

Mario J. Gonzales

Malditos

BEFORE CABEZON'S MOM OD'D THERE, ME AND MY COUSINS TUG AND Tweety would go to the hill and hang with Manny, an older guy from the Projects. Long time ago, the hill was where the mojudos lived in small houses built by farmers to keep their illegals near work. Now the place is torn up, the rooms tagged, walls falling down. Piss-stained mattresses and bent cooking spoons litter the place. I mean, bums and junkies have hustled their way through, no doubt. In fact, some tweakers had a lab here and it blew up in their faces. You could see the smoke for miles. One dude, Palo, burned himself good and wore a mask like that Phantom of the Opera guy for a while.

But that's not why they say the hill is haunted or cursed. It's really cause some farmer, Gandangi or Gandansky, shot himself here, when all the wets were getting off work. Tug and Tweety's stepmom, who was the farmer's maid, said she heard he had went gay for a mojado. Who knows? Maybe the Mexican laughed or fucked him up when the farmer tried to put the moves on. But for sure he died bloody on the hill.

Haunted or not, the hill was the place to kick it. It was where I'd smoke a bowl and watch the sun burn down without no one bugging. Things got crazy, though. It started with this game Manny made up: seeing who could hold a lit M-16 firecracker the longest. Tweety always won, until one day Manny offered Cabezon twenty bucks to hold the cuete until it exploded. Cabezon did and ended up shredding his middle finger.

The idea for the game came from those old cartoons where the Coyote tries to catch the Road Runner by slipping dynamite down his throat. But the Coyote ends up holding the sticks and BOOM. He gets fried—smoke spilling from his ears, his fur burnt and dirty. The Road Runner comes into the picture, goes beep-beep, and ZOOM—escapes.

I always hated that. Cause I wanted the Coyote to win. Watching those cartoons as a kid, slurping my bowl of Cap'n Crunch, I would think: *Andale, Coyote, get that damn Road Runner. Build one of those cool catapult machines and trap his ass this time.* But every cartoon ended with the Coyote falling crazy into some canyon, hitting the ground, getting destroyed.

Tug felt the same way, though he thought the Coyote was like the Mexican—slow, skinny, full of plans that fail—and the Road Runner was the white dude—sneaky, quick, winning no matter what. Tug was always talking about racism, “We gotta get together, we gotta be tight,” he'd say. Tweety called bullshit, saying to his brother, “You're tripping, King,” as in Martin Luther.

They'd fight afterwards. Tug's got fast hands so he'd draw first blood. But despite his name, Tweety is solid, like a Sumo crossed with a Samoan. If he gets you headlocked, you're done. Nobody messes with Tweets, not even Manny. But we all fuck with Cabezon.

Not seriously, though. Me, Tug, and Tweety are cool with Cabezon. For sure, he can be irritating as hell but he's all right. Manny's different. He's bitter hard with Cabezon, almost like he hates. Or worse, cause most have reasons to hate. Like when some asshole gets in your face while you're chilling. You naturally grow hate for that shit and go hardcore not resting till you own whoever is fucking with you.

Cabezon don't do that. He don't mess with no one. He's just too small. Built like a girl: bony-ass arms, baby chicken legs. Seriously thin like a user, although Cabezon don't use. Manny's always tempting him, saying, "You want to feel like you can fly? With this shit a brick could hit your face and you wouldn't feel a damn thing." Cabezon will usually stare at the ground, shake his big old head, and make excuses, "I got to go to the doctor tomorrow," or "I tried that already and it ain't no good."

Don't get me wrong, I'm not soft for Cabezon or anything. I'm just saying he don't always use common sense. It's like after he tore up his finger he comes to the hill. We're downing Tecate tallboys, getting buzzed, when Tweety jokes, "Hey, Cabezon, got any more fireworks?" And guess what? The pendejo pulls a cuete from his pocket. Manny, who's wasted, gets this look. I seen it before, like when he says he can dunk but won't even try. Instead he'll talk smack about your skills.

So anyway, Manny dared Cabezon to do it again but this time even more stupid:

"Cabezon, wanna be a real man? Put the cuete in your mouth and let's see how chingon you are."

We laughed cause Cabezon's hand was still bandaged from the first time and nobody thought he'd do something that crazy. But he did. He put the firecracker between his teeth. Seeing that, Manny ran to Cabezon with his lighter and tried sparking it—once, twice. On the third try the fuse sputtered then nothing. Too much wind. Manny tried again but his lighter quit. He looked around seeing if we'd offer a light. Instead Tweety yelled, "Sit your drunk-ass down, Manny." He eventually did but not before throwing Tweets a fuck-you sneer.

The thing is Cabezon has always been slow, with his melon head and seizures. But since I've known him, starting from second grade, he's never done anything too stupid. I mean, yeah, he flunked a lot and everybody thought Cabezon was retarded. Although it wasn't just that. Once in fifth grade I overheard our science teacher, Mr. Holcomb, call Cabezon a "chigger." At first I didn't get it, thinking it was a racist name whites called Chinese blacks, and it made no sense since Cabezon wasn't either. It wasn't till I read chigger meant a dirty bug that I got what the teacher was about.

Honestly, I don't know why Cabezon is the way he is. My dad said that Cabezon's mom partied like mad when she was pregnant and he came out weird:

real small with a big head, always sick. I guess strange shit runs in the family. Like Bobby, his brother, that dude never leaves the house. Either they don't let him or he's like a hermit. Cabezon once told me that Bobby goes wild if he downs the wrong food or if someone touches his Bruce Lee karate pictures. Then they gotta tie him up so he don't hurt himself. I remember thinking that was harsh and so I asked Cabezon, "Your family really binds Bobby like he's some fiend?"

"Yeah," he said, "we even done it at Easter when Bobby ate thirteen colored eggs and got big toe pain. I taped his knees together with white tape from the 99-cent store. If you don't believe me, just ask Celia."

Celia is Cabezon's only sister. She graduated school on time and even went to Los Gatos, the junior college, for a while. With Celia first thing you notice is her wide hips and short arms, like the *Jungle Book* bear. Tug tried calling her Baloo but the name never stuck since that girl is so quiet and shy, really more mouse than bear.

Cabezon's always talking up Celia, saying stuff like, "She lives in the library, reading till her eyeballs get sore." He claims she reads so much cause she's studying to be a doctor: "Celia's gonna fix people's blood when they're sick. She's real good at taking care of things, smart like a positron."

When Cabezon spouts this bullshit I'll call him out, "What the hell is a positron? You making things up, Cabe."

"No, no. Celia's smart. She got lots of positrons living in her head. I heard about them on TV," he'll say. With Celia, there's no arguing with Cabezon since he don't see no other way but hers.

Like I said, except for Celia, most of Cabezon's family is messed up. But it's his mom who's the worst.

She'd come by the hill a lot, asking, "Have you seen Eddie?" That's Cabezon's real name. She talks like a baby with a real high voice and if she ain't wearing her false teeth you can't understand nothing she says.

Truth is, though, everybody knew what she was really doing: sniffing around, looking to score. "That old bitch is always hungry," Manny would say after she split. Sometimes he fed her. But since she never had paper, they'd trade, usually pills for rock or crystal, if each was holding.

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Not long ago, I don't remember when, Cabezon's mom started showing up around town in a blond wig. It was weird cause, for one, the wig was real long and wavy, not made for an old woman. I mean, since it was Cabezon's mom you expected her to have a contaminated, 1970s, thrift-store wig. But hers was shiny brand new, expensive looking. The other twisted thing was how she wore it: the hair hung off her head crooked, all the fucking time. It's not like she didn't notice. She even had this cheap-ass green sparkly headband to keep it in place. Though that was usually crooked, too.

One day, the day it looked like the sky was stitched together with storms, Tug asked Cabezon about the wig.

“Hey, why your mom’s got fake hair on her head?”

Cabezón started hopping around, saying he could jump ten feet across this burned-out row of fence posts. When he reached the last one, he said, “She got things growing inside her. A tumor, a cancer.”

Nobody said anything since we’re stupid when it comes to serious shit like that, but then Manny, of course, shouted, “Hey, she got that AIDS, Cabezón. Your mom’s always messing with filthy crackheads, smoking rocks. Hate to tell you, but life’s a bitch, isn’t it? Let me tell you something. Put your mom on a no-crack diet. That ought to cure her hood-rat ways.”

Cabezón kept his mouth shut, although he looked mad. For Cabezón this meant his face burning red and him scratching at his neck like big-ass mosquitos had just attacked.

Even if he was pissed off, everybody knew Cabezón wouldn’t do a damn thing since it was Manny talking shit. He wouldn’t defend his mom and he didn’t. In fact, before going home, Cabezón helped Manny load wood into his truck.

Once Cabezón took off, I said to Manny, “Maybe you should take it easy with Cabe. I mean with his mom having cancer.”

But telling Manny to chill with Cabezón is like telling Godzilla not to waste Japan. Manny didn’t like it, so between bites of a nasty-looking burrito he said, “What the fuck? I’m cool with Cabezón. He’s my boy. I’m just fucking with him. He knows that. And anyway, I can’t help what I said was true. His mom is cochina, ghetto-ass dirty.”

Soon after Manny said this, I swear someone ripped the sky open with a rusty blade and it rained hard and forever, like God was some old drunk pissing on the world.

For two days it rained. When it quit, I went to the hill and caught Tug, Tweety, and Manny talking about Cabezón’s mom. Tug had seen her outside Owl’s liquor store, staring at her reflection in the window, stroking her wig like it was her own hair. We cracked up, with Tug saying, “She’s fucking demented. Like our grandpa got before he killed hisself.”

Tweety shot this irritated look at his bro, saying, “Damn, Tug, you never know what comes out of your mouth. Our grandpa didn’t kill hisself. He walked out of the house in the middle of the night cause he was mentally confused. He probably thought he was still in Mexico and not California where cars will hit-and-run your ass off the road. That’s what happened, and anyway Cabezón’s mom’s not that old. She looks like a hag cause she’s a rock junkie wearing fake-ass hair.”

“Wouldn’t it be a trip,” Manny said, putting on his evil-faced grin, “if we got Cabezón to wear his mom’s fucked-up wig?”

We thought it’d be funny, though nobody was in the mood to talk Cabezón into jacking the wig from his mom. Except for Manny, who said before we split, “It’s on me. Show up tomorrow. I’ll get Cabezón here.”

The next afternoon Cabezón showed himself on the hill holding a paper

bag. We asked, “What you got in the bag, Cabe? Give it here.” He laughed a little and kept peeking in the bag like it was the world’s biggest secret. When Manny threatened to take it, Cabezon got serious for a second then reached into the bag and brought out his mom’s cancer wig. Putting it on he said, “Look, I’m my momma. Everybody look, I’m dancing like my momma.”

He did this funny dance: shaking his hips, wiggling his ass, even throwing kisses.

Then it got crazy.

Cause out of nowhere came Cabezon’s mom, wearing a short robe, cutoffs, and flip-flops. She looked all fucked up. I mean, not drunk or high or nothing but sick and skinny. The skin on her arms and legs had big red spots and her face was covered with lots of thick shiny makeup. And since she didn’t have her wig on you could see her baldness. But she wasn’t all bald since little clumps of hair hung off her head.

“Eddie, come here with momma’s hair. I saw you take it. I saw you run away like a little mouse. Little mouse, come to your momma and give her what she needs to be a special flower,” she called out. She was walking toward Cabezon from behind. When she spoke, he turned around and said, “Momma!” Then Cabezon ran and his mom went after him. She was coughing, holding on to her robe, trying to keep it closed. Between coughs she kept saying, “Little mouse, little mouse, come back!”

Tweety, Tug, and Manny were laughing, really busting up. I laughed too, not wanting to be seen a pussy. Inside I felt weird. I mean, it seemed all right when Cabezon fucked around with the wig by himself, but seeing his strung-out looking mom going after him psycho was different. I wanted to say, “Hey, Ms. Leyba, go home and take your son Eddie. Don’t come back here no more. This ain’t a good place for you two.”

But I did nothing, just watching them run like fools. Cabezon was making big circles, kicking up mud, way ahead of his mom who got tired quick and couldn’t move straight, staggering drunk-like. You could tell Cabezon was playing, acting stupid for everybody, daring his mom to catch him.

His mom was getting pissed though and started throwing things at him. First her flip-flops and then whatever was around: sticks, beer cans, plastic bottles.

As soon as she did this, Cabezon jumped on a big rock near the edge of the hill. The sun was behind him, turning his body into two colors: black and gold. On the rock Cabezon took the wig off, held it like he was holding somebody’s head, and sang, “King! King! King!” while moving his arms and head like some out-of-control puppet.

After jumping off the rock Cabezon kept clowning big time and looking to us for our reaction. Manny never quit laughing but Tug and Tweety had stopped. They were sharing a cigarette, staring into phones that were probably shut down for unpaid bills. Finally, I shouted, “Hey, Cabezon, give your skeleton mom back her hair already.”

His mom had quit chasing him. She was breathing rough, still coughing.

Her nose was sticky with snot and her eyes bulged red. She dropped to her knees, putting her hands together like she was praying, and called out in her high voice,

“My baby Eddie is in big trouble if he don’t bring back his sick momma’s wig. His sick momma will have to tell Celia. Everybody will get mad at Eddie. That’s what his momma will do if her baby makes everybody cry sad tears.”

Hearing that, Cabezon flat out ran into one of the buildings while yelling, “No, Momma, no. I’m gonna run from all the trouble so Celia will never find out.”

Tired of all the craziness, I said to Tug and Tweety, “This is boring. Let’s bounce. Go shoot some hoops or something.”

Me and Tweety left, but Tug stuck with Manny. Later he told me that Manny traded rock for Cabezon’s mom’s pills. She hit the pipe hard or maybe that shit was just garbage cause she started vomiting black. Manny booked it when Tug went to get help. Tug said when he got back Cabezon was there watching his mom shaking, lying on the ground. He had put the wig on his mom’s head and was saying, “Sorry, Momma, I made you sick.” Tug also said he was tapping her chest like there was a button there that would make her get up. Eventually the ambulance came taking her away.

I stopped going to the hill for a while after what went down. When I finally decided to go back, I went alone. I did call Tug and Tweety asking about kicking it there but they were busy: going with their grandma to the Pentecostal church. I didn’t call Manny. I’d been making excuses not to hang with him. We’re still cool, and when I see him cruising in his truck he’ll stop and say we should do this or that. I’ll answer, “Yeah, for sure,” and then never do nothing.

It was late when I got there. The cold winter sun barely dropped any heat and the wind clawed into my jawbone. Crows the size of footballs stared down from an overgrown mulberry—the only living thing left on the hill. I felt the dead weight of their eyes and I started to think, I mean really think, about this place. What the fuck was it really? Just dirt piled on more dirt burying the stuff people leave behind. Or just burying all the shit that’s gone down here. I thought about this while walking in and out of the broken buildings, smelling rotting boards and breathing cobweb dust. Going outside, to the part of the hill with a steep drop-off, where people have dumped tires, couches, old rusty ovens, that kind of shit, I looked down and imagined the wrecked body of the Coyote under piles of junk.

It was almost dark when I went home, making sure to walk by Cabezon’s house in the Projects on the way. All the lights but one were off. Maybe Celia’s reading something, I thought. Then someone came out of the house. It was her, Celia, taking out the trash. Standing on the sidewalk, I said, “Hey, Celia, how’s it going?”

Before she could answer I said, “I wanted to know about your mom. I mean with all the cancer stuff she has. She okay?”

Celia looked at me with her big dark eyes and spoke real soft cause her voice

only knows softness, “Yeah, she’s okay. But my mom don’t have cancer. My brother Eddie tells everybody she has cancer but she really don’t.”

Neither of us said anything after that. I just stared while she shoved the trash bag into the green barrel. I saw she had cut her hair. It wasn’t long and nice anymore but short like a boy’s. Before going inside, Celia smiled with her lips—the rest of her stayed blank—and waved bye with her baby-small hands. Watching her close the screen door I thought she really did look like a bear after all.

The streetlights turned on, spitting yellow, one by one. I took the alleyway home trying to avoid the dogs in the Projects. They’re the sorriest animals in town. A lot don’t eat much and are tied up all day. Then at night they’re set loose and go looking for food, fighting over what little they find.

When I got home my mom was doing dishes and my dad was sitting in front of the TV, sorting stacks of papers from work. I went beside my mom, thought the gray in her hair looked like snowflakes on a Christmas tree, and helped her dry. Then, for some reason, I said, “You know Celia, Eddie Leyba’s sister? That girl for sure is going to be a doctor.” My mom answered yes, real quiet, like she didn’t want nobody to hear and my dad said, without looking up from the TV, that the Leybas were malditos and to keep clear of them. I don’t know why but that pissed me off and I went to find Rooster, our dog, just to mellow out.

Rooster was caked in mud and growling at his tail so instead I took a bath. The water went cold quick or maybe I just sat there forever, wanting everything around me to freeze, to feel as cold as I felt.

Closing my eyes, I went under water and counted off how long I could hold my breath, trying not to think about how brainless life was. It was then I felt Cabezon. He hit me. With his dumbass ways he hit me hard, and all I wanted was to destroy that feeling rising inside. Or give it to his mom. Give it to Celia. Give it to someone who should give a shit. I can’t. Cause I seen how the Coyote don’t get no help to stop his falls. He just falls, faster and faster, till he hits the ground.