

The Miraculous Apotheosis of Two-Time Pulitzer Winner Enrique A. Rodriguez

“What do you think it is that turns you off of capital-L Literature?” Professor Kelly asked.

Caitlyn groaned. “It’s all like, *I went to the beach and saw a bird. The bird reminded me of my father. I cried.* I don’t care, you know?”

Kelly sucked tapioca pearls from a wide straw. “I’m gonna push back on that. I’m not sure you have enough experience with the style to make that judgement decisively. There’s more to Literary fiction than magical realism.” Caitlyn sighed and moved uncomfortably. Kelly passed Caitlyn a book over her desk. “This *is* magical realism, but it’s different. I think you’ll like it. For your free time.”

“Thanks,” said Caitlyn, slipping it into her book bag without looking at it or ever intending to read it.

“For the contest, I want you to consider writing something you’re uncomfortable with. I won’t beat around the bush— literary fiction usually wins, genre fiction never does. And you strike me as somebody who wants to get published.”

“I’d also like the \$300 gift card,” Caitlyn agreed.

“In any case, I’m excited to see what you’ll submit.” Kelly’s jagged smile made Caitlyn smile, too. Kelly took her seriously. She wasn’t used to that.

Caitlyn wound her turquoise hair into a braid and pulled her purple galaxy leggings up around her belly. She sipped her almond frappe as she started to write. What would make those nihilism-junkies at the Girdmund College Journal happy? Ed Sheeran blared through the college cafe speakers. She thought back to things she had to read in high school that she hated.

“The old cow, Bessie, was a wonder,” she wrote. “Ellie Branson was proud of that prize cow like she was her own child. So when the cow fell down a well, Ellie bawled her pretty brown eyes out as she cocked the rifle and shot Bessie five times at the bottom of that well—the first one killed her, but the other four bullets were for insurance.”

This story fit fit all her criteria, but she couldn’t continue if she wanted to stay awake writing it. Maybe she should just write another vampire story. At least then she’d have some fun.

On the other side of the cafe, Caitlyn saw her classmate Jonas McKenzie. Jonas was exactly the type of guy who could win this college journal contest. He looked like a writer. He smoked like a writer. He wore a denim jacket and shoes with pen scribbles on them. In their creative writing workshop, he met lavish praise from the class for every story he wrote—Jonas wrote exclusively in epic verse, and almost every story involved somebody masturbating into the ocean. He was perfect.

She needed to be more like Jonas. Her second attempt at a story was called *Elisa*. In this story, the titular Elisa lived in a clock tower, watching the hands tick from the inside— backwards, from her perspective, waiting for her lover to return. The story was told in reverse, and in the end it turned out she killed her lover. Good enough— she submitted it to the link in her email.

There was one restaurant in walking distance of Girdmund College: Peacock & Zen. This crappy sushi restaurant doubled as a farmer's market deli. Caitlyn's friend Tiffany played a game on her Nintendo DS that made a lot of jingly bell noises while Caitlyn browsed the web for other contests to enter. *Elisa* was the sort of thing people liked to claim they'd read— unlike her normal fare, which was the variety of fantasy which *sold* but only because teenagers were horny.

"I like your vampire stories," Tiffany said without looking up from her game. "They're funny. The girl in your novel reminds me of me."

"It's trash," Caitlyn replied. "It's glorified fanfiction."

"I like it."

"*Adults* don't like it— real adults, who don't watch cartoons."

Tiffany shot her an eye-roll.

"Why do you care so much about what boring book nerds like? You said they were pretentious."

"I want \$300," said Caitlyn.

The waitress came by and brought them their meals. Tiffany had gotten a plate of sushi, and Caitlyn ordered a reuben with locally-fermented kimchi. It tasted overwhelmingly of anise, even though hypothetically there shouldn't be anise in any of the sandwich's elements. She'd spent her last eight dollars on this sandwich, and she wouldn't get more money until her paycheck from the Writing Center came through.

"This one says you can submit under a pseudonym," Caitlyn said. "Maybe I should write under a fake name. Like George Eliot. People like George Eliot."

Tiffany crammed a piece of maki into her purple-painted mouth as she played her game.

“I don’t care what people think of me,” she said. “Or my fiction.” Beeps and jingles rang from her game. After a moment, she edited her thought. “Except I think I would care if people sexualized my characters. I’d be mad if I found slash fic based on *Ninja School*, when it gets published.”

Caitlyn tried to smile. *Ninja School* was never getting published. Tiffany, Caitlyn’s only friend at Girdmund, was a bad writer. She’d been working on the same ninja-based novel since middle school and only had ten pages. She had a drawer full of prologues to impotent ideas which all involved ponies, ninjas, or characters she’d clearly lifted from different anime. Tiffany was Caitlyn’s dark foil— if Caitlyn couldn’t get her at together, she’d die unpublished, buried in her own drawer of misfired novel ideas.

Suddenly feeling queasy, Caitlyn got up and made an excuse to leave. It wasn’t the reuben. It was *Caitlyn*. *Caitlyn* wasn’t anything. *Caitlyn* was a genzennial creative writing student with delusions of grandeur.

It was a long walk up the hill back to her dorm. Jonas was in the dorm lounge, watching porn on his laptop with his three friends, who were all wearing turtlenecks. They smelled like weed and popcorn.

God, Jonas was the perfect artist.

“Ugh,” he said, pointing at the screen. “The lighting just changed again. Did they think nobody would catch that? How gauche.”

Caitlyn clenched her fists. She needed a new identity. She couldn’t compete with this.

She ate cheese spread on crackers under her bed. Her floor was stained with glitter and littered with socks and pennies. Her lights were off, her laptop open.

People didn't like reading about girls or writing about them. All her favorite writers were men— and, she thought, if she saw a book on a shelf by a *Jonas* she thought she'd probably pick it up before one by a *Caitlyn*. It was an unhappy thought.

Was she being sexist by making her author a man?

Maybe womankind could take one for the team this time. She wrote a name that sounded good: *Enrique Alberto Rodriguez*.

He was Latino, she decided. Maybe that was bad, too. Or maybe it was okay, because her dad was part Mexican.

No, it was bad. She erased the name and wrote another.

Michael G. Grandview.

She immediately hated Michael G. Grandview. He rose to life in her brain— a tall, middle-aged white guy with receding sandy hair, and a pair of rimless glasses. He wore his shirt tucked into his pants underneath his bulging gut, had two daughters, and wrote weird experimental pieces—like novels without punctuation, and 1000-page sex manifestos from the point of view of a cream cheese bagel. He didn't do his own laundry and she couldn't connect with him.

Enrique Alberto Rodriguez, however, seemed to wave at her from behind the rapidly sharpening vision of Grandview's tacky lake house in upstate New York.

Caitlyn could see him clearly. In her imagination, his mouth seemed to be moving, wordlessly. That was the first thing she noticed about him.

The rest of the details filled themselves in.

Enrique was, like Michael, about fifty year old. He was a tired fifty. It was clear that he'd been handsome in his youth, and if he took better care of himself, he'd still be handsome today. His skin was yellowed by years of cigarettes, alcohol, and (for a time in the early 2000's) cocaine. After he won his first Pulitzer, he partied pretty hard, and it aged him. Though who could blame him? All those fancy parties, all those rich publishers and intellectuals sitting around in parlors passing around absinthe and pills like it was 1920 and the Fitzgeralds were present. After years of living off rice and ramen in a leaky basement, Enrique thought he'd earned it.

Yes, he'd earned the high life. He stayed up into odd hours watching celebrities' wives playing ukulele and singing songs based on poems that didn't rhyme. He knew he had an issue with ego— didn't every great writer?— and he swore he wouldn't let it get out of control. But he did. And it turned him into the kind of asshole the old Enrique would have hated.

Of course, it was his wife who saved him. She and his two daughters— Caitlyn borrowed them from Michael's backstory— held an intervention. They were the ones who got him into detox. He hadn't touched the stuff since. *The stuff* included nicotine and alcohol. Clean living, he decided, was best.

His one remaining vice was coffee. He drank it with a lot of fake sugar— watching his weight— and it got him through his work. So, maybe his living wasn't *that* clean.

He was more than his art, he reminded himself daily. It was a hard thing for him to remember. His teachers only ever praised him in sentences like this:

“Enrique, you're so troublesome, but you're so *talented*.”

And like this:

“Enrique, you're *talented*, but you're not motivated.”

His talent was, he thought, the one thing that buoyed him in everyone's minds. It was his only saving grace.

When he was poor— and he was poor for a long time— it was his art that he knew would save him. His art was all he wanted anyone to see. When people saw him on the subway, he imagined how they saw him— a wiry brown guy with baby vomit on his shirt and holes in his pants— and he thought, if only they saw my *art*, they'd know the real me.

Yes, Caitlyn thought, picturing him. He looked pensive. He grinned when he saw a woman on the subway carrying three little dogs in a paper bag. She was one of those weird subway ladies, dressed all in pink sequins and an enormous feathered hat. Her sunglasses were children's toys, shaped like stars. Next to her bag of little dogs, she set down her umbrella. It was pink like the rest of her, and the handle was a flamingo.

For some reason, the flamingo stood out to Enrique. He wanted to go where the flamingos lived and see them out there— where did flamingos live, anyway?

Caitlyn googled flamingo habitats.

Enrique wanted to go to the Yucatan. Or Argentina. He wanted to see a place where flamingos could *evolve*, where something that pink and stupid-looking could happen naturally. He could scarce believe they were real birds in the world.

Enrique came home and told his wife about the flamingo. She didn't understand his fixation— did you get the formula, Enrique? Yes, I did. They were both so tired these days.

So he started to write. He wrote by hand, on yellow paper.

"Her umbrella," he wrote.

Caitlyn's fingers moved over the keys of her computer.

“Her umbrella came over the hill like the pink sail of a ship. The peonies were dim against her ravenous brightness, and Old Ignacio hated her for what she did to his garden— his years of cultivating the peonies, orchids, lilies, and marigolds with all the reverence of a monk tracing holy texts were all washed away in a second by the mere presence Martha St. Claire’s garish Sunday dress.”

This was good, Caitlyn thought.

She could hear his voice now, coming from his lips. He had a baritone. It was a little raspy, but it sounded good. He spoke with the slight accent of someone who grew up speaking one language at home and another at school. She listened to him tell her the story, and she wrote down everything he said.

She had to look some stuff up, obviously. She didn’t know anything about peonies. Or flamingoes, or really anything she wrote about at all. She nearly failed 7th Grade Spanish, except that she’d cheated on the exam.

But she liked being Enrique. She liked writing the word *garish*. It was the kind of word that she didn’t think a Caitlyn could get away with— pretentious much? But Enrique could. Enrique won a Pulitzer.

It ran about four thousand words. She called it *The Flamingo*. Or rather, Enrique called it *The Flamingo*. His wife had liked it a lot. He read to get the baby to sleep. The baby liked his voice. The baritone. The raspiness. The accent. And if it got the baby to sleep, it was a *very* fine story, in her opinion.

Caitlyn stamped his name on it and gave it a once-over. No typos. Good enough.

Jonas won the Girdmund Journal contest. The campus newspaper's front page was a picture of him accepting his prize— a \$300 Walgreens gift card— and a ticket for a free printed copy of the Girdmund Journal when it came out in the spring. The story was called “My Eurydice is New York” and, predictably, it climaxed with the protagonist furiously jacking off into the harbor. Honestly, it was some of Jonas's best work. He deserved the win.

“Your piece is a good start, but it feels unfinished,” said Professor Kelly, when Caitlyn showed her the story. “Focus on grounding your work in something emotional. Have you looked at *Million Oceans* yet?”

She hadn't even removed it from the bag.

“Not yet.” Caitlyn frowned. “Just because I'm not openly weeping all the time doesn't mean I'm not *real*.”

“Even so. Your readers need something more.”

Caitlyn and Tiffany got drunk in Tiff's dorm off of pink vodka flavored like birthday cake. Tiffany, who had taken her shirt off and was wearing it like a cape, made some very good points about plot being scaffolding for the building that is story.

“That's why I haven't written anything serious yet,” Tiffany cleaned up a pink spill on her carpet. It would smell like birthday cake forever. “You can't write until you get the plot perfect. Don't wanna waste time.”

“What would Enrique do?” Caitlyn wondered.

“Your made-up writer guy?”

“In my head, Enrique's mega successful. Don't bash him— he's in the *New Yorker*.”

“Then you have to come up with a story that’s good enough for the New Yorker,” Tiffany suggested.

Caitlyn had a thought and pulled up her own short story, *Elisa*, and switched out her own name for Enrique’s. Then she sent it to *The New Yorker*.

A month later, she— well, Enrique— got a message back from *The New Yorker* telling her that her story was *very* good, but not what they were looking for. It ended in an encouraging message to submit something again soon.

Laurell Journal, however, merely sent Enrique their congratulations.

Caitlyn couldn’t believe it. They wanted to send her a check for 40\$ as well, but they would have needed a full, real name for that, so Caitlyn turned down the money. Enrique started writing other stories. In one, a fish lived its whole life in a tank of absinthe. In another, a man got shot in the head and lived the whole geological life of the lead as it merged with his brain.

Enrique’s stories were tangible things. They spread and wove, careened and dissolved on the tongue, crashed and fluxed and melted like chocolate. They were delicious and sometimes dangerous, with jagged edges or a frozen heart. As Caitlyn submitted more of them, they were published in college journals, in magazines, and eventually, finally, in the *New Yorker*.

“Rodriguez’s exploration of his relationship to his own soul is painful and nourishing. *The Killing Owl* makes me want to believe in Rodriguez’s chief claim— that beauty is simple, love is easy, and the hardest thing in the world is being known.” said one reviewer. “His musical prose and heartbreaking narratives are proof that magical realism still has much to offer.”

Caitlyn had to buy these magazines from the Walgreens by her campus. It was a secret thrill to see Enrique’s name in print. In the meantime, Jonas called her werewolf murder-mystery

pedestrian. Later that week, Enrique submitted to *The New Yorker* a short story titled “Pedestrian” about a man who got hit by a bus while jacking off into the ocean. It was hailed as “Disturbing and revolutionary” by critics.

Caitlyn tried to act like Enrique. She went to Peacock & Zen and drank coffee in the darkest corner, beneath a dim fluorescent light. Enrique was an awful cook. On Sundays, he’d try to make pancakes for his little daughters, and he’d fail miserably every time. When they were *really* little, he could pass off “pancake scramble” as a real dish. Eventually, his oldest daughter got wise to his games and demanded McDonalds instead.

On Sundays, Circe slept in and came downstairs at around noon. Enrique handed her a cold Happy Meal and kissed her on her cheekbone— it was his favorite place to kiss. She had a birthmark there that looked like a heart.

Caitlyn named Enrique’s wife after the witch who turned people into pigs. Circe had a bit of witchcraft in her soul as well. Her hair, long and dark, wreathed her like a raven’s wings. Her laugh was like thunder and she was the most brilliant person Enrique had ever known. Ever since they met at college, and she’d wooed him by slipping cryptic poems beneath his door, Enrique was enamored. It was Circe who ripped him out of his post-Pulitzer addict years, Circe who told him to keep writing when he felt like giving up, Circe who laughed at his funny stories and told him when his bad ones were bad.

Once, when she caught the campus bug and was out of her mind on orange cough suppressant, Caitlyn thought Circe was in her dorm. She was there with her raven hair and her bare feet, in an oversized t-shirt and cotton underpants. She had beautiful crow’s feet around her eyes

and laugh lines around her mouth. She lugged a bad romance novel under one arm as she filled up a plastic cup with ice from the fridge.

“You fell asleep writing,” she said to Caitlyn. “Missed our date.”

“Oh my god, I’m sorry,” said Caitlyn. The yellow pad of paper in front of her had a long line of ink trailing off the page. Circe sipped her ice water.

“It’s okay. I got what I need from Cowboy Clark,” she had a coy smile. She held up the romance novel. The cowboy on the front had washboard abs and a glittering smile.

“I can’t compete with that,” Caitlyn replied, pulling the blanket over herself. With her eyes closed, she could see Circe better. “Cowboy Clark is a lucky bastard.”

“Are you going to come sleep in a real bed, or do you want to stay in that chair all night?”

Caitlyn’s stomach churned and she sat up.

“Circe... I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Circe held the bucket as Caitlyn puked up all of the cough suppressant. Circe held her and stroked her hair, sitting on Caitlyn’s elevated bed against her purple backrest pillow.

As everyone scrambled to cram for final exams, Caitlyn tossed her Chem homework into the recycling bin after a long panic attack in Kelly’s office. There was no way she’d pass— Kelly assured her that lots of people had to re-take their gen eds. Sure, sure. She got consolation sashimi at Peacock & Zen. In her dark corner under the light, she felt something switch in her, like the changing of a season, except localized in her own head.

It was time to write Enrique's first Pulitzer winner. The one that launched him into fame — well, book fame— and eventually sent his life crashing down. This was the part of the story just before Enrique hit his lowest point.

When he wrote it, he wasn't thinking about winning awards. He was thinking about his father. Javier.

Javier was dying. It was 1999. Javier wasn't even that old— seventy-one, and he looked even younger. As a young man, he'd worked for a construction company that used asbestos in nearly everything. Now it turned out he had something called Mesothelioma, a kind of cancer that the company knew about when they made him breathe in the dust every day. There were lawyers now, and settlements, but they couldn't stop the coughing.

Javier had a sense of humor, but at no point did it ever intersect with Enrique's own. And Javier never laughed in Enrique's presence. Enrique often wondered how his mother, the bubbly songbird who was always quick with a joke and eager to make light of any situation, decided to marry Javier in the first place. They loved each other immensely and Enrique couldn't understand *why*.

Javier loved Enrique as well. That was confusing, too. It was strange to love someone you couldn't connect with.

The one thing that both men could entertain an interest in was soccer. *Fútbol*. Enrique had taken too many basketballs to the head in middle school to appreciate athletics— but he could sit with his father and watch the game. They'd eat chips and drink piss-thin beer they only kept in the fridge for these occasions. When he was away at school, his father would call him before and after every game to ask what he thought. Enrique didn't, in all honesty, watch every

game when he was at school. He was too busy trying to get the pretty poet girl from Poetry II to notice him at the kegger. But he always pretended anyways.

It was only years later, after the 1994 World Cup, that Javier admitted that he hadn't watched half the games either. He just liked having an excuse to call.

"It's a shame I won't see our grand comeback," Javier said to Enrique in the hospital. Chemotherapy wasn't working and Javier grew thinner every day. He spoke, of course, of the disastrous 1998 World Cup.

"Oh, you don't know you won't still be kicking," Enrique had a sour feeling in his gut.

"Why don't you write me a story about it," Javier suggested. He said *story* like he was talking about one of little Enrique's hand-drawn booklets about tyrannosauruses. That's how Javier saw Enrique's career, regardless of how many issues of the New Yorker he appeared in.

"I'll write you a story, Papa," he promised. And he did.

In the story, a boy and his dad went to a fútbol game together. They lived in the Yucatan, with the flamingoes. They went to see Miguel Sanchez, the greatest fútbol player in the world, who had just taken a crushing defeat. Enrique described the action so well that Javier pumped his fist at the end of the game as Enrique read it to him, when Miguel scored the winning goal. The father and son went to get shaved ice afterwards. Enrique ended the story there— left it so that the father and the son could sit on the painted park bench, each holding a paper cone of blue ice, as the Mexican summer sun colored the sky like a field of peonies, until the end of time.

Javier passed away a month later.

Circe cried when she read the ending.

“This is beautiful,” she said. “You have to publish it.” Audiences wouldn’t like the story as-is, he argued— it was written to entertain a dying old man, not literary critics. Circe pushed him and pushed him until he finally caved and started rewriting.

Instead of the Yucatan, where he’d never been, he changed the location to a made-up island called Iguana. He populated the island with everyone he’d ever met and loved, all mixed-up together and mashed into new people that he loved just the same. As a mega-corporation tried to turn the island into a profit machine, the island slowly sank into the sea. He wrote his way backwards from the fútbol game until he reached a beginning:

“It was said by Mr. Juarez, who ran the bike shop, that the god Erupides promised prosperity in exchange for sacrifice. He was as old as God. And I, myself, was the proud owner of a baby-blue three-gear beauty from his shop. So every year, we climbed the mountain to throw something precious into the volcano.

It turned out here was a thrill to destroying the things we loved. Grandmother’s quilts, fine old coats, precious glass cats, church bells from Rome, love letters, all went into the maw of Erupides. I gave the Volcano God my favorite dog’s urn, the ship-in-a-bottle I built with my grandfather, and one day, my bicycle. When these precious things hit the boiling rock, they bled pink and turquoise splashes of chemical fire— pieces of me, turned to gas in the two-thousand-degree heat of the earth’s womb.”

When the check came back, he almost fainted at the number of zeroes in the number.

Enrique’s first Pulitzer was for *A Million Oceans Around Us*. It was just like he always pictured it— one life ended, and another began.

It was book signings. It was live readings. It was those drug-fueled literary parties in secret locations. It was conventions. It was tv appearances. It was Oprah's Book Club.

It was becoming friends with the big names in writing— King, Didion, Gaiman, Pratchett, Palahniuk, Foster-Wallace, even old boys like Vonnegut, and so many others. It was getting recognized on the street by bookish college students with blue hair. It was dark days and horribly bright nights. It was detox and tears and sweat and piss. It was a third baby— at this age? Circe, how? It was book deals and a tv movie that was unbearable to watch. It was falling out of the zeitgeist and back into something comfortable, but also, but also, but also not.

Enrique flew out to Oklahoma. They wanted him to teach a Creative Fiction course. He needed the money, honestly. They had a mortgage on their upstate lake house to worry about. He set up his laptop in the only restaurant near the college— some godawful sushi-farmers market hybrid that served the worst reuben he'd ever eaten— and pulled up his proposed syllabus.

Caitlyn glanced across the restaurant to the man sitting next to the fake begonias. He was tall and thin, with wavy salt-and-pepper hair. He didn't take off his coat, even though it was warm in there. She decided he must not pay attention to things like that— he had the look of the sort of guy who might not notice a knife in his back.

She stood up from her seat and walked over— it must suck getting recognized, she thought. Maybe she shouldn't say anything. But it was too late to turn around. He'd seen her coming.

“Hello,” said Enrique.

“Hi,” Caitlyn said. “You're Enrique Alberto Rodriguez, right?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Enrique replied with a grin. “You're a fan?”

“You look busy,” she said. He nodded good-naturedly. Truthfully, he hadn’t been recognized in awhile. “Your work has been really important to me.”

“I can sign something for you if you want,” he offered. She reached into her book bag, looking for any piece of paper, and she came up with the magical realism book that Kelly had given her. She hadn’t looked at it until that moment.

“This one’s my favorite,” Caitlyn said to Enrique as she passed him the copy of *A Million Oceans Around Us*.

“Mine, too,” said Enrique. He scratched his name into her cover with a fountain pen.

“Who should I make it out to?”

“Caitlyn Brown,” she said. “Me.”

“You a writer, Caitlyn?”

“I’m... trying to be.” She grimaced at the words. “You probably hear that all the time. But I really am.”

“I’m trying to be a teacher. If you’re around next semester, maybe we can help each other.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think we’ll meet again,” she said. “This is the one you won your first Pulitzer for, right?”

“My only Pulitzer,” he was bemused.

“That’s not right,” Caitlyn frowned.

“I’m pretty sure it is.”

Caitlyn figured Enrique was probably right about how many Pulitzers he’d won. She could have sworn it was two. But she didn’t know anymore. She wished him well and went back

to her own seat. Enrique beheld the college girl, perplexed. Her dress duck-tailed into the back of her pants, covered in images of galaxies and nebulae. She didn't appear to have noticed. Under the dark fluorescent restaurant lights, she seemed to Enrique like some kind of lonely astronaut— no, a diver, in a submarine— adrift in the darkness.

He opened up a new document on his computer.

“The diver,” he wrote. He had a good feeling about this. He felt an excitement build in him that he hadn't captured since the incident with the flamingo lady on the subway.

He wrote a paragraph— a really, really good paragraph. When he glanced back at her table, she was gone. Only the coffee remained.