

Loisaida -- A New York Story

Chapter 1

The Stink in 5C – March 1989

Jesus

Jesus Reyes standing by the bed, touches the cheek of his sleeping wife, then places his hand in the air an inch or so above her mouth following her warm even breaths in and out. Ana is snoring softly, as she sometimes does. Never loud enough to wake him, but he likes to tease her about it. He pulls the cover down to reveal her belly, the slight swelling visible beneath her nightgown. She told him they must have started the new one that first night they could after the baby was born. What was it they called that? *Irish twins?* Hadn't his mother said there was an O'Reilly in the family tree? *Some crazy pirate washed up in Ponce once upon a time.*

Next to her, the baby begins to stir. There's a crib in the corner, but Ana is a country girl from Mexico who believes babies should be kept close. She turns, eyes still closed and murmurs in her sleep. Jesus lifts the infant and tries to step softly into the living room.

He walks back and forth holding the boy, concentrating on each step, each breath. *This is what is real,* he tells himself. *This is what's important and worth living for.* He holds his son tight against his chest feeling the quick beating of his tiny heart.

Never before has he felt so much love, or so much desire to protect what he has. How lucky he is now, a beautiful young wife, a family, a home, a job as the super. A life. How easy it would be to blow it all away.

Nearly twenty years since he'd been a teenager in that war. Five years clean. Two without even the medication. But today, all those bad old thoughts coming home because of the smell in 5C.

When you're a super in a building in New York and the tenants start to complain about an odor, and the young man's mailbox is bulging, and no one has seen him in a week, and the last time *you* saw him you meant to take him with you to a church or a meeting or someplace, or at least to say, "Those marks on your arm. Be careful. So many have died," but you didn't, maybe because you didn't want to seem preachy, or it would have made you think too much about things you shouldn't be thinking about at all, but one thing you're certain about, if you open the door to 5C, it won't be a broken refrigerator causing the stink.

Jesus pictures the day the man moved in. *Was it even a year ago?* Ana said he was a movie star. She'd seen him in something, a soap maybe? He told her he'd given up the acting. He was a writer now. He didn't go out to work every day, but some days Jesus would see him leaving the apartment wearing a suit jacket, looking very smart, professional. And the women he'd bring – beautiful women with straight white teeth and tans like they had nothing better to do than lie in the sun.

Then he started to bring the others. Cheap women and a man with dead eyes hidden behind an easy smile. Neighbors would complain about noises. Pacing all night.

Jesus once asked him about it. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was working on something. Talking to myself, acting out the story. I'll try to keep it down."

Then this afternoon, old lady Sobczak approached Jesus muttering about the smell, and he felt something come up in his gut.

He walked down the corridor, the crone shuffling behind him, keeping his eyes focused straight ahead, afraid if he looked down or out of the corner of his eye he might catch a glimpse of someone or something he'd left behind on the other side of the world. As he turned the key, he imagined finding not just the body of a single dead junkie, but the jungle itself, the death, the violence, everything he tried so hard to protect Ana and the baby and himself from ever seeing.

The door wouldn't open. He tried to call the cops, but his hand was shaking when he picked up the receiver, and so he went out. Lit a candle for the young man no one knew for sure was dead. Found a meeting – the first he'd been to in years. After that he walked around the city, past the lost humans begging for change, and then he came home.

What a waste, he thinks. A man like that, handsome, smart, with money. Yet, he could fall so easily, so suddenly and completely. Jesus hugs his son to his chest and weeps.

Teri

Outside of 5C, Patrol officer Teri Conner is talking in what her partner Thomas Garcia calls her "loud-soft" voice, trying to coax whomever is inside to answer. Garcia meanwhile pushes the door, which has a little give. Then he takes it -- bashing it open with his shoulder once it's clear that whatever is holding it shut isn't very strong. Teri, the junior officer, knows he shouldn't have done that without permission from a sergeant.

They step inside and there's the dead junkie a few feet in front of them. Garcia pulls out his piece, holds it in both hands, points it at the corpse and shouts, "Freeze motherfucker."

He laughs and repeats the phrase, this time clearly for her benefit, “Freeze motherfucker.”

Teri snorts, not worth wasting words. The junkie is wearing jeans, no shirt. The belt still around his arm. Syringe on the desk, next to the computer. He must have been sitting on the chair when he shot, then fell over. Teri takes a quick look at the screen, the green letters still glowing. Her days as a secretary are useful. Document names. One is highlighted, titled: *Prologue*. The cursor blinks below the “P” like a beating heart.

The apartment is orderly, more so than the chaos they usually see. *He was someone*, Teri thinks. *He belonged to someone*.

And this reminds her of visiting her kid brother, Shawn, in the hospital after he OD’d.

The EMTs had cracked a couple of ribs doing CPR. He pointed out the bruises and talked about suing the city. She gave him the look, and he gave her the “just kidding” grin.

“A joke! Really, I’m going into treatment. Swear to god.”

And he had. Then dead within a year. He was dealing small amounts of coke in their Queens neighborhood. Pissed off some Colombians, the new kids in Elmhurst, and they blew him away.

Teri was working in an office, thinking about nursing school. But after that, she decided to apply to the academy. Just wanted the chance to get some bad guys.

Her mother between drags of portable oxygen and nicotine rasped, “Honey, I loved your brother to death. But shit, to most people, he *was* the bad guys.”

Now here she is, a year and half later in a strange apartment, standing over another young corpse. Bloated and stinking.

The deceased is around six feet tall, blond and blue. His eyes are open, starting to swell, and Teri wishes she could shut them or at least cover the body.

They radio the station, and wait for their sergeant and EMS.

Garcia pushes up an already open window.

“We’re not supposed to touch anything,” Teri shouts.

“What? You think you at a fuckin murder scene? This could take time.”

“It’s procedure.”

“Shit.” He goes downstairs. She stays with the body. The apartment door is open and the smell is bearable.

Alone with the dead man, she wonders if she *could be* at a fuckin murder scene. He looks familiar, but she can't place him. The couch is leather and not too shabby, the computer – name brand, state of the art. She notices the books – Stanislavsky, *On Acting*, Kerouac, *On The Road*. *Who was this beautiful white boy with the armful of tracks, the books on the shelf, barely worn Armani jacket draped over a chair?*

It doesn't surprise her when the sergeant walks in accompanied by Detective Ouspenski, homicide.

“Did you touch anything?” Ouspenski asks.

“No sir.”

“Good girl.”

She watches the way he notices things -- the small closed suitcase with the airline sticker sitting by the couch, the door bolt now off its hinges thanks to her partner, the

latch on the fire escape window gate. New York City regulations didn't allow regular gates on fire escape windows, so the gate had a special latch that could be opened from inside the apartment. She heard a skilled burglar could manipulate a latch like that using a wire, open it up from the outside, but it seemed unlikely anyone could have left that way and closed it.

Ouspenski goes into the bathroom. He asks her to follow him. It's a typical tenement bathroom – only a toilet and a sink, the tub in the kitchen. Ouspenski is a large man, tall and heavy, especially around the middle. It feels almost inappropriate, too intimate standing next to him in such a small space.

“Could you fit through there?” he asks, pointing to a narrow window also off the fire escape. It can't be more than nine inches wide.

“I don't think so, sir.”

“Yeah, right,” he says. There's a little crinkle in the corner of his tuned down mouth and something sad in his gray eyes.

The EMS team arrives and pronounces the death. They still have to wait for the medical examiner. Ouspenski steps around the corpse and looks at the computer screen.

“Young lady,” he says turning to Teri, “Do you know how to work one of these things?”

“Yeah, I guess. What do you need?”

“Can you get the one called *Prologue*?”

“I think so.”

“Can you do it without touching the machine a lot? Just pressing something?”

“The diskette is loaded. It looks like I'd just have to hit the enter key.”

He takes a pen out of his pocket. Hands it to her. “Do it with this patrolman.”

She hits the key. The machine hums. Then the words appear ghostly green
against the black screen:

*This is a story about a revolution that never happened, and the people it never
happened to. This is a story about a place – New York’s Lower Eastside, a.k.a. the East
Village, Lo-i-sai-da, a neighborhood of artists, dreamers, hustlers, devil worshipers,
anarchists, junkies and yuppies, all competing for breathing space in a city without air.
This is a love story about a poor farm boy who meets a beautiful blonde. This is a story
about a time – the era of greed, when the poor were objects of scorn not sympathy, and
the gentrifiers viewed themselves as urban pioneers. This is a story about sex and drugs
and real estate. This is a story about a murder...*
