

Celestina, Mañana

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Que pinche calor, Celestina whispers to the mirror as she pushes her crackling-red hair away from her face. *Oops*, she shrugs at the silver-and-black streaks roots showing, while her left hand glides over the golden stitching of her name, *Celestina Vidaurri*, on her busdriver's workshirt. She's proud that her workpants are creased into a shark's fin, that the black socks are paper-thin, a required comfort for her wide feet encased in the black men's shoes scuffed from thirty years of pedaling, never missed a day yet.

Celestina's a good driver, no accidents, so smooth and efficient that most of the passengers don't even notice her, a middle-aged woman in San Antonio past her prime. And like most of these women who don't get whistled at anymore, she makes up for her extra curves with killer-red manicures, hair processed until it's got the life of dried blood. Celestina is different, though, though it's hard to say exactly why, maybe it's the movie-star name, maybe it's the Mexican *huipiles* she wears sometimes in a city where glitter and cellulite are one overflowing package in bluejeans. Maybe it's her ordinary brown face with the purple birthmark on her right cheek. Celestina interprets dreams too, and she pays attention to everything about the woman who asks for her help – teeth, favorite jewelry, eyebrows, flying hands, smell.

Most of all, Celestina pays attention to signs. And this week, the signs have been telling her something is going to happen. For instance, every morning she's looked up on her regular #79 route to see the Travis Bank's clock at exactly 11:11 a.m, when it's impossible to make the schedule the bosses want her to keep. Three days ago, a black cat saw her and didn't cross her path when she was on Soledad walking to the library. Two days ago, she saw a rare horny toad before it shimmied under a pile of leftover bricks at her house on Rivas. And this morning, Friday, she heard her mother's voice calling her, clear as that jukebox from the Acapulco Drive-In, waking her up, *Miiiija!*, and her mother's been passed like twenty years.

Yea, today's gonna be *bien* different, Celestina says to herself, though she can't tell you why, it's all the rains this summer, yes, like some Bible prophecy, but it's something else too, she just can't put her finger on it. Last year, it was the butterflies raining down on the city for days instead of passing through to Mexico, falling from the sky like black and gold whispers of dead people, and now she feels it all the way down to her *panocha*. But what? Does it have anything with her turning fifty in a few months? She checks her mirrors, glances at herself again. *Quien sabe*.

The beginning of summer in San Antonio this April is Hiroshima-hot, but Celestina's route is a yellow stick of cool, filling up *with la gente* on their way to work. At six in the morning, they're already sweating off their Zest-clean, wrinkling their hotel and security uniforms fresh from the *Dale Shine* Laundromat.

"*Cómo 'tas Chuy?*," Celestina greets the stocky ex-boxer with the Spurs championship Tshirt, his brown bag steaming from *Tacos and Donuts*, when she pulls up on Flores and Culebra.

“Los plancharon hueys!”

Chuy doesn't see her, yells in despair to his fellow carpenters, strutting towards them at the very back of the bus, punching the air with one fist, the other hand holding on to the bag. The tacos are for sharing with Rigo and King-Kong, worthy fanatics of the pro-basketball team, like all the other short men in this town. Celestina shakes her head at their devotion, glosses her full lips in the mirror.

“Siombre, they got ironed, pero they're still in the finals ese, so hay que darles un break,” King-Kong rumbles.

He's the big man at 5'10", with a lion's sculpted head, and flat top with three perfectly shaved lines at the back of his head. Two fake diamond stud earrings on the right, one on the left. *“El King”* tattooed on the back of his thick neck. Celestina smiles at his past, how the name stuck because he was always rescuing children and animals, before the gangs. Today he's celebrating because his first-born son, Mikey, finally came to visit him.

“El huerco me forgive, tengo un grandson!” King-Kong announces to the guys. He's been out of prison for a while now, living with other men in the halfway house on Fredericksburg and Mañana Street.

“Me salvó el Lord, vato,” Kong says, sharing pictures with the non-believer Rigo, repeating how he's been saved and how that's the reason Mikey finally forgave him.

“Ay que pray, got to believe in the Lord Jesus.”

But Rigo and Chuy are too busy exchanging weekend stories about the game and *las viejas* who don't obey them.

“Estas viejas, que mas quieren, tienen buenas chambas y credit cards y todavía ‘stan jodiendo.” Rigo has given up on women, just left his fifth wife when she asked him how many women he’d been with.

“Cien.” His alcoholic’s face scrunches up so that his face seems to be made of old elastic glued together. He looks a lot older than sixty, his body a rusty buick that’s seen better days..

One hundred seemed like a good round number, pero se encabronó mas, vatos.”
Rigo told wifa number five it’s always better to be the last than the first.

But the hooting and preaching stops when *la Gloria gets* on the bus. To Celestina she’s the most beautiful woman in San Antonio, the kind of woman you want to hate, but it’s impossible because she doesn’t hate back. Today, Celestina notices that the *colombiana* Lady Di is wearing her white peasant blouse and Mexican flowered skirt for her job at *Mi Reina* downtown, a tourist favorite. Celestina wonders what it must be like to be so beautiful, and then answers her own question, remembering when men looked at her like that, as La Gloria ignores the men and their whistling, sitting directly behind Celestina in the long benches reserved for the elderly or handicapped that face each other across the aisle.

“Maaaasita, quieres un taco?”

Chuy, the ladykiller of the three, sing-songs his macho compliment, his whole body straining in his seat, admiring her in profile, despite the rough elbow from King-Kong.

“Oye, vatos, hay que respect.”

Chuy ignores the big man with the flutey voice. Though he's twenty-two, Chuy looks like an eighteen year-old featherweight, and he's got something to prove. Today's the day he's going to put the move on Gloria, even if she's never even given him a *Mona Lisa*.

"*Quieres share un donut, baby doll?*," Rigo joins in the teasing from the back, but he's not offering it from the brown bag.

Celestina glances at Gloria in her mirror, watching the tears clinging to her chestnut eyelashes, slipping down her cheeks, down the cleavage that Chuy and the others want to see so desperately. Celestina can't understand why men are so cruel to women. Which is why she's given up wanting them, and there was a time no one would have believed it possible.

The *colombiana* with eyes that come from the deepest recesses of her country's emerald mines is raising two sons, alone, and though she works six days a week and weekends, it's never enough. Her mother and younger sisters depend on her in Cartagena. Still, she made it here, political asylum, after the death threats from her ex-husband, the druglord who's sworn revenge after she left him. Her little brother, Rafael, is a lieutenant in the opposing Moncebais cartel. Demetrio, the oldest, is a paramilitary soldier who would kill his brother if they ever cross paths.

Now the sun is heating them up like tortillas on a hot *comal*, only the passengers getting on the bus glisten with dust and flakes of pink bougainvillea. Celestina wishes she could put on some music, but the rules are no, so she hums a *huapango* she likes about love on the other side, trying to imitate that woman's milk and honey voice she heard one special night, and the music in her head makes her want to dance in the plaza