

play live. I sat on the edge of my bed, content like only my violin could make me. Dad looked content too, maybe happy, but I noticed a look in his eyes that was something between pride and despair. *La Dama Aragonesa* is not an easy piece to learn—or to play, for that matter. It took me an hour to learn, and I knew exactly what he was thinking, that being, “If my son wasn’t such a fuck-up maybe he could be a famous world-class violinist.”

This guilt only really bothered me for a moment, though. A chill ran up my spine, and some of the hash I had eaten for breakfast began to hit me full force. That’s the thing about hash, you eat .4 or .5 of a gram in the morning, just by itself, no preparation needed, and you will be on-and-off fucking blasted (fucking *blasted*) for the rest of the day, in spurts and waves. It was a wavy moment right then, and it must have been wavy for my dad, too, because I started rocking a little bit, and he had no idea what was going on with me. That despair in his eyes seemed amplified tenfold, and the devil in him came out to pass judgment, so I said the only thing I could think, which was,

“Dad, how the fuck do you remember so many songs? There’s... Sometimes when... uhh... Well, some days we’ll play twenty or thirty songs I’ve never heard you sing before, and, like, obviously you know all the words, and then you look at the rhythm section and give them hand signals for which chords are coming.” This I said in Spanish, which in this wave sounded foreign to me. It sounded much too fast and choppy, and he *must* have known how stoned I was because he hesitated a long time. He looked angry at first, and then a look came on his face like he was almost embarrassed by what he was thinking. A ray of sunlight ripped its way through my curtains and caught my violin on the bridge. I looked down at it and thought, “Wow, this piece of wood is worth more than me and dad’s two cars combined.”

My dad was the oldest of ten siblings, one of which hadn’t made it past five years old. He was what you’d call autistic, at least nowadays. His sister had dropped him on his head when he was three. I’d asked her about it the night of my cousin Gerardo’s wedding, after we’d been drinking shots of tequila, and she said she always felt, growing up, that everyone was too quick to forgive her—maybe, she had said, because her brother had been an enormous burden on the family, who’d had a bad harvest the previous year.

I’d long suspected my dad of having some sort of autistic-savant things going on in his head. He had a photographic memory for phone numbers and dates, and could instantly do large sums in his head. Before my grandpa passed away roundabouts ninety-seven years of age, he would play people in dominoes and be able to figure out exactly what pieces they had in their hands. I, on the other hand, hadn’t been gifted with any of my grandpa’s or my dad’s abilities, other than an unusually high tolerance for alcohol.

Being the oldest, my dad had had to drop out of school in the third grade to work in our family’s corn and avocado fields. This had always been a point of contention between him and his siblings, whom he felt didn’t appreciate any of his efforts. He’d tell me about waking up at four a.m. and dragging a big wheelbarrow full of unhusked corn to the market twenty miles away; and how, one day, his uncle told him to put on an extra mariachi suit he had and join him in the town square, where he made as much as he’d make in a day in the span of an hour. Maybe he’d never been very good at school in the first place; he never told me the same version of the story twice. Regardless, he’d had to buckle down and work hard, and he didn’t have a network of older siblings to help raise him. Strangely, when I looked at my dad, I didn’t see a child like I saw in so many other mariachis I’d met throughout the years, growing up. I saw in my father a man I could always rely on, who had been through the world and had made sense of it the best he could.

My dad began, “When I was twenty-five I went to a mariachi *maestro*”—and here I imagined an ancient mariachi wearing wizard robes, holding big leather-bound tomes of forbidden knowledge—“and this *maestro* taught me that I must associate notes with colors, whichever color first came to me when I heard the notes.” I listened, mulling this over in my head. “So, I just started doing that... and it was easiest to remember the colors as they were in my memories, when I walked through the mountains and fields near Cotija and all around Michoacán...” I had the impression he’d never shared this with anyone. I don’t know why anyone else would have asked, now that I think about it, and he continued, “Now, whenever I need to remember a song, I just walk through the stream or the street in my memories where the song is, and once I see the colors, the words and then the notes come to me at

ANNA ONEGLIA

Picking Mangos, 2014
oil on gessoed paper, 11 x 28 in



courtesy the artist