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# BURIED ONIONS

## CHAPTER 1

I knew the mortuary students would get good jobs because my cousin had died recently and my father and two uncles were dead, all of them now with arms like the arms of praying mantises, crooked and thin as whippers. My best friend from high school was also dead, his head having been caught like bulk laundry in the giant rollers of a steel foundry. It was his first good job, and his last. I pictured him with a head like a hatchet, and if I met him, say in heaven, or some dream that was close to heaven, I wouldn't know if I should say something first or let him speak the tinny words of someone whose head had been flattened by iron. "Juanito," I decided I'd say, cheerfully patting a bench to invite him to sit next to me, but looking the other way. "You remember when you stuck your finger in a bottle and couldn't get it out?"

I had gone to school with Juan since we were seven, and I knew his sister Belinda, now heavy with a baby, her second and possibly her last because her husband, Junior, was in Vacaville prison. She hadn't softened. She was a *chola* with wings of blue over each eye and a tear tattooed on her left cheek.

I thought about Juan while sitting at a wobbly metal table on the campus of City College. The

mortuary students all had clean fingers and sat over coffees that I imagined cooled quicker than the coffee regular students drank. I figured that when they handled the bodies, the dead stole some of their heat, and later, when they climbed the steps of the dank basement, the students of that ghoulish business had to stand in the sun and quiver until the heat returned to their bodies.

The sun was climbing over the trees of City College and soon the black asphalt would shimmer with vapors. I had a theory about those vapors, which were not released by the sun's heat but by a huge onion buried under the city. This onion made us cry. Tears leapt from our eyelashes and stained our faces. Babies in strollers pinched up their faces and wailed for no reason. Perhaps as practice for the coming years. I thought about the giant onion, that remarkable bulb of sadness.

I returned to my apartment, which was in a part of Fresno where fences sagged and the paint blistered on houses. The swamp coolers squeaked like squirrels. Dogs pulled at chains, the clover leaf of their padded paws hardened by years of this kind of traction. Laundry wept from the lines, the faded flags of poor, ignorant, unemployable people. The old sat on porches, fanning themselves, stirring up that onion smell so that it moved up and down the block. Some guys, all of them Mexican like me, worked on their cars, and the young mothers stood on their front lawns, talking as they pushed their strollers back and forth a few inches. Still the babies cried, and their crying stirred up our frustration because we were like those strollers going back and forth, back and forth, getting nowhere.

For me, there wasn't much to do except eat and sleep, watch out for drive-bys, and pace myself through life. I had dropped out of City College, where I was taking classes in air-conditioning. I quit not long after my cousin, *mi primo*, Jesús got killed. He was at a club with Angel, his best friend and *carnal*, a blood brother. On that night he was exactly that, a blood brother, as Angel eased Jesús down to the sticky black-and-white tiled floor. My poor *primo*. He had died all because he told another guy that he had yellow shoes. They were in the rest room, at the sink I imagined, and my cousin was happy he had a job and a new woman, so happy that he wanted to talk. Jesús made the mistake of looking down at this guy's shoes and saying something. This guy pushed a dirty blade right into my cousin's clean heart. Or so I heard.

I tried not to think about Jesús, or Juan, or my father and uncles, all of them on their racks of black, black earth. But on those days when I saw the mortuary students huddled together, I couldn't help but think of them. I shook off those images and opened the door to my apartment. Roses flowered near the living-room window, sweetening the entrance. I had no more than a couch and two chairs, college books that I intended to resell, a bed and dresser, and family pictures angled so they almost looked at each other. I had a print of a ship riding the ocean, its sail full, going somewhere. It was fake art, the kind of thing you can pick up at a swap meet or get as a gift when you buy a gaudy red sofa from a Mexican furniture store.

The apartment was stuffy, hot. I turned on the swamp cooler, poured myself a glass of cold water from the refrigerator, and sat down with a sigh on the

All my life everyone was pulling away from me—Father, my mom, Jesús, school friends, and homies who disappeared in three lines of the obituary column. I could have cried under the heat of Fresno, but it wouldn't have mattered. My tears would have evaporated before anyone saw my sadness.

**F**resno, California, is such a sorrowful place that nineteen-year-old Eddie imagines there must be onions buried underground, their vapors drawing tears from the residents above. Eddie is trying hard to stay out of trouble and make a decent living, but he's not finding it easy—especially with his aunt urging him to avenge his cousin's murder. Will Eddie get caught up in the violence he despises? Or can he escape this land of buried onions?

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