

THE GRINGO
CHAMPION

Aura Xilonen

THE GRINGO CHAMPION

*Translated from the Spanish
by Andrea Rosenberg*



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To my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, and my mother.

*To all the world's immigrants,
which, if we go back to our origins,
is all of us.*

Words, like ideas, are barbaric men's invention.
—LIBORIO

THE GRINGO
CHAMPION

And then it hits me, as the scruffs trail the gorgeous chickadee, hooting at her and talking dirty, that I can get myself another life by beating these pinches australs up. After all, I was born dead already and nothing fucking scares me. I could always prove it too, like I did a while back when I smashed in the teeth of a scruff who was making moves on the chickadee while she, silent, just stared down the street toward where the bus was supposed to be coming, all uncomfortable, especially when the prick pincer her ass with his esproncella-infested digits. At that, I cut the ties that bound me to the counter at the bookstore where I work; the dust vibrated around me, and I was off like a shot to drummel his snout with my fists—what did I have to lose, after all, since I’ve never had anything? And so I come up behind the guy and give him a sharp kick in the ankle, and he crumples over like a trivel running down a windowpane on a rainy day, all slow-like, and then I slam him in the cockles with all my might.

Pow! Bam! Wham! And I knock out his teeth till all I can see is his own ferrous swell there, red, whineous, and trembling, his body sprawling the length of the bench. By this point a little knot has gathered around me—street fights happen all the time, and the scruffs and yups hoggle around trying to get a better look.

One of his buddies says to me, “Fucking hell, cabrón, no sneak attacks. Bring it straight on, you fucking wetback, like a man.”

And he lets me have it with a couple to the teeth, like those dogs that destroy everything they see, and just like that, instinctive-like, with the same foot I used on the first guy, I bazooka the second guy between the underpinnings and take him out. Before he went down I saw his eyes roll back; his balls must have been shoved right up his ass and into his brain. And he falls flat on his face on the ground.

Now nobody in the little knot wanted to get into it with me; they were just staring at me, bluish, dwarven, like they had crumpled under the weight of the air.

I tried to catch a glimpse of the chickadee or whatever, to see if she was O.K., but I didn't see her. There were so many scruffs, I didn't know if the bus had come or if maybe some yup had squirreled her off and dragged her back into the alleyways, where the houses are like rats' nests.

A black woman who'd seen the whole brawl comes up to me, grabs me by the arm, and pulls me out of the pack while some of the scruffs try to start something with the neutered negris on the bench; she drags me to the corner and says, "Sweet Jesus, kid, stop shakin' that wasp nest and get yo' scrawny ass out of here, or you ain't gonna last three seconds."

But I shrug her off and leave her there on the corner, muttering to herself, and cross the street to the bookstore to get back to helping the houseflies.

* * *

[Oh, I hadn't felt that good since that time I plunged into the Rio Grande and, with the strength of these emaciated arms of mine, emerged again hours later, half dead, like I was breathing for the first time. I left behind all my squeams about harsh things there, at the edge of the water, on this side of the abyss.]

Back behind the counter at the store, Jefe comes at me like

a scythe and asks, “Sold anything yet, you fucking louse?” Then he goes up to the window that looks out on the street and spits out, “Shit, what the fuck is going on out there on the corner?”

I shrug my shoulders, a rag in my hand because I have to finish the dusting I left half-done when I took off to pound those scruffs in the chickadee’s defense.

“Somebody ran over a dog,” I say sulkily, or something like that, and insigh with exfuriation. Just then I look up and out the window and feel a shiver in the point of my tiepin, a pang in the pit of my stomach: the chickadee is crossing the street toward the bookstore.

Earth, swallow me up.

My balls shrivel from the shock. I can’t even swallow my own spit.

I imagine myself evaporating into thin air with just a look from her; in the blink of an eye, I become fugititious.

Jefe spots her too and calls me a moron.

“I’ll take care of her, you odoriferous jackass,” he says, and waves me off to the back of the store behind the bookcases so I can’t embarrass him in front of the beautiful bird while he preens his goatee.

The chickadee enters the store, rumpling the air, ignoring the books piled up on the shelves and tables; she moves past and drills down in front of the counter. Jefe shriggles his eyebrows and rollicks his eyes as if he’s trying not to stare at her chest.

I keep my eyes on the floor, feeling adrift on a paper sea among all those books.

My mouth’s so dry, I start gargling the air.

She says who knows what—I’ve stopped listening. I only feel my temples fluttering a thousand miles an hour. Jefe waves me over and in a trinkly voice hisses in my ear, “What did you do, you louse-infested prick? She wants to talk to you.”

Jefe moves away a few steps and pretends not to be watching,

but I know he's got eyes in the back of his head and ears in his peepers. The chickadee looks me up, down, and right through, as if I were made of smoke, and just says, before turning and walking out, "Dude, gracias . . . but no thanks. I don't need a hero, sabes?"

She turns around and I feel all of her curves, her lips, her breasts, her scent, hit my craterized skin like a hurricane. Jefe ogles her pert ass as she heads out the door and crosses the street toward her building. I remain plastered to the tile floor, splattered with some sort of sticky substance or whatever. Jefe turns, frowning, and says, "You fucking shithead, what the fuck was that?"

I shrug my shoulders again and feel like gunning away right there, awash in the many gallons of ink it must have taken the printers to splatter all those books with letters. But it's not like I'm scared of his anger. In the brawl outside, my pulse had been cataleptic, mummified. Serene. I could have passed a camel through the eye of a needle while I was pulping those scruffs. No, it's chickadees, especially the beautiful ones, the flirtatious ones, that give me the shakes; I feel things leap in my belly just imagining I'm near one of them; I think I shouldn't even be breathing the same air they breathe; my marrow sizzles if I just brush their skin with my eyes. I can handle punch-ups, no problem. With those curves, though, I spin out and plunge into my deepest voids or whatever—but when the chickadee headed out of the bookstore I felt desolate, upside down, all saggy-like.

And me, not a peep, couldn't even make a peep around her.

"What the motherfuck was that?" Jefe yanks me out of my befogged quivering.

"Nothing, Jefe." I pull myself back together. "Chickadee wanted some kind of magazine we don't have," I say to the contusion so he'll stop poking around in the gaping fissure I can feel opening in my chest.

“Fucking Levitican cabrón, how’s this store supposed to survive when you can’t even sell a goddamn magazine, huh? Chingafuck.”

And I stand there, dazed, nauseously engulfed in my own vomit.

I can’t sleep; I just stare at the dull darkness that stings my iris, drills down into my pores and fills them with cold, up in the loft Jefe’s letting me use here in the bookstore, crawling with mellifluous spiders, with bugs hunkered on the walls, ready to pounce on my flesh. Suicidal spiders. And no, I can’t fall asleep. Instead I imagine the chickadee dangling from the bare bulb, and then she breaks all the windows and stabs me with her purple fingernails in the middle of the night. I even think I hear the fractured noise of her hands scraping my skin, tearing me to bits like when I rip up a newspaper to clean the windows, like the same noise glass makes when it shatters.

“Motherfucker. Shit. Fucking motherfucker. Fucking pyrolytic louse. Fuck, fuck, fuck!” he yells, louder and more deranged with every shout.

I don’t want to get up.

I don’t have the strength to do it on my own. I can feel the fever still clinging to my skin; a legatious turbulence is running in circles through my bowels. Just then, all of a sudden, as I’m watching the ray of sunlight fill with dust floating warm in its luminous bowels, Jefe shouts up at me from below, in the bookstore, like he’s got a bullhorn attached to the back of his neck.

Cursing, I throw back the blankets and descend the little staircase from the loft with my eyes shattered, like I’ve been weeping ground glass all night or something. There, my eyes spiderwebbed from insomnia, I see a hell of a mess.

The bookstore’s been turned upside down. Tossed. Jefe is

already righting a bookcase and gathering up the corpses of depaginated books. The bookstore looks like the path in Wells Park in autumn, strewn with tattered leaves, hundreds of them, carpeting the floor. A few books even seem to have been stabbed to death, or beaten, or ripped up with angry teeth. They lie amputated around us, as if they had a rocket shoved up their ass that blew out their guts. Jefe looks at me, holding a bunch of ragged pages in his hands, but instead of cursing at me, going for broke unleashing all his frustrations on me, I see how his eyes are shattering and he's collapsing onto his molten skin. I don't know what to do, so I don't do anything. I just shrug my shoulders again and start picking up whatever's closest to me. I adjust a broken table and drop a clamor of books onto it.

* * *

["Books bleed," Jefe told me when he met me that first day there, in the bookstore, because he needed someone young and super cheap to go into the nooks and crannies of the bookstore and clean it all, help him with everything: scale the walls like a scorpion to lift or lower textual petulancies; carry anacreontic boxes of volumes and take them to the storeroom to slow down their wormification, since all books fucking wormify; be wordaciously frasmodic to mop, shake, and tidy the shop.

"Tell me, kid, what do you know about books?" he asked me that first time when I asked him for a job.

"Nothing, sir," I said.

"What do you mean, nothing, kid? You're not a moron, are you?"

"No, sir."

"So what do you know about books?"

I remember I stood there staring at his weetzy shop crammed with bricks up to the ceiling, and just said the first thing that occurred to me in the moment:

"They're a real pain in the ass, sir."

For the first time, I heard him laugh with that laugh of his like an unhinged alebrije. He took off his glasses and buzzed like a bumblebee.

"Oh, shit, hoo-hoo-hoo! You're not just a moron, cabrón, hoo-hoo-hoo, you're a colossal dumbfuck!" He kept laughing a long while.

When he wheezed to a stop, he told me he wanted to see how I did washing the display cases for free.

"That way I can find out if maybe you're not as dumb as you seem, kid—maybe you'll leave my glass squeaky clean. Oh, and another thing—what's that smell? You smear your clothes with shit or something?"

I figured it would be a cakewalk; I'd leave his glass squeaky clean like the glass in a coffin when the corpse is no longer breathing and vamooses, to the other side of the air, impassive, nevermore, out of fucking breath. And I did: I scraped off the grime of centuries with my own fingernails like razor blades and my breath like glass cleaner.

Months later, Jefe would admit he hired me because I was the only kid who looked like he'd never steal a single book.

"What the hell would I want them for?" I answered, out-braided at having my honesty sullied. "I want to go to New York, not stay here just on the other side from everything I'm trying to escape. In the meantime, though, while I'm here, I'm just trying to put together a little dough so I can toss myself like a pebble into another pond."

But Jefe didn't hear that last part because I said it so quietly that maybe I only thought it.

So as the weeks passed, seeing I was ready for anything, he let me stay up in the loft in the bookstore. That way, in addition to working all day, I could keep an eye on the place at night while he went home to be with his missus and their little misters, and

left me caged in there with padlocks on the outside and the little window in the loft all boarded up.

“But if you need help, you ringuearme on that telephone. Don’t forget, you caustic little asshole, you call me, capisce?”

And he went off to the suburbs, pleased with himself, to cauterize his missus with his prick and produce more little misters.

After that, up in the loft, nervously, I started tossing eye boogers at the books. First the ones with illustrations. I’d take them upstairs. This was because sometimes an overdressed lady would come in asking for books en español and ask me something I didn’t know the first thing about. Jefe had noticed this and yelled at me algorithhmically one afternoon:

“You brainless louse, you’d better start reading some goddamn books, even if it’s just the back covers, so you’ll know what the hell people are talking about and you can sell a fucking book for once and stop being a goddamn moron.”

And so, gun to my head, I inhaled a lot of bullshit written on the books’ back covers. Sweating bullets, because reading makes your eyes hurt at first and your soul gradually fills up with lice. At night I’d carry virgin books up to the loft and bring them back down again in the morning, deflowered.

“Hey, dickhead, any idea why this fucking book is full of fingerprints?”

“No, Jefe, beats me.”

“Don’t play dumb, you simioid prick.”

And so I learned to put plastic bags on my hands so I wouldn’t leave marks in the books. I’d carry them up and carry them back down again. I even learned to unwrap them and wrap them back up in their original packaging to keep them pristine. Because Jefe loved his books; for him, every time he sold a book it was like selling a piece of his soul. That’s the way puffed-up apes are: aged by their own foibles.]

“Go on, you purulent jackass, and tell my missus to get over here. Goddammit, I don’t want to have to tell her about this and get her all worried and make things even worse,” says Jefe, still kneeling in the upheaved bookstore once I’ve righted all the bookcases and started sweeping up the fallen leaves with a broom. I stand there staring at him. He looks so different, so on his knees, his dripping dampening the bookshelves he’s holding in his hands. He looks like a broken fountain; Jefe has become a bit of rain that’s tethered to the clouds. In my eyes he’s so nebulous, so unarmored, squealing like a fucking pig over the fragments of his torn-up books, that I leave the broom wobbling in midair and make a mad dash for the libidinous streets to clear my lungs or whatever, because there was still a tatter in my throat, clogging it like an avocado stone, a seismic vibration plugging my veins, I don’t know, crouched in a vile pit. I inspel air through my nostrils.

“Hey, pissant, wasp sting yo’ ass?” I hear the black woman shout toothlessly at me from the other side of the street, herding a little metal shopping cart full of junk. Then she moves off toward the corner and disappears around the chickadee’s building. I keep standing there, malleted on the sidewalk, time rocking from side to side. I feel lost. I see a mob of yups walking by, tightly packed, cell phones glued to their ears; I see addos and scruffs wearing out their hands grabbing their balls; I see dudebros and chickadees crossing, coming and going, leaking carbon dioxide from every pore. I see the cars that stop and go, metallically spinning, weaving in and out. Horns, rumbles, the clanging of the sun striking the tops of the buildings, here all the birds are tangled in the wires. I see the high windows with flowerpots on their fire escapes, their cozy skylights. I see closed blinds and open blinds. The buildings brick-colored, gray, made of smoked glass. Sheveled trees and impeccable window boxes.

The barrio is like an appliances aisle.