eventually, you moved in.

The word *love* came out accidentally during a Chicago blizzard. That day so much fell the city practically shut down. No one in the streets, snow piling up inch after inch. Wind so bad that the mayor told people to get off Lake Shore Drive, and you can still picture the abandoned buses and cars buried in ice, the frozen waves cascading down the freeway.

Neither of you went into work, and there was a pile of weed you had been saving for a rainy day. So you tripped together, making breakfast in your pajamas, taking breaks to shed each others’ clothes or watch romcoms. During the swell of your tenderness, you went there. In Spanish no less.

“Te amo, Cariña,” you said as you finished, like a bad telenovela actor.

And when she wouldn’t let you go, when she kept her legs wrapped around you so you stayed inside, you knew you meant it, too.

The space cakes were strong and you felt so good, not even the cold could stop you from having the occasional cigarette. It was while you were outside, braving the elements, that you got the call. Whatsapp blew up on your phone and it was your mother dialing from Colombia. Your mother always filled you in on the latest familial gossip. The drama unfolding with her neighbors, who liked to sunbathe on the roof naked. Or whatever stupid fad your father was trying as of late. Dyeing his beard to hide the gray, wearing acid washed jeans. Anything to try to stay young and hip.

“¿Estás sólo?” was the first thing your mother asked, and this strikes you as strange in retrospect; what would she have done if you’d said yes?

“I’m with Cecylia.”

Despite the subzero temperatures, you felt a sudden heat slowly creep down your back.

“Mamí?”

You didn’t cry as you calmly explained to Cecylia that your father died. Your father wasn’t the one who knocked over the stop sign, that was some drunk kids the night before. But he did cruise through the intersection where it had been, and, well, no one is ever really ready for that sort of thing. And for what it was worth, your old man could drive stick before he could read. Never felt better than he did behind the wheel. Was willing to risk deportation in the States just for a few minutes in traffic with the local salsa station on, his hands at ten and two.

“Malcriados,” you repeated over and over again. That was what your mother called the drunk kids and you latched onto it.

You can’t say how much time was spent sitting on the couch, muttering to yourself, Cecylia rubbing your back as *Love Actually* played on the TV screen.

“Fucking malcriados,” she echoed.

Once you and Miguel are in the apartment complex, not a sound. No questions, no nada. Absolute silence, or else Cecylia will wake up and you’re both done for. You make Miguel repeat what you’ve said and he indulges you. He swears to God, with a capital G. Not a peep. But still you have to remind him on the front stoop because Miguel can’t stop talking about a bed. He hasn’t slept in one since before the cartel. And even though you’ve explained it’s a couch, not a mattress, Miguel’s all for it. Better than a freight train or the ground. Maybe you two can make Cecylia breakfast? He knows the perfect recipe for chilaquiles. His mom used to—

“Cállate,” you say, brusquely. “Por favor.”

This gets through. Miguel holds a finger to his lips the entire way up the stairs, and it’s only when you’ve set him up in the living room with a blanket and pillow that you think he’s in the clear. You throw him a silent thumbs up. Miguel responds with two.

Then the lights flick on and Cecylia is there, not in a sexy T-shirt

with a tray of cookies, but a bathrobe instead, holding a baseball bat. She breathes a sigh of relief.

“Babe,” you say.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t notice the smell?”

Ask if you can talk in private.

“Absolutely not,” she says, dropping the bat. “And leave him alone in here with all our stuff?”

Say: “His name is Miguel and he’s undocumented.”

“Hector, what are you doing?”

“He’s from Mexico.”

Cecylia grabs at your hands and sniffs your fingertips. “Have you been smoking?”

“Just reds.”

Miguel clears his throat. He tells Cecylia she has a lovely home.

“He likes our place.”

“You can’t just bring people here without asking.”

Nod along to what Cecylia says. Agree wholeheartedly to her points. You’re not right in the head. It isn’t fair to ask so much of her. The crazy work hours, long nights when she has no idea where you are. You know how her anxiety flares up if you’re not there. Not to mention the robberies happening in the neighborhood lately. She called and texted and you left her here worrying, waiting.

“My phone died. I’m sorry.”

Cecylia gathers the robe around her before taking a seat. “Has it occurred to you he might be lying?”

Miguel has quietly watched your interaction, but even with the language barrier it’s clear he is unwelcome, so he starts to move. Tell him not to worry, that he doesn’t have to go anywhere. Watch the confusion spread across his face. For a moment, the room is filled with the sound of his fingernails scratching at his stubble. Then Miguel kneads the brim of his Bulls hat, tips it toward Cecylia as if to apologize, before sitting back down.

“It’s just something I need to do,” you say. “He needs help.”

Cecylia shakes her head in disbelief. “Hector, you need help.”

None of it works. You get on your knees and press your forehead to her stomach, beg her to let you have this, to make things right, but Cecylia never caves.

“If you keep this up, I’m gonna have a panic attack, Hector. Is that what you want?”

“He’ll leave in the morning.”

“No.”

Tell her there’s no need to freak out, that you’ll just take him somewhere else. Tilt your head toward the kitchen so Miguel knows to follow. Act like you’re making for the door, but quickly rustle through a drawer instead. Move around the takeout menus and spare wine openers. Pocket Cecylia’s car keys. Pretend she isn’t in the room.

“You can’t take those.”

Jiggle the keys in your pocket. “I just did.”

Cecylia tries to grab them from you. Stop her with more force than you intend to. Leave her crying in the kitchen as you and Miguel head down to her car. Switch the radio to the local salsa station as the engine starts to churn. Ask Miguel if he likes this kind of music.

Miguel, though shaken by the exchange, knows just what to say. “Me encanta.”

The last time you saw your old man, he was saying goodbye.

“I’m staying,” you said, when they announced they would move back. “My life is here.”

Your parents exchanged looks. Every other week you came for dinner, caught up, drank maybe a little too much whiskey your father always kept stocked (Chivas, only the best).

He stirred the ice in his drink. “We knew that already, mijo,” he said. “We just wanted to let you know it was time.”

“Time for us to enjoy the time we have left,” your mother added.

And even though they didn’t say it, you knew what they meant.

You were twenty years old and it was time. Time for you to start your own family. Time to stop looking for someone to blame for the mess you'd made yourself. But could you be blamed? If your parents had never left Colombia, you would have been raised in the city they were from, would have held your mother's hand as his coffin was lowered. And even worse, they had gone back knowing you couldn't truly feel at home there, with your broken accent and First World dreams. You all knew that. Colombia would have disappointed you.

You certainly could have used more time. Because with more time, maybe you would have had more money. But what little money there was had been wasted: on the Chicago nightlife, on bars, on bottle service at clubs, on Plan B for the other girls, the ones before Cecylia. A nicer apartment. Progress. Raising your own standard of living.

So three months ago when your old man died, whatever was left went toward the services and not a plane ticket. For a lush plot of land, in the shade of a historic tree. Granite, he would have liked that for sure. Decent catering for the wake. And so that was when the crazy work weeks began, and you found a second job. Anything to lighten the load for your family abroad, especially your mother, who, despite her pain, remained strong.

One night Cecylia came home from class and found you on the floor.

"I'm fine," you told her.

Even Jim had seemed concerned on your first day back. And you wanted so badly to go off that you just said the mantra you'd adopted in light of everything: "I'm fine." And for good measure, "I'm fine, Christ, what is this, an interview?"

"I'm just asking," Jim said. "We have to look out for each other."

Later, you noticed Jim staring at you while you closed a check for a table.

"Really, Jimbo. I'm fine."

"If you're fine, I'm fine, Hector."

But it became increasingly clear that you shouldn't have been. Jim was on the fence about how soon you came back to work, was willing to give you more time off, but you had only laughed and said, "You know us beaners, we work like mules."

Then Jim told you it was fine to take a smoke break. On your way off the dining room floor, one of your tables thanked you for recommending the penne alla vodka, and for some reason that's what did it, what made something crumble inside. You fought back tears as you addressed the confused faces around the table. You were glad they enjoyed their meal, glad to be of some use. Out back, crouched behind the Dumpster, a lighter trembling in your grip, hold the cigarette between your lips, you told yourself. Steady the lighter with both hands. Wonder why your old man came to the States in the first place. Wonder what it was supposed to add up to. Wonder when it all went to shit.

The streets are dead. It's been some time since you've driven, but it all comes back, and for a little while you buy into the road trip feeling. The salsa thumping through the speakers, your hand hanging in the open window with a cigarette. Things will be okay, you tell yourself while pulling onto Lake Shore Drive.

But then Miguel breaks it. He wants to know where you're going.

Lie and say there's another shelter you can try. If it isn't open you'll both sleep in the parking lot until it does.

Miguel doesn't seem to like this answer and he puts his shoes on the dash. Cecylia would have hated that, but let him do it anyway.

Look out toward the lake and take it in, the way it is right now with the wind in your ears and the beginnings of a new day over the horizon. All your life can be estimated by your proximity to this lake. And only here, driving along it with Miguel beside you, watching the hues bleed into each other as the night is put to rest, can you appreciate that gift.

"La trataste mal. Muy mal."

Focus on the road. Don't even acknowledge the comment. The fuck does he know about you? About your relationship?

"Déjame aquí," he says, pointing to the nearest exit ramp. Miguel just wanted a night off from the street and you've given him that.

Suddenly, a siren erupts behind you, the blinking lights flashing into your view. You're going seventy at the crack of dawn like everyone else and the cops don't have anything better to do, not with a brown dude at the wheel. It's possible Cecylia reported the car stolen, but no, she would never do that. You left on bad terms, but it's nothing you can't fix.

Cycle through the version of events where you're the hero you want to be. Miguel lays low after you help him and eventually gets his papers. You attend the ceremony where he becomes a U.S. citizen, and the photo of him standing in front of an American flag holding his documentation forever rests on your mantel. Now an older man, Miguel divides time between his mixed grandchildren in the States, and his multiple properties in México. Cecylia and you grow closer, and she admires your generosity, gives you three kids: beautiful twin boys and a daughter. You live long enough to see them all succeed, to watch them instill your values in the next generation.

If the police realize Miguel is illegal, you'll be held complicit. He's a dead man if you stop the car, and the life you've imagined will die with him.

You can feel the air picking up on your face. Don't pull off the accelerator, even when the handling starts to slip. There are other cars blurring past you, commuters from Indiana on their way to the Loop. Take advantage of the empty lanes.

Miguel blurts out, "Are you fucking insane?"

Keep your foot on the gas. "What's today's forecast?"

"The fuck are you talking about? Stop the car, you crazy fuck."

Laugh when Miguel prays, when he begs you to pull over. Look at yourself in the rearview mirror. This is you. This is you running out of time. There's no more time to look for someone else to blame,

Hector. And then finally listen. Tune into what's going on around you—the whooping sirens as you slow down onto the shoulder, Miguel's English voice as he calls you a sick prick, the friction in your grip with your hands at ten and two—and just be. 