

Ander  
&  
Santi  
Were  
Here

jonny garza villa

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a novel

  
WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

C *hingada madre.*"

The words come out as a rough whisper through exhausted breath. I plop into a chair, lean toward the outdoor space heater for warmth, and crane my neck to the left and then the right, loud cracks relieving the stiffness in my muscles. Or whatever it is that happens when I pop body parts. I don't know. I'm not a fucking scientist.

I *am* tired, though. Taquería Guadalupe, my family's restaurant and a Santos Vista favorite here on the Westside of San Antonio, isn't usually so busy on a Thursday, but today's lunch rush had us seating people even out on the patio. After putting on a smile, taking orders, carrying food and drinks for hours, and giving all the tables a good wipe-down once everything finally stopped being so wild, I'm surprised my legs work at all right now. No lie, I could fall asleep here and be perfectly content.

The only thing that'd make it better is if it wasn't so cold outside. I've been craving springtime for about two and a half months now. Those March and April days that have me begging Tita—the Lupe of Taquería Guadalupe—to let me work outside. Crop-top-and-shorts-with-a-negative-inseam weather. When there's a cool breeze, the sun's out but not frying me, and it's not raining all the time yet (plus it doesn't get humid like

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the coast or dry as shit like West Texas). Those days where I'm tempted to blow off work and spend sunup to sundown shirtless at some river instead.

That's Heaven.

Way more preferable to these January days when I feel like I'm trapped in one of those grocery store freezer-aisle coolers. I'm not made for weather below seventy degrees. But some days, I just need to not be stuck inside. I need that sudden gust of wind that flows through the patio, biting my face to keep me awake, carrying with it the smell of mesquite wood, masa, meat, and purple Fabuloso and a chill that would sting if it wasn't for the warmth coming from the heaters.

And it's been a pretty good day. Can't complain after getting a fifty-dollar tip from some Beckys and Karens—the kind who think Google Maps is taking them to a fancy River Walk or Pearl restaurant and accidentally end up on the “bad side of town.” The type of white women who only like their margaritas with sugar on the rim and think they can empathize with brown people because they read *American Dirt*.

Ignoring passive racism for forty-five minutes and acting like my only goal in life is to be every girl's gay best friend is something I can grin and bear when their money is paying for my next pair of swim shorts. I should put that on my resumé. And at least they were quick to catch on to me casually pointing out the THEY/THEM/ELLE and PLEASE DON'T CALL ME SIR buttons pinned onto my sweater.

I stretch my arms and tilt my head back. A yawn comes out that becomes more of a tired moan and then turns into humming along to norteros playing over the patio speakers. My hands go up, adjusting the white bandana tied across the top of my head. Then I check my fingers, making sure the burgundy of my nails is still intact. I look down to inspect my TAQUERÍA

GUADALUPE sweater, a color somewhere between baby and Argentinian blue, and khaki chinos rolled up, exposing the skin of my ankles. Sometimes I don't catch a salsa or grease stain until way after the fact, and then I'm rushing to the kitchen, scrubbing it with dish soap.

Nope. Nothing. We're good.

"AJ!" Ronnie shouts from the half-open door leading from the restaurant out onto the patio. Or leading from the patio into the restaurant? *Both?*

I'm not sure how long he's been watching me. Hoping not long enough to know I've been sitting down on the job for the last ten minutes, even though I know he'd never say anything to my parents or Tita. But how'd I not hear or see him until he said my name? Sneaking up on me like a friendlier cucuy in a bright green taquería tee under an unzipped black hoodie. "What're you doing sitting out here? *Está pinche frío.*"

"The heaters make it better," I tell him, watching as he takes a seat next to me.

I've known Ronnie since he started working at Lupe's as a busser when he was sixteen and I was six. He was the first trans person I'd ever met, and even when I was that young, I could tell there was something about him and his energy I was drawn to. That felt familiar. Growing up, as someone who sometimes feels more boy and other times more girl but 99 percent of the time somewhere in between or not existing on the graph at all, having someone like him around made the process of figuring out who I am a lot less lonely.

Twelve years later he's still here, running the patio bar and being the guy in charge of the place when Tita and my parents aren't around. Like right now.

"You can head home if you want," Ronnie tells me. "I think we've tired you out enough for today."

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“I’m gonna sit here for a couple more minutes. That cool?”

My head’s tilted up and my eyes are closed, so I only hear him tell me, “Yeah, that’s fine.” But I also don’t hear him leave. Must not be eager to get up and do anything either.

“El mural de pan dulce es muy popular,” he finally says. I open an eye and see his finger pointing across the street to the painting I did for Rosalinda’s Panadería. Large pink, yellow, even light blue and green conchas cover the entirety of one of the walls outside. I also added some golden sparkles to give it the perfect amount of aggressive cuteness without being too busy.

“Every day—it could be forty degrees outside—there’s always three or four muchachas taking pictures for the Gram.”

“Hm.” It comes out like a small laugh. Today the regular muchachas dressed to match the aesthetic of the mural and do their one-leg-up-and-peace-sign poses aren’t there. Instead, it’s two much less assuming people: one that’s probably about my age, standing up against the wall, and another who could be a tía or maybe an older cousin, standing toward the street, busy talking on their phone. The one near the wall takes their own phone out and—*oh my fucking god*—starts taking selfies.

The loud, abrasive squeak of my chair as I jump to my feet makes Ronnie cringe. “*Why are they taking a selfie like that?!*” I turn to Ronnie, my eyes wide in frustration and mouth open, and my arm is held out to the mural. “That’s not how you capture the moment correctly.”

“Cálmate, kid,” he replies, waving a hand up and down, motioning for me to put my butt back in my chair. “You can’t control what people do with your art.”

“*I can try.* There’s a tripod in the office. I’ll go give it to them if it means I don’t have to see this happening right now.”

He only scoffs and rolls his eyes at me while crossing his

arms over his chest. “Oye, how many more are you doing before you leave for Chicago?”

Way to obviously brush off my very valid concern over *my* work.

“At least eight more with Beautify,” I answer with just enough bite in my voice to tell him I’m not over this while continuing to glance over at the mural, eyeing both people now sitting on the sidewalk, backs against the wall. The one who doesn’t know how to properly photograph art sits next to the dark smudge that is my signature. “Could be a few others depending on how much time I have on my hands and if I can get some commissions.”

It’s been a little over half a year now since I sat Mami, Pa, and Tita down—at this exact table, actually—and told them I had emailed the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (which has to be, for absolutely no reason, the longest name ever for a college) with a plan to defer my acceptance for a year. And then I slid my iPad over to them so they could read an offer I’d already accepted from this local nonprofit, Beautify Not Gentrify. It was a chance to take part in their first Youth Community Residency Program.

What I remember most, though, is how the excitement in my voice decreased with each word I spoke because of the way their faces went from interest to disappointment and anger.

“You’re staying another year?”

“You aren’t going to college?”

“Why didn’t you talk to us about this first, Ander?”

It wasn’t a great moment for us.

“Yes.”

“I still am.”

“Because I didn’t want y’all trying to convince me this was a bad idea.”

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The memories of Pa's frustration and Mami trying to hold in her screams are so vivid I could paint in detail the creases on his forehead, her eyes wide with rage, and how she sucked in her cheeks to keep herself from saying anything she might regret. As much as I tried to explain how amazing of an opportunity this was—*is*—they still think that since I didn't go straight to SAIC, I'm going to end up as a taquería waiter for the rest of my life. Which is a thought no one put in their heads except for themselves. They accused me of throwing away my talent and have spent the months since asking me what is here that I couldn't do in Chicago.

I can point them to the "Como la Flor"—inspired mural that covers the side of the H-E-B a few blocks down, where everyone in the neighborhood gets their groceries, and the *No Human is Illegal* piece I did for the RAICES offices in graffiti font and Sylvia Rivera on Club Sixty-Nine at the Main Avenue Strip and the *Last Supper* I did on the Iglesia Santos Pedro y Andres CCD Building that took three weeks to finish as things I wouldn't have been able to do in Chicago. As proof that the past half a year hasn't been a waste of my talent.

Even though there's this voice in the back of my head that constantly tells me I made the wrong choice. That I fucked up my entire future by staying here because now I'll be stuck painting pan dulce and Selena for the rest of my life. And, yeah, that's not terrible. I wouldn't be mad about that future. Everything about the art I get to do feels like me: Mexican, queer, and done in a way that's loudly and proudly both.

But then I think about that meeting with the Seattle School of Art and Design and how they, to my face, rejected me *because* all they saw was a person who paints pan dulce and Selena, and how, for the very first time, I felt a shame about it. And, because



of that, there are times where I don't know whether I love or hate where I am right now.

I was hoping doing this—staying here a little while longer—would help me figure out who I am and what I want as a muralist; as an artist. That doing all this cool shit with this residency would've made the thoughts go away. That I'd either figure out a way to change my entire aesthetic or start embracing it so that a few old people in oversized cardigans won't get to me.

Rich white kids get to spend their gap year backpacking through Europe and collecting STIs in hostels like Pokémon cards. Not that getting paint all over my hometown isn't the most incredible opportunity I've ever been given, but I doubt Kayleigh Lynn and Chad are having identity crises in Paris right now.

"Ey, your fans are coming," Ronnie says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"What? Who're—Oh. *Ughh.*"

I don't know if I'm more annoyed about those two walking up to us or that the one who was taking selfies is actually kind of cute. Looking cozy in a faded navy hoodie under a denim jacket, and gray sweatpants that are taking all of my strength to not stare at.

"Ronnie?" Sweatpants asks.

Ronnie's got a blank look for a second before the light bulb in his brain comes on. "Oh, Santiago, right? You're . . . the interview." He smiles as he stands and holds a hand out. "Nice to meet you, man."

They shake hands and then Sweatpants Santiago looks over at me definitely not staring at his face, but I catch myself and look into his eyes quickly enough to maybe not have been caught. The person with him starts talking to Ronnie in Spanish, but it

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all goes mute when Santiago gives me a smile. Not a huge one, but it's soft. Cozy like his hoodie probably is. And I smile back at him. Taking in those tired, dark brown eyes and pretty, full eyebrows. His nearly buzzed hair and skin that's a little darker than mine. His hands holding on to the railing between us.

Okay, maybe he's a little more than *kind of cute*.

"I gotta take this," Ronnie tells me as he gets up, and I pop my neck again turning my head from Santiago to him.

"Oh. Yeah. That's fine. I should probably get home anyways. I'll see you later?"

"You know where to find me."

I watch as Santiago and his friend person head toward the front door of the taquería and, just before going inside, catch him looking at me one more time, giving me one last smile. And this time a little wave. I hold my hand up too, and smile back, until it's been actual minutes since he's gone inside and I'm sitting out here alone, realizing that it is actually fucking cold out here, and thinking about how comfortable it might be if I had a very specific guy's denim jacket right now.

**C**hachi!" Mami yells into the backyard at my sister Carla and her friends. "What are you doing? What—*Where did you get a piñata?* Actually, no quiero saber. ¡Ven pa'ca! Time to eat, pendejitos."

Sometimes it's better not to ask questions. Like when I come home with my best friend (and coworker the past three years) Zeke to find Chachi and her friends Raúl, Benny, Sammy, and Frankie throwing piñata limbs at each other. All of them screaming as bright, multicolored burro parts fly through the yard. Honestly, this is average for a Friday night at the Martínezes: my parents, Tita if there's a Spurs game on she can watch with Pa or if she just feels like adding to the chaos, and anywhere between six and eight teenagers—only two of which Mami gave birth to—all talking at a solid "Mexican nine."

Chachi's friends follow her into the house, everyone with a donkey leg or head in hand. She's always been the type to surround herself with guys, do *guy* things. (Mami's words; none of me believes we should be gendering *things*.) She keeps her hair pulled back into a messy bun, never any makeup, and out of my parents' two kids, she's definitely got the more masc style. It's hard not to think of her as anything besides *boyish*. Definitely more boy than me.

We all line up in the kitchen, where Pa and Tita are finishing

the pile of homemade corn tortillas. Zeke is at my side, paper plate in one hand and phone in the other. Texting either his Human Evolution class group chat or his hole-of-the-week while we wait for chicken colorado, rice, pinto beans, roasted jalapeños, and cooked spinach and calabaza. In his usual only-ever-half-here mental headspace.

Mami calls him, me, and our other friend Mo *los trillizos*, which I've always thought was a stretch. In no way do we look like triplets. I'm shorter than both; Zeke and I are browner than Mo, and Zeke's always had these wild curls compared to my middle-part hairstyle that Mami says reminds her of Shawn Hunter from *Boy Meets World*, even after I've told her a million times I don't know references from the boomer generation (and get a chancla to the head every single time I've said it). And I've stayed twink while Zeke's started embracing the freshman fifteen and his little pancita and the cub lifestyle.

Also, we used to date. Zeke and me. Mo liked to keep things strictly platonic, besides that one week our sophomore year. So, in addition to best friend and coworker, Zeke's also my ex-boyfriend. And referring to them as my triplets weirds me out. I'm not some white from Alabama or English royalty.

But I can kind of get where Mami sees it, especially when we're standing next to each other, wearing our glasses and oversized, nearly-the-same-color-pink long-sleeve tees, navy cotton shorts, and calf-high socks. It's just what happens when we spend way too much time around each other. There's a difference.

Tita follows us back to the dining table, her gold JEFA hoops shaking as she walks over makes them look like they're dancing along with whatever music's playing inside her head. She sets down a glass filled with a soft pink liquid and plenty of ice by my plate before her hand goes through my dark hair.

"What is this?"

“A paloma,” she answers. “But if your mami asks, it’s jugo de pomelo y e’Sprite.”

I smile, grabbing the cup and taking a slow sip, tasting her heavy hand and the 1800 tequila mixed into it. (Not that I’ve drank enough tequila in eighteen and three-quarters years to know the difference in flavors between brands; that would be *illegal*; I’m not twenty-one; I could *never*.) Then I slide it to Zeke sitting beside me so he can get a quick drink before Mami catches on.

My attention goes back to the iPad I’d left at the table to get food and a half-finished design of a La Chalupa concept that popped into my mind a couple days ago displayed on the screen. The Lotería card—not that weird thing Taco Bell does. Soon it will be my latest mural, now that I’ve got approval from Beautify on a place at Juan Diego Creek Park. Zeke is all eyes on his homework, Chachi and her friends are circled up on the living room floor even though we have more than enough couch space and chairs for them, and Mami, Pa, and Tita sit with us at the table.

“You have another project coming up, mi’je?” Mami asks from the opposite side of the table. Her head is tilted up, trying to be metiche and see what I’m doing.

“Yeah, on Monday.”

“Qué bueno. Make sure you take some pictures for your portfolio to show the university. You’ve been keeping them up to date on what you’re doing with your year off?”

“It’s not a year off, I—” I take a deep breath. *Don’t let them get to you, Ander.* “Yo sé, Mami. I’ve been sending things to my advisor and keeping him updated.”

“Juni and Beautify seems to be keeping you busy.”

“Busy enough.”

“Maybe you should think about doing less of other things so you have more time for that. For your art.”

I look up at her, my eyes squint as I try to read her mind. *What is she talking about? "Art is my only thing."*

"I mean . . . never mind. Eat your food. We'll talk later?"

"What is there to talk—"

"Your semester going all right, Ezekiel? Still enjoying school?" Pa asks, fully ending our whatever that attempt at "talking" was. His eyes quickly going over to Mami, doing their telepathic parent talking.

They love getting in my head about stuff like this and being super passive-aggressive with their constant questions about how well Zeke is doing at Incarnate Word while I'm still here. They can call me a disappointment to my face next time. It's cool.

Not as if their child has used their time before college getting real world experience SAIC freshmen can only dream of and creating art that has been in the *Express-News* and travel blogs. That's all over the motherfucking neighborhood. *And Instagram.*

Like, yeah. Doing nothing with my life. Sitting at home and going through crayons.

And, sure, I realize this is some weird, unhealthy way of showing that they love me. That they're—whether they're saying it out loud right now or not—proud of me and my talent. They've always said that. They tell me all the time.

They've just never been in love with me sitting here at this dining table with them instead of in Chicago. As proud as they are, there's always some disappointment there because of that.

"It's all right. Getting the rest of my basics out the way, you know? School is school."

Around the tenth or eleventh time they asked, we came to an agreement that he'd stop overselling the college experience in front of Pa and Mami. Keep it as dull as possible. Even though I know my brilliant whore of a best friend is thriving and living

his best life at UIW, and he has no regrets about going right into it after graduation.

I tune them out. This mural idea needs my attention more than they do. Specifically the girl's dress that's got to be the right color at the bottom. This, like, navy that turns indigo that turns violet that turns white. Only dropping my concentration to switch the Pencil for a fork and pick at my dinner.

Zeke's toes slam into my shin. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough to snap my head up to him. He gives an overly enthusiastic smile, but one of those where his mouth stays closed and doesn't show any teeth.

*You good?* he mouths while Mami, Pa, and Tita are talking between themselves, moving on from harassing me and, indirectly, my friends. Mami listens to Pa talk about some raid that happened at La Carnecería on Abigail and Ruidoso. Tita's voice is stern but quiet as she cusses ICE out, but also sad as she lets out her worries for the families that went home today to find out their spouses and parents are gone.

I nod, giving him a small smile back. *I'm fine.*

"Did you hear about Josué's family?" Mami asks Pa.

"No. ¿Qué pasó?"

"Denied asylum. ¿Tú crees? And now they're stuck in Matamoros, his wife and four kids."

Pa whispers his own string of cusswords in Spanish about this country's entire immigration system. Quiet enough for him to believe we can't hear him, but loud enough for us to definitely hear every word. "What are they supposed to do?"

"I don't know, mi amor. Josué is thinking about leaving. He can't stand them living in tents there on the streets. You know how bad it is for hondureños in México."

"I don't blame him. I'd do the same if it was you and les niñas in that situation."

“And Estevan. Over at Juanito’s garage. They stopped him on his way home a couple nights ago.”

“*He has kids here,*” Pa answers. In a way that I can tell, like every time they talk about this, is chipping away at his heart. “Is he going to try to come back?”

“He’d rather wait the ten years than get caught again and be permanently thrown out.”

“Chingada madre. Those girls will graduate high school before they see their dad again.”

These conversations have been the norm for what seems like most of my life. Pa sitting me down when I was five and explaining why everything in the restaurant always got so chaotic just before people in black jackets with ICE on the back showed up. Seeing more than a couple cooks rushed out the kitchen when we’ve been able to get a tip and a head start. Hearing how one or two wouldn’t be coming in for shifts anymore and knowing exactly what that meant. Or my old high school classmates talking about a mom or dad being deported, or the handful of undocumented students always on edge about whether DACA will stop existing and they’ll get sent to a country they have no memory of.

I had parents and Tita making sure I didn’t grow up like those Mexican Americans who try to forget they’re tied to that first word. Who talk shit about immigrants and stay ignorant about it all. Who think they’re better because we don’t stumble as badly through the English language as our parents or grandparents do. That we’re somehow immune to racism if we buy into it. My friends, like Mo, made sure of that too. He’d take me to LULAC Youth meetings (before they got all defensive and transphobic about the *x* in Latinx and we peaced out), where we’d usually spend at least a few minutes hearing something about immigration policy and the government and how to call our congressperson or senator.



I'm not desensitized. This stuff is fucking angering. And Santos Vista always seems to be the place where random stops happen. The school walk-throughs Chachi and I grew up with. The way security guards at Santos Vista High School think they're also ICE agents and how some governors or presidents really try to make that a thing. Actual born-here citizens feel scared about walking around at night not because of gangs or criminals but because they might end up *accidentally* in a cage when these pinche terrorists want to act first and give us their half-assed apologies later.

But . . . maybe I *am* desensitized. Or maybe because I know that there's some degree of separation from it, I've let myself not think about it. The stories of my bisabueles coming here from Mexico isn't personal for me. I was never super close to undocumented classmates or anyone who had family aside from a few people at Lupe's. I know that as long as I have my license on me, I'm good. I'm away from it all. I have nothing to be afraid of.

Even the way my heart hurts doesn't compare to maybe the way Pa's does, having seen his own friends and employees taken into custody. I've never ached. I've never felt broken like so many people from around here have.

I understand. I've been to the rallies. But to say that it moves me in the same way as my family or Mo or the people at RAICES would be a lie. Maybe it's because I've never had a reason or trauma to give me that sense of empathy about it.

And maybe I'm extremely grateful for that.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,  
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of  
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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