

Dead End Lovers

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Claudio was lost in New York City, stranded, between Park Avenue and Lexington Avenue. His cell phone clung to its last 1 percent battery, dying half an hour later. He couldn't pull up Google Maps to find his way, trapped in a sea of people marching past him.

Suddenly, a bicycle screeched to a stop just inches from him, its tires skidding against the pavement.

"No!"

The rider loomed over him, his expression twisted with frustration. "Where the hell is the Intake Shelter?" he muttered, shaking his fist. Then there she was.

She had long eyelashes, a Treasure Troll blowout, and half a shirt, that left her belly button exposed. Pointing up the block, she said, "30th Street is two blocks down."

"Oh, thank you so much. I like your nails. They're cute."

He wore a Tommy Hilfiger bucket hat, its brim casting a shadow over his eyes. Pulling out a pen, he quickly jotted down her number. In that moment, he felt like he had won the lottery, happy enough to forget he was on his way to the Intake Shelter.

Claudio waited on the curb as cars lined up, ready to race. The buildings around him seemed to bounce and sway. He covered his face and flinched, imagining himself shooting up to the rooftops-only to plummet back down. A wave of dizziness hit him, the sensation of falling, gripping him like a gravity phobia. Maybe it was the coffee making his hands tremble. He imagined an air conditioner plummeting from above, crashing where he stood. Shadows from the towering buildings stretched across the broad street, merging with those of the neighboring structures.

This wasn't Knoxville, Tennessee, where buildings stood only two stories high, where jumping out a window might only mean a broken leg.

Here, in the heart of the city, he envisioned something stirring inside him, something that might make him leap from a much higher floor.

Finally, the Intake Shelter, the old Bellevue Hospital, wrapped in scaffolding and bordered by blue plywood boards. His heart settled. Intake provided him with blankets and set up an appointment with a case worker.

Room 23 had 4-inch-thick doors that groaned like trumpets when they opened. He stood by the gated window staring out. At least he didn't have a roommate.

And then there was Nita's number, he stared at it for hours.

Claudio remembered 2509 Washington Pike. Knoxville, Tennessee. His apartment crumbling, with a caved in bathroom ceiling, which was leaking since September 2022. The maintenance log claimed it was repaired months ago. On TV, Senator Whiteburn declared, "This is not a sanctuary city!" as buses of migrants departed for Chicago. A "Notice to Vacate" taped to his door, ordered him out by Easter Sunday. Then the pickup truck contractors pulled up and fixed every apartment except his. Claudio glanced at his Greyhound ticket to New York City.

"Forget this small town. I'm out."

New York City. The McDonald's sat between a Seven Eleven and a weed dispensary. An old man peered through the windows, searching for a restroom and a kiosk. The glass was partially obscured by a blind spot from the sun.

That's when Nita appeared, her eyes radiating with hatred as she shot him a glare. Mr. Alicea swung open the door, carefully avoiding her intense stare.

He lowered his gaze as she glared at him. His biscuit sat in an open wrapper and his coffee was a rich brown, distracting him from Nita's face.

Nita's eyes never left him until his biscuit was gone. An unspoken challenge hung in the air. He pretended to focus on his receipt. When he finally glanced up again. Her hatred still burned through him.

It was 80 degrees that morning, but Mr. Alicea felt a chill, one that lingered until he left.

Later that day, a man in a wheelchair cursed loudly in Spanish. Nita was halfway up the block, matching his fury with curses of her own. She wrapped a dog leash tightly around her fist, pulling her pit bull back.

"Yo no juego!" she screamed marching toward him.

Then, her voice cut through the air, loud and sharp: "You lucky you in a wheelchair sucker, because I would've cut you." With that, she turned and walked away, her face flushed with rage.

Smith Park had a handball court wall splashed with neon orange, gold, and azure graffiti in bold block letters. Nita's pit bull roamed freely, sniffing around the fence.

Nita chased her sister Mya, tossing water balloons in the air. Both their bodies glistened with water, gleaming in the sun. They ran through the sprinklers, their laughter and screams filling the air with pure joy.

When the sisters got home, Nita danced in front of the mirror, her hips swaying as she stuck out her tongue.

"I told him-I hate you, I'm going!" she shouted from the bathroom.

She dug through her purse, pulling out a pistol and setting it carefully on the edge of the bathtub.

I got a new boyfriend anyway.

He about to call me right now.

He about to take me out to eat

*And buy me some weed.
We're going to move away
To California, Hawaii, Jamaica.
He's going to beat up Mikey
And we're getting the new Tesla truck.
He like my lips, flat stomach, and fat ass.
If I find out he got a girlfriend,
I'm going to kick her butt
Because that's my man.*

Later that day, Mya and Nita rode a moped, making a sharp U-turn before speeding through traffic. They zipped past a red light and a cop car.

Nita saw the cop slam his fist into the steering wheel, shouting as he was trapped between the lanes of traffic.

The moped was already two blocks ahead. It roared like a chainsaw as the girls sped away vanishing in the distance.

Claudio opened his laptop, clicking on a link. The words, "Cherokee Mental Health" flashed across the top of the screen, accompanied by soft classical music in the background.

A bearded man's face appeared, sipping from a coffee mug.

Claudio stared at the screen- "In this inkblot, I see dollar signs."

"Good what else?"

"I'm tired of being broke. Girls diss me, my mom tells me to get a job. I'm going nuts!"

Dr. Ian asked if he had any suicidal thoughts and whether he had any supportive friends. After a brief pause, they scheduled the next appointment. Claudio closed his laptop.

Later, Claudio stared at the weed shop window. It reflected his bearded face, wrinkled clothes, and dirty sneakers. His gaze shifted to the vape pens and the giant mason jars filled with bud.

An old man scratched a lottery ticket with a dime.

Claudio thought, *I got to get this money*. He pulled lint from his pocket and checked his EBT card; only 14 cents left. He tucked a How to Get Rich book under his arm and walked away.

“What’s up. Pull up.”

Claudio walked into the building lobby.

Nita nodded and they made their way up the steps.

He couldn’t help but glance up her mini dress, catching a glimpse of thongs and fishnet leggings.

Claudio undressed
when she slipped off her lingerie.

Three minutes later,
the condom was filled with fluid.

Then, suddenly, they heard screaming.

“Freeze. Everybody get down!”

Claudio quickly pulled up his boxers.

A police uniform appeared.

And they scrambled for the fire escape.

The police picked up a cell phone. Sealing it in an envelope.

Claudio woke up in the backseat of a Lyft, his body tense. His fingers were stiff from gripping the zipper on the duffel bag-10 grand, all his now. A score this big should’ve made him feel rich. Instead, his stomach churned. What the hell had he done? Still, money meant survival.

He pushed the guilt down and hit the stores- Air Forces, jeans and jewelry. He even took Nita to Sergio's, a ramen noodle spot in Manhattan. And he got himself a new apartment too.

The boss man had an office window with a rooftop view, overlooking Central Park. His secretary swung open the door, wiping her mouth, and checking her reflection on her cell phone.

Then the boss man appeared, puffing on a cigar. His backrest towered over his freshly shaved head and a folded handkerchief peeked from out his breast pocket.

"Joey if you don't have my money, maybe your mom does. We'll pay her a visit."

"Don't worry boss," Joey stammered. "I left the money bag on my dresser."

Joey gulped, his eyes wide with panic. A jail scar ran from his cheek to his chin. He loosened his collar, but it stuck to his sweaty skin.

"Joey, you remember what happened to Junior, right?"

"Cops followed me, so I hid it, boss. Don't worry, I got it, I'll bring it tonight."

But Joey's apartment was a disaster. Sofa cushions were on the floor, cabinet doors hung wide open, and drawers were pulled out, -still no money bag. His heart raced, beating a million times per second.

His cell phone flashed with the Lyft driver's face. "Chuck" was written under the photo. Joey left a message: Did I leave my bag in the backseat?

He slammed his phone down and stormed out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

A car pulled up with the Lyft light glowing on the windshield. Chuck rested his arm on the driver's side door. He wore a cowboy hat, sunglasses, and a flannel shirt. A fresh air freshener dangled from the rear-view mirror. Filling the car with the sweet scent of pineapples. His cell phone was mounted on the dashboard.

"Right on next block. McCarthy Hotel. 360 feet away." The phone buzzed with the notification.

Joey opened the passenger door and slid in. His partner climbed into the backseat, pressing the muzzle of a gun against Chuck's seat.

"You Chuck from Lyft?"

"Yeah. How you guys doing?"

"Yeah Chuck you remember me? You drove me to Southern Boulevard. You remember a bag I left?"

"Nah man. A kid came after you. He left with a bag that had a dragon logo on it."

"Yeah. That's it. You like guns Chuck?"

Chuck stared at Joey's gun, then let out a deep sigh.

"Sir, he went to this hotel. I'll take you there."

"Chuck, if the bag isn't there, we're coming back."

Seagrid's Hotel loomed above the car. When Joey and his goon stepped out, a luggage bag with a dragon logo stuck out of the trash.

"Hey Joey, it's got to be here. That's the boss's bag."

Isaac wore a gun holster belt, military boots, and black cargo pants as he paced the lobby. "Security" was stamped on his shirt as he kept an eye on the hotel place.

His walkie-talkie crackled with static and beeps.

"Officer Isaac, I just saw two goons kick in door number..."

In room 103, Joey stood over Claudio with his pistol drawn.

“I’ll kill you if we don’t find that money.”

Another goon hovered over Nita; his mouth clamped shut on a zip tie.

“Officer Isaac. Someone just kicked in door number 103. Beep!”

Isaac sprinted down the stairs and flung open the stairwell door.

“Security! Halt! What are you guys doing?”

A gunshot rang out and Isaac retreated up the steps.

“Hey lady, duck your head.”

When Joey heard the police sirens, he peeked through the window blinds.

“What bag of money? You guys are crazy.”

Joey read off Claudio’s I.D. and then turned it over.

“Better have the boss’s 10K. We’ll be back, Claudio Alvarez.”

“Joey, let’s get out of here. The cops just pulled up.”

Claudio reached for Nita as she rushed toward her moped.

“Please don’t leave me.”

“Claudio- I got warrants!”

She had left her wig on the bed. Her short hair exposed. She jumped on her moped wearing white Air Force sneakers on her right foot and red Air Max sneakers on her left.

“I hope my moped don’t break down.”

Claudio rode behind Nita, hugging her tightly. His helmet visor reflected the flashing red and blue police lights.

“Oh snap. They’re getting closer!”

Nita zipped past a car, missing it by mere centimeters. Another car nearly swiped her.

“Nita, red light! Watch that car!”

“Claudio, who’d you rob the godfather?”

“I don’t know, I just saw the money in the backseat and took it, slow down!”

“You better give them back their money!”

Nita swerved into a garage and disappeared. The police set up a roadblock but couldn’t find Nita and Claudio.

The next day, the rain smelled like rose water, each drop making ripples and rain angels on the surface. It sounded like a mix of a fireplace and ocean waves crashing. When the wind blew, it looked like beach waves rolling across the roof.

Then they closed the window and talked.

Nita showed a man on her cell phone. Mario wore a brimmed hat and held a bottle of rum. Easy money. They found him passed out in front of his door, key still in the lock.

Nita and Claudio opened closet doors, dressers, and bathroom cabinets. Nita found pill bottles labeled Vicodin and Xanax. Claudio lifted the mattress to find \$ 5000 in cash.

As they tiptoed past Mario, he grunted loudly but fell back into a deep sleep.

“Ay Claudio, check his pockets!”

Nita and Claudio headed back to the house. Nita showed Claudio another picture of an older man.

“The Viejo told me his wife died but he always got money. I told Richie to meet me at Echo Park.”

The strawberries tasted like soft apples. The old man swallowed and closed the container. The wind blew the newspaper across his hand, folding the page. His glasses case, orange shirt, and notebook lay on the checkerboard table in Echo Park. An airplane flew overhead with a roar.

When he looked up, Nita and Claudio were standing over him. A pipe pressed against his back.

“Give me your money Viejo!”

The old man unzipped his cargo pants pocket and handed over his wallet. He locked his credit card with his cell phone but still lost \$1500 in cash.

Melissa pulled a pen from her hair-bun and jotted down an order in a checkbook. She pulled out some menus from her apron and walked away from Nita and Claudio’s table. The table was set with a spoon, fork, and knife, lying neatly on the fabric napkin like a complete family. Soft jazz music played in the background.

In the candlelight, Nita’s face glowed like an angel.

Melissa returned, twisting the pepper grinder over Nita’s shrimp scampi pasta. The air was filled with the aroma of garlic.

“Oh, Claudio, this necklace is beautiful. Thank you so much, boo.”

“You know I love you, angel-face. I can’t stop thinking about you. I love you.”

“I love you too, boo.”

When Nita looked out the restaurant window, she could see traffic, treetops, and rooftops. The nearest roof was covered in gravel, with two

rusted cans of spray-paint laying nearby. She imagined a tag-up crew spray-painting, "Nita loves Claudio" on the building.

When she looked again, she saw a couple- pushing a baby carriage. Nita imagined being a married mom. She sandwiched the phone between her ear and shoulder.

"Girl, he bought me a necklace and took me out to eat."

Claudio put some money inside the checkbook, leaving a tip on the table. Nita smiled. She slipped the metal dip cup into her purse, along with a spoon and fork. Melissa shook her head as they left. "look at these thieves."

Figueroa Park. Bounce seats with giant springs sat by the playhouse. A mini-bridge connected to the monkey bars. The children's slide curved to the right. A steering wheel emerged from a yellow panel, towering over the mini-steps.

A willow tree in background drooped like a green pom-pom, partially blocking the red brick building. Another tree stretched over the park fence casting a shade.

Nita and Claudio sat on a park bench, watching finches hop across the leaf covered ground beneath their feet.

Suddenly Nita stumbled backward and collapsed, her body jerking violently. She convulsed trembling Uncontrollably. Drool spilled from her lips as she rolled onto her side.

"Hello 911. What's your emergency?"

"My girlfriend is having a seizure or something!"

"What's your location?"

"Sorry, I can't hear you over the firetruck sirens. Say that again?"

"What's your location sir?"

“Umm...I don’t know exactly. We’re on Southern Boulevard and Doe Avenue. Figueroa Park.”

“Is she responsive?”

“Umm. Baby, wake up.” Claudio’s voice wavered. “Umm... she rolled her eyes backward. She’s choking and coughing. She said she got hit by a bat when she was younger!”

“Okay sir. An ambulance will be there shortly.”

The rooftop was coated with tar, and a small chimney stood in the distance. The people below looked like ants, and the cars appeared as miniature toys. A seagull glided overhead.

The boss flicked his cigar off the roof. It plummeted fifty stories. His furrowed brow betrayed his irritation.

The Dragon Gang patted Joey down but they missed the wiretap hidden beneath his wrinkled business suit. He stole a glance at the goon blocking the roof door, his expression tight with concern.

“We got the money Boss. I shook the cops and got away.”

The Boss shook his head, disbelief clear on his face.

“Joey, I need you to ride with the guys to the landfill.”

“Boss, I spanked the guy who took the money. He’s in the bag.”

“Joey we’re backed up. The Don is pissed. We needed that money last week.”

The Boss made a series of vague hand gestures toward his background goons. They began to move toward Joey as he stared down at the street. His heart leaped into his throat at the thought of being thrown down. He scratched his nose nervously and shuffled his feet.

The rooftop door swung open and twenty FBI agents poured in.

“Everybody get down or we will shoot.”

The boss man raised his hands and dropped to the ground.

Knoxville, Tennessee was beautiful. Magnolia trees bloomed with crème white flowers opening like dinner plates. The air was thick with the fragrance of Mimosa trees, their hot pink parachute seeds drifting through the breeze. A mockingbird screeched, chasing a crow away.

At the gun shop, a hundred rifles lined the wall, their price tags dangling from the triggers. Another hundred handguns were displayed in glass cases. Nita felt uneasy buying a gun over the counter. Beneath the firearms, boxes of bullets sat stacked.

Nita chose a Glock 19. The grip was textured with layered lines running from the magazine to the trigger guard. The slide moved with ease and a bullet slipped from the chamber, clinking to the floor. She aimed the gun at the TV, targeting the Lucky Charms cartoon.

“I rob Lucky Charms right now. I on’t care!”

Claudio bought a Beretta. The grip had a circular seal with two screws and a red dot was on the side. He aimed the sights at his reflection in the mirror.

“I’m Claudio Wick. Boop. Boop. Give me your loot!”

Claudio trembled, driving in serpentine patterns before stopping in front of a man pushing a baby carriage. *What the hell they are doing out this late?* Then he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Before that happened, Nita and Claudio stalked a man heading toward the back of a pizzeria. But when they heard the roaring laughter of three men, they aborted the robbery and walked away.

They drove around Broadway, Central, and Bruins Avenue, but all the store lights were off. The only place still open was the Mouse’s Ear, a porno store.

The couple behind the register handed over all the cash. Claudio stepped backward toward the entrance while Nita stood there, looking around. A minute seemed like an eternity to Claudio.

“Give me your purse and wallet. Slide off the jewelry.”

Nita sat in the driver’s seat, passing by a cop car. The police switched on their headlights and began following them. She drove calmly until the cops U-turned and headed toward the Mouse’s Ear. Claudio sighed in relief.

Nita parked by the side of the road rummaging through the purse and wallet. It felt like it took forever. Then Nita and Claudio switched seats.

Mya threw dirt into the goon’s eyes and ran toward the door. In the hallway, she banged on all the doors but no one answered.

Another goon chased her as she knocked down the trash can.

“Ay, ay, ay. Ged back!”

She panted with her heart pounding. When she swung open the staircase door, Detective Smith scooped her up over his shoulder and returned her to the goons.

Meanwhile, Nita and Claudio sat in a New York hotel.

“Ay Nita. We got the \$15,000 cash, plus \$5,000 more.”

Mya’s name appeared on Nita’s cell phone as it rang.

“Ay, Mya, you okay?”

“Ay listen up. Since this lady tried to escape, the ransom is double. \$30,000 dollars and the deadline is two days.”

Nita clenched her fist before smashing the table.

An Internal Affairs officer from the 16th Precinct wrote a report on the Officer Involved Shooting. This is his report.

Detective Smith's Written Statement.

A GPS tracker on stolen goods led me to Charlie's Pizza Shop. Upon arrival I observed the suspects, Nita and Claudio, exiting the premises.

I identified myself as a police officer and proceeded to tackle Bonita, handcuffing her. At this point, Claudio fired three shots, and Bonita broke free.

When I fired back, a pregnant woman blocked my shot.

I requested backup and was asked, "Do they have hostages?" I replied, "Negative." I was then advised to cease fire until backup arrived. I took cover and a unit arrived in fifteen minutes. I could see Bonita and Claudio yelling, but the gunfire caused my ears to ring, and I couldn't understand what they were saying.

Detective Smith signed and dated the sworn statement.

I Internal Affairs Officer Brian asked Detective Smith if Nita and Claudio still had the tracking device. He replied, "Probably not since they discarded the backpack and the GPS map no longer shows a blinking light."

When Detective Smith arrived at the bodega, the air smelled of coffee and bacon. The chip rack was on the ground with packages scattered across the floor. A uniformed officer snapped photos of the crime scene.

At his office, Detective Smith paused the video upon seeing the same Glock 19 and Beretta used in other robberies. He froze the frame when one of Nita's tattoos was exposed along with a calligraphy tattoo spelling "Bonita".

He played the video again, watching as a customer tackled Claudio to the ground. Another customer reached into her ankle holster and drew a gun on Nita.

The cashier pressed the alarm button under the register, locking everyone inside. Claudio broke free from the tackle but bumped into the locked doors. He kicked the metal panel until he managed to shoot off the locks.

In her statement, the cashier mentioned there was no money in the register as the shift had just been switched.

The off-duty police officer stated that she had been shopping when the robbery occurred. She didn't recognize the robbers because they wore ski masks and hoodies.

Bryant Park was lined with dark green tables and chairs. The open lawn featured a Shakespearean theatre and neatly trimmed pine bushes. A police officer paced at the entrance periodically patrolling the area.

Nita and Claudio sat beneath an umbrella. The wind brushed against them soft as rabbit fur. Nita rested her fist against her face, her sunglasses covering half her cheeks. Then Mya appeared walking directly toward them.

"You alright Mya? You hungry?"

She hand signed, "Yeah, I'm okay. I just want to shower and get some sleep."

The jail had a basketball wedged between the barbed-wire fence. A correctional officer stood with his arms crossed by the reception desk.

Behind the cell bars, an inmate slept on a blue floor mat. A bed sheet divided him from his cellmate. The phone line stretched across the entire floor.

The boss stood in line, wearing a jail jumpsuit wrapped around his waist. He had a light beard, and a toothbrush stuck out of his t-shirt pocket along with a folded commissary sheet.

Finally, he made a call.

This is an inmate from jail. Press 1 to accept the call or hang up to reject the call.

“This is the boss. I need an exterminator to kill a rat.”

“Boss, what’s the name and address?”

“Claudio Alvarez. 1134 Bryant Avenue.”

The man on the other end cupped his hands and lit a cigarette. He wore a trench coat and sunglasses. Tattooed teardrops marked his face, and a dragon tattoo covered his hand.

“Boss, consider it done. We’ll get right on it.”

“There are 30 seconds left on this call.”

“Hey, look I gotta go. These guys are burning a mattress, and I’ve got a migraine. They won’t let me get my meds.” Click!

The ambulance swerved and tilted. It’s red lights flashing. A woman in a paramedic shirt and cargo pants lifted the bed-guardrails, then spoke into a walkie-talkie.

Claudio stared through the back windows of the ambulance watching the buildings speed by as they disappeared into the horizon.

I’m getting sleepy. Help...help me. Why won’t my ears stop ringing? My fingers are tingling. Help me.

The paramedic sat on the metal bench, swaying back and forth. She jotted something down in her mini notepad. Before tearing apart Claudio’s hoodie to search for the wound.

Damn, I’m getting sleepy. I’m about to pass out.

Claudio shut his eyes.

Officer Jenkins wore a business suit and a gun holster. He pulled out a mini-notebook and jotted down some words in the hospital hallway.

Claudio lay on the hospital gurney with his hospital gown backward as the nurse snapped on his wristband.

Dear God. This is Claudio. Damn I can't believe a Dragon Gangster shot me. If you let me live through this, I promise to turn my life to you. Please let me marry Nita, and please protect me from Joey. Amen.

Officer Jenkins pulled out some photos.

"Claudio, do you recognize the shooter in these pictures?"

"That's the guy right there, with the trench coat. The guy who shot me. What about Nita? Where is she?"

"The shooter is in custody but the Dragon Gang has a thousand killers."

"Officer Jenkins, he kept stalking me. He left a Post-it note demanding 10K on our front door. Another time he wore a Corona mask and lifted it up, taunting me."

"Here's my business card. Call us if any Dragon Gang goons pay you a visit."

"Please don't let the boss-man kill me."

At that, the nurse placed an oxygen mask over Claudio's face and he dozed off.

Claudio lay on a gurney, grunting and screaming as Doctor Echo pulled bullet fragments from his stomach with operating scissors. He passed out and awoke in a hospital bed, accompanied by a police officer.

When Claudio arrived at Riker's Island, his wound became infected again. Mya was in there too, awaiting trial. She was facing 25 to life. She looked around her jail cell for anything she could use to hang herself with. She wrote a suicide note but crumpled it and threw in the trash. The police were still looking for Nita. A detective wedged a business card into her door frame. She awoke in the streets.

At the church she lit a candle by the Lazarus statue.

Dear God grant me respite. I pray they throw our case out. Amen.

"Suicide Prevention Hotline. This is Amy. How can I help you?"

"Hello Amy. My name is Bonita, and I am thinking about hurting myself. Mya and Claudio are in jail because of me. My life is over!"

Breaking news. A correctional officer has been found guilty of murder. Officer Brian Blanco along with six other officers beat Jerome Mosley to death in his cell. We want to warn you that the video we are about to show is disturbing and graphic.

Charlie Webber, a black police officer with a thick mustache, had a massive chest that poked out of his vest. He wore no t-shirt underneath. He organized a search team to find the escapees from New Jersey Penitentiary where Claudio was incarcerated. The murder of Jerome Mosley sparked an uproar and a jail riot.

Claudio and a hundred inmates poured out the back exit of the jail. Due to the thick fog, helicopters and drones were unable to capture any ground level activity. The trees in the woods were so densely packed that vehicles couldn't drive through. Officer Webber was busy, having saved an inmate's life with a defibrillator. He also provided medical attention to another inmate, who had run into a tree branch, poking out his eyes in the process.

Claudio's jumpsuit was soaked with sweat as he panted loudly. The mist rose up to his waist obscuring his vision. A police dog barked nearby, while Claudio crouched behind a tree, his legs feeling like jelly and his toes cramped with each movement.

Officer Webber called off the search at sundown. He filled up the jail bus with all the inmates except for Claudio and three others.

Migs Weed Dispensary had big screen TVs displaying various marijuana strains. A moped was parked outside, but there was no sign of Nita. Claudio peeked through the glass door, still no Nita.

When he stepped inside, the smell of rainwater and sweat hit him. His pants were shredded, his shirt clung tightly to his body, and he still wore his jail slippers.

"Ay Keith, I gotta find Nita. I just got out of jail. I can't find her."

Keith looked up from his laptop. He had a bald head and wore a button-up shirt.

"Ay Claudio. I thought you too broke up. I think I saw her with Richie."

Who the hell is Richie?

Claudio nodded silently and walked out.

He tried the musk table next. It was filled with burning incense, oil bottles, and a stack of shea-butter soaps. Mustapha sat down sporting a light beard, a *kufi*, and holding *dhikr* beads in his hands.

A customer resembling Nita rolled on some China Musk. Claudio sucked his teeth when she spun around. It wasn't Nita.

"Ay Mustapha you seen Nita. I gotta find her."

"Nah, I haven't seen her in a month. I heard she went to jail."

"Nah!"

Then there she was, smiling, her deep dimples showing. She wore a thin sweater, that clung to her body. Her hood framed her face. Behind her, a beggar at the check-cashing place, pressed his face against the window, staring.

Southern Boulevard felt like heaven. The light reflected off the windows, and the building's entrance arched over the door frame. The sun was mild, the sky clear, its color the same as a blue jay feather.

Nita waved her hand, "Claudio, you look crazy. What happened?"

"Look Nita, I'll tell you what happened later. Where were you at? I was looking everywhere."

Claudio quickened his pace, long strides taking him toward her. He made the "yes" sign, staring in amazement until a car honked.

"Get out the way stupid!"

"Wow Claudio, you lost weight."

"Ay Nita, you got some money? I need food and clothes."

She mocked him, "Ay, Nita, you got some money?"

But she dug into her purse and pulled out a twenty.

"Come eat poppy. I still got some of your clothes too."

Then they went into the building.

Claudio snapped pictures of the bank. He got photos of Burnside Avenue and nearby exits. He removed a white band from around his collar and put a bible in the backseat.

"Ay Claudio. You see the cameras over there right?"

"Yeah. You think they got a good picture of us?"

"Nah poppy. You saw me? I was all like "Come to our church", like a real nun."

“I’m glad. They only got one guard mami. We could take that bank.”

Nita stuffed her nun’s coif into the glove compartment; then fluffed up her hair. She showed Claudio cell phone pics of the ceiling cameras in the bank.

“It’s a camera by the door, the register, and the hallway.”

“Ay Nita, if the cops come, I be like Vroom, cut left, and head straight for the interstate.”

“Yo Claudio, how you gonna be when you rob the bank?” She made a mouse voice, “Give me U walley pleze. Haha.”

“Aiiight Nita. Here’s Walmart. I’m about to pull up and get some masks, zip-ties, and duct tape.”

Tiger Bank. Tear gas. Smoke. Police helicopters. Locked doors. Alarms.

The SWAT team swapped out magazines. It smelled like gun smoke with a million holes in the wall.

On the ground, Nita clutched her stomach, straining. Her blood trail started at the door. She dropped a gun. Police lights hurt her eyes. The ringing wouldn't stop.

Someone yelled into a bullhorn. “Let the women and children go.”

“I'm not going back.”

Claudio's duffel bag weighed a Tesla truck. The vault was a treasure-room. He ripped the film off the shrink-wrapped money and stuffed more into his duffel bag.

“Nita. I'm going to tell them to send us a plane.”

Nita stood up and collapsed.

“Talk to me, Nita.”

Maybe it was the endorphins in her blood that made her think of Sergio's date, where they had their first kiss. They were kissing like pet shop birds.

She held her head, thinking, *Dear God, save us. I don't want to die. I knew this was going to happen.* A tear ran down her face. A drowsiness overtook her.

She whispered to Claudio, “We shouldn't have come here. Tell them we're surrendering. I'm shot.”

“Nita, we're gonna make it. Come on. We got a quarter million.”

“More sirens, more cops. Drop the bag and come over here.”

Claudio held Nita tightly. Blood was on his sleeves. He dabbed his tears with his sleeve cuffs.

“Surrender or we'll shoot!”

Nita's shirt collar felt wet. Claudio cried on her shirt, his voice breaking as he cradled her head.

“Nita wake up!”

Officer Kennedy with a Navy Seal anchor tattoo on his right forearm, stood ready. His high-and-tight haircut complimented his bulletproof vest, which proudly displayed “SWAT TEAM.”

Through his riot gear shield he could see the sun's harsh light streaming through the windows. He squinted against it. A flower pot lay on its side. The phone kept ringing, nonstop. Couch cushion fabric scattered across the ground like popcorn.

Claudio's silhouette vanished into the vault. His light beard made Officer Kennedy think of a Taliban soldier. *What's that bulge by his*

waist? A gun? Where's the enemy? Dirt nap time. Right there. Come on bank teller get out of the way.

"Where's that shooting coming from?"

"Officer Kennedy stay put!"

Officer Kennedy crouched behind the lobby couch, waiting. Then the ceiling lights flickered and died.

"Captain it's coming from behind the bank counters."

"Hold on I don't want to shoot the bank teller."

That's when Officer Kennedy spotted Claudio, patting Nita's face, trying to wake her. Claudio's figure seemed to blur then double.

Shoot the one in the middle.

The bank grew smokier. Another canister exploded. Claudio's eyes teared up, turning red. Ten men in gas masks loomed over him. Nita hunched over, her breathing-stopping.

One cashier didn't hit the alarm. She ducked behind the counter, then shouted, "Claudio, behind you!". At that a SWAT team member arched his eyebrows in confusion.

The bank teller's badge read Cathy Sheckles. She had told Nita and Claudio when the bank would receive deposits and when the guards changed shifts.

The Department of Children's Services had taken her two daughters. A family lawyer charged her five grand to get them back. On top of that, she wanted a polar bear rug and elephant tusks locked in the vault. She was only 25 years old.

The SWAT team leader lifted his riot shield shouting, "Watch out. Six o'clock" Pop. Pop.

"wait. I can't see the shooter!"

Cathy shot at a SWAT officer. Something bounced off his armor. Her gun muzzle flashed six times.

Gunshots rang out. She jerked back before falling to the ground. Holding her head till she lay lifeless. The SWAT team pushed gun stocks away from their shoulders.

A jet-black ponytail fanned out on the ground. An aquiline nose, olive skin, and green eyes. They reminded a SWAT team member of green digital camo with brown pixels.

Walton Avenue was clouded and dim. The streets were dotted with raindrops. A signed farewell card was taped to a building wall alongside a photo of Nita and Claudio, smiling and holding hands. On the corner, Saint Mary candles stood bunched together like bowling pins. Some had toppled, their wax, melting into the pavement. An empty bottle of Don Julio liquor stood nearby.

Ten years later, the city's memory of Nita and Claudio endured. Walton Avenue held a mural of the couple, the paint chipped but still vibrant, with the words, "Stay in school. Don't be like us." Down the block, street vendors sold shirts printed with their faces, faces now mythologized and misunderstood by the passage of time.

At Don's Discount Store, faded photos of Nita and Claudio hung by the register—a reminder of days that had shaped the neighborhood's rough past. Meanwhile, the Museum of Crime unveiled a permanent exhibit, featuring the couple's belongings, preserving their story in glass: the worn handgun, a silver necklace, and their mugshots. Their presence became an urban legend, yet also a cautionary tale.

During a press conference, Police Commissioner Jackson addressed the past and present of South Bronx crime: "Yes, we've seen our worst days here, but we've come a long way since. The damage left behind by individuals like Nita and Claudio is a chapter we've closed, but the scars remain."

A journalist, Michael Stenson, pieced together the ripples of their actions in a documentary that exposed lives devastated by the couple's choices. Mya, Nita's sister, had been one of those left behind, her Thanksgivings and Christmases hollow. She declined to speak further during her interview, her eyes dull, her voice trailing off. Soon after, she was found lifeless in her apartment, her existence swallowed by sorrow.

Charlie, owner of Charlie's Pizza, recounted years of paranoia: "I pulled a gun on a mailman last week, for heaven's sake." With a tired grin, he added, "Twenty grand on security cameras, and you still wonder if it's enough."

In Tennessee, state lawmakers took a different approach. The Cathy Sheckles Bill passed with overwhelming support, mandating rigorous background checks for bank tellers, an effort to prevent the manipulations that facilitated crime. New tellers would now start as cashiers, under close supervision.

Their actions left a lasting stain on communities across states, but in their absence, neighborhoods stitched together the pieces, building resilience from the ruins of their infamous saga. Nita and Claudio had become larger than life, but now, only caution remained in their shadow.

The End

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