

Rhythm Method (Fiction)

1.

I've been given a month to say goodbye to my daughter. I never believed that one completely died right away anyway.

My daughter, Miss Lizette Colon, had just discovered the taste of red wine at a loft art show in SoNo—the wannabe SoHo of Norwalk—we went to last weekend. She bought her first bottle last night. After getting dressed in her long, grey, wool skirt and black turtleneck, she brings the bottle of Merlot over to Gage's Bridgeport apartment. She never could resist an invitation from Gage to spend the night. Gage Leonard, this *pendejo*, has been getting in her *pantalones* since age eighteen. I've had a bad feeling about him since the Catholic school days.

The next morning after an evening of waiting for a phone call from my daughter that never came, I'm tired on my way to the salon. On the way, a woman driving in the wrong direction of the road hits me head-on. I'm killed instantly. The woman who hit me, a night shift nurse and a diabetic, didn't take her insulin shot and fell asleep behind the wheel. She's still alive. I'm not.

Now I'm everywhere. It's an almost instant transition from traditional life to after-life, only with a hint of limbo. I decide to go to Gage's apartment this morning and make sure Lizette is okay.

There she is, naked on that son-of-a-bitch's bed. I'm lying next to her when she wakes up to the racket of snowplows, the ESPN that has been left on through the night, the cackling waterfowl coming from Seaside Park, the cracking of icicles falling to the ground, a black couple outside quibbling while they warm up the car, shovels going in and out of the snow-caked walkways, and the siren of a police car. It's a carnival for the senses on this Valentine's Day morning. These are the things that I am going to miss, these things that were never important to me before, all these things that pale in comparison to Lizette's beauty.

I watch her turn around and wait for Gage to open his eyes. Her nose is pressed up against his. She runs her fingers from his forehead to his lips. Gage wakes up with a yawn and a hard-on. "Come here *mami*," he says while pulling her towards him. It makes me cringe but I can't tear my eyes or my translucent body away.

As they begin to make love I can't help but see a look of apprehension on Lizette's face, as if Gage's thrust carries a new volume that is foreign to her. The in and out, in and out, a hardness then soft, very soft, a big thrust, a sigh, and a pause. He runs his fingers through her hair and all of a sudden his thrusts are harder and quicker. I can see Lizette trying to pull away with her arms and her hips, but before we know it his laconic lust has been terminated and he's still inside of her. He rolls off of her and she turns around, braving the mirror above Gage's dresser. Her long, wavy, dark, brown locks are covering half her face. She grabs the open bottle of wine on the night stand and pours herself a glass, just enough for two small sips.

Sipping, she turns away from the mirror with lassitude, pulling the blanket towards her. Her limited energy covers only the bottom half of her body. I watch the *pendejo* get out of bed and grab a pair of silk boxer shorts from the floor and decorate himself while his eyes are fixated on ESPN. He gets back into bed with us. He strokes Lizette's hair and exposed shoulders, giving fair time to both areas, but still concentrating on the play-by-play.

"You didn't pull out," Lizette says.

Gage waits for Dennis Rodman to make the shot. Rodman misses. Gage speaks, "What ever made you think that was a reliable method of birth control anyway?" He shrugs. "So? We haven't had a problem yet. Why would you do something so stupid?"

I can't believe that Lizette has been having unprotected sex with this piece of shit. I thought she was smarter than that. I'm truly disappointed in her and now I can't even confront her.

Gage speaks again, looking away from her, "Maybe we should give us a try." He then looks at her and continues with his words drenched in insincerity.

"Move in and be faithful," Gage suggests.

"Why are you telling me this now?" asks my skeptical daughter.

He grabs her small, beautiful right hand, stroking the palm of it. "Because I never thought you'd leave me," he says to her. I have a feeling this isn't the first time that he's pulled this kind of thing. I watch her turn her back to Gage and land her eyes on his closet which is encumbered with what seems to be a hundred pair of Nike sneakers. I can't help but wonder what kind of person has the need for so many sneakers that look the same. It's someone that my daughter doesn't need to be around.

"This is it Gage. It's over." I happily hear her say. "I can't do this anymore." She grabs her underwear and her turtleneck. I hear her say these words but I don't believe that she means them. She speaks with the same hesitation she did as a child before dinner when I'd ask her if she had washed her hands. "Yes" she would answer while looking down at the ground.

"I'm with Christian now. He's coming back in March."

"Christian? Who's Christian?" Gage asks in a sardonic tone. "You mean that cat in the military?" he pauses and looks away. "That's never going to work," he states with a blind confidence.

He has annoyed her. I can see it on her face. She moves a little faster. She can't wait to get away from him.

This whole encounter is so tacit to me. The fact that he doesn't have many words for her doesn't surprise me. He always seemed ignorant. I'm supposed to be all knowing, but I still have no idea what she sees in this guy.

I watch them exchange a long kiss by the door, something warm while the cold Connecticut winter air creeps through the door cracks. "Happy Valentine's Day," Lizette says. Gage looks at her and nods. He just nods and looks out the corner of his eye. This bastard has no idea what I would do to him if I could do anything. I feel like I'm finding out too much, and Lizette is about to find something out that could rivet her life forever.

As soon as she walks out the door the bitter, harsh, morning winter wind comes at her so hard that it blows her long, wavy, dark, brown locks, her black trench coat, and her hobo bag into an amalgamating frenzy that transforms them into a blurred equality. I can't take my eyes off her nor would I want to. She's wearing those flat shoes despite the fact that I told her it would be snowing through the night. She watches her feet as she moves slowly towards her rusty Mazda 323. She looks back at Gage's door. He's out of sight but still inside of her.

I just want her to drive as fast away as she can from that *sinverguenza's* apartment but if she speeds she'll slip all over the road and worse, get into a fatal accident.

I only have two weeks left. I can't believe I get to see Okinawa, Japan. What a majestic place. I'm in awe of the palm trees, the waterfalls, the buildings that look like opened books with pages flapping together in the wind, the beautiful Okinawa sweet potatoes with the pinkish purple on the inside that I will never be able to taste, and the roaring of those helicopters. This is where Christian resides, Kadena Air Force Base.

Lizette was always happy to tell me the romantic details. Before Christian left for his six month overseas assignment, they spent the whole night snuggling on the summer sands of Short Beach in Stratford. She brought a book of her own poetry and a blanket. He brought a 40 ounce and two plastic cups. I had met him a few times and liked him. I thought a guy in the military would bring her some stability.

Who would she tell these stories to now?

My Lizette handled all the details of my funeral like the adult I always knew she could be. I thank God that I left her enough life insurance to handle the affairs of the burial and the house. I've been watching her grieve. I lay in bed with her, wanting so bad to take her pain and anger away. I listen to the kind words from Christian who spends night after night on the phone with her. I remember the first day that I met Christian. He came to the house with a dozen roses for her.

Now I'm watching Christian in his room, in bed with a petite, young, Asian woman. The fact that he is unfaithful hurts me. I misjudged him. I can't share this new discovery with Lizette and it infuriates me. I watch him wake up and roll over, kissing this young woman to life. After what seems to be an interminable panorama of lust, he rolls over to reach for the telephone to call Lizette on her first day back at work. .

I watch Lizette in the workspace among the dusty props, the paintings, the forms, the old mannequins with misplaced limbs, the plastic flowers, the foam letters, and the paint cans, all coexisting in discord. She has been designing window displays for over a year now. I have always been proud of her artistic sensibility. I watched her drink a whole bottle of wine last night, stopping every now and then to look at one of my most recent photo albums and cry.

The workspace phone rings. Lizette goes to answer it.

"Hey baby. I just wanted to wish you luck on your first day back at work," he says as he caresses the palm of the Asian girl's left hand. The little whore then gently kisses him on the lips.

"Thanks. You're sweet."

"How are you holding up?"

"Well, I just got here and this place is as messy as it was before everything happened. I'll just wait for Randy to get here to see what's going on." She takes out a jade compact that is in the pocket of her overalls. It's the first gift that Christian sent her from Okinawa.

She gives herself a long dissatisfied look.

"Hey," Christian says with a surge of excitement.

"What."

"I learned something new in Japanese."

"What is it?"

"Suki desu. It means I love you," he says into the phone but looking at the Asian *puta* while he says it.

Randy, Lizette's boss, walks into the workspace wearing these horrible leather pants that seem about two sizes too small.

“So when will you be coming home?” Lizette asks Christian

“I’m flying into LaGuardia on March 15th.”

“What time?”

“I don’t know, baby. I have to look at the paperwork again.”

The Asian *puta* just looks puzzled and pouting at Christian while he speaks.

“Well, I have a doctor’s appointment that day that I cannot miss so let me know.”

She pauses to give Randy a smile.

“Well, I have to go, Randy’s here.”

“Okay, baby, I love you and have a great day,” he says. He hangs up the phone and grabs the *puta* under the sheets. They both begin to giggle like idiots.

Lizette hangs up the phone. Randy, who hasn’t seen her since my funeral, comes up to her and gives her a long, hard hug. He squeezes out the tears that start streaming down her face. I want to tell him to stop. I think she’s been hugged enough.

I listen to Randy as he tells her how sorry he is for her loss, how I will always be with her. He consumes her with all those generic clichés that are passed as consolation. What nobody understands is that they don’t help. The only thing that helps is time. And yes, I will always be with her but he has no idea for how long.

I remember when Lizette and I saw “Ghost” in the theatre. That final scene when Patrick Swayze says his last goodbye and then walks away, after everything has been resolved, his murderer has been found and the love of his life can go on in peace. I want Lizette to find that peace. When I walk towards that light I want us both to feel that way.

3.

It’s my last day. By the end of today I have to say goodbye to my darling daughter. I’m consumed with emotion as I watch her awaken, take her shower, eat her breakfast, drink her *café Cubano*, and get dressed for her doctor’s appointment. This feeling reminds me of the way I felt when she went off to college, the feeling of a mother who is about to see the fruit of her labor.

The snow is starting to melt. The moisture is coming back to Lizette’s skin.

I watch her with my heart as she’s in the waiting room of Dr. Espinoza’s office, the doctor who delivered her and is a good friend of the family. Lizette’s twirling her restless feet and looking at the alloy of Bridgeport women. I can tell that she’s mentally pointing out all their flaws, a habit she must have picked up from me. There’s a black woman sitting next to her who smells of cocoa butter and body odor, dressed in green stretch pants and black sneakers. There’s a skinny girl with long, wavy, dark, brown locks who’s with her mother, sitting across from Lizette, still in her catholic school uniform. This girl can’t be more than twelve years old. There’s the obese white woman in cornrows wearing an oversized Dallas Cowboys Jacket with a little mulatto girl in tow and speaking loud Ebonics.

She’s about to find out if Gage has really left his lasting mark. How is she going to handle a child? This is when she needs a mother the most. There will be no free childcare for her. There will be no grandmother to spoil her baby. She will be bound to Gage, that *pendejo*, for the rest of her life. How will she tell Christian? Will she even

tell him at all? For right now I watch the pain in her eyes, the anxiety that is so apparent on her restless face.

Espinoza calls her in. I watch as he gives her a hug. I want to push him away or scream at him to let go of her. I listen as he asks her questions.

“Do you smoke?” I’m shocked when she answers yes.

“Have you been pregnant before?” She answers yes.

“Have you ever had an abortion?” She answers yes.

“How many times?” She says one.

“Any allergies?” She answers no.

“Are you on any medications?”

“No.”

As I listen to this litany of questions and surprising answers I can’t help but wonder about all the other things about Lizette I will never know. Is my work really done? I watch her as she answers these questions. Her face seems remote and vacant. She begins to take off her clothes to get ready for the clamp. Her body is covered in goose bumps and her nipples are concrete and rosé. Her head stays down, looking at her stomach while she traces it in circles with a full hand. She then looks into the mirror ahead of her.

Espinoza calls her back into the office.

“*Mima*, you’re pregnant.”

Lizette goes silent. She takes the focus off of Dr. Espinoza and places it on the plain, white wall. Her nose begins to turn red as it always does when she holds back tears. Her knees begin to loosen as if they have nothing to house them.

“Do we need to talk about your options?”

No response.

“Lizette, please answer me.”

“I don’t want to talk about my options.” She grabs her black trench coat and leaves Espinoza’s office.

I walk outside with my daughter to the shrieking of inner city traffic, the stomping of St. Anthony’s Black and Puerto Rican students in the playground across the street, the scene of crack addicts begging for change, the overwhelming grandeur of the tall People’s Bank building, and the sun shining so bright that it turns all these elements into a bright balance. It’s a balance that I feel.

She heads towards New York City to pick Christian up at the airport. We used to come to New York every month. She loves the Fifth Avenue Bizarre. I bought her an amethyst ring there. It was the last thing I bought her before I died. I didn’t tell her that day how much I loved her, how glad I was to bring her into this world. I should have told her these things every day of her life.

Tonight I will watch my daughter fall asleep. By the time she wakes up I will be gone.

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