

## JESSICA DUNNE

*Sloat at Sunset*, 1996  
Oil on Linen, 92 x 60 in



PRIVATE COLLECTION, PHOTO CREDIT: DONALD FELTEN

## OCTAVIO SOLIS

# Last Gallantry of a Badass

There's this unspoken grace period lasting an indeterminate length of time between one fuckup and another, and Irving Childress III knocked on my screen door just as that period came to an end. He stood there on my porch flicking june bugs off the screen with his finger, waiting with the sullen patience of a nun for me to open up. I hid in the kitchen as soon as he knocked, but I knew he saw me. So I downed the last of my brew and went to the door.

Hey Mundo.

*Que pasó, Irv.*

How're you doin'. How's your mom. She around?

It's after two, dude.

I know it.

I'm about to go to bed.

And I'll let you. But see. I need you to do me a favor.

Is this gonna be about dogs, Irving?

No, it's not gonna be about dogs. Are you still mad at me about that?

I shouldna been, but I was. Most sins in this world are difficult to avoid, but full-on *pendejadas* like stealing your own dog, c'mon. Even my little niece laughed in my face after that one.

This is not about dogs. There ain't a single dog in this one. I swear.

Then what's it about?

I can't tell you just yet.

I gotta get to bed, man.

I turned off the porch light and he went black. I couldn't see even the shape of his long scrawny head and his jug ears. Just all black. But still through the screen door I heard his voice break.

It's Bobbie. She and me got into it. And she broke it off, man. Threw her ring right in my face. You know, our promise ring. And it was over some dumb thing, I don't know. Something about *mole*, her mother's *mole*. She thinks I don't like her mother's *mole*.

Do you?

No. But she's wrecking the whole thing over nothin', man. And it was beautiful. I never had a girl like Bobbie. She's like my whole reason for existence. I gotta make it up some way, man. I just gotta.

I turned the porch light back on and he was looking down, wiping his nose with his fingers and smearing them

on his jeans. I thought Bobbie Mendoza would never marry him if she saw him like this, but they might be good for a couple more months.

What is it you got in mind, Irving?

Well, it involves a little breaking and entering. But it's for a good cause.

He grinned his ol' cowhand grin, and I knew that meant some crazy, blood-rushing, scary good time was about to be had. All in the name of love, which didn't excuse shit but surely made it worthwhile.

Lemme find some shoes.

Raised where I was in the Lower Valley in El Paso, wall-to-wall brown kids with most of our teachers blue-eyed and silver-tongued, I grew up halfway believing that whites were much smarter than we were. Irving broke up that myth real quick. He was always getting busted in school for unbelievably stupid shit like setting off the fire extinguisher on the cheerleaders at a pep rally and barbecuing his own dissected pig fetus from biology lab. But it also endeared him to us, made him honorary *raza*. Even the old truck he drove us in now had a *Brown Power* bumper sticker on the bumper.

I appreciate you coming along. I'm gonna owe you for this.

You owe me for the last time.

Well then, I sure hope this makes up for that.

He reached down to the floorboard and raised a six-pack of Miller Lite. I picked the coldest one off the plastic stem and lowered the window on my side to catch some of that cool desert breeze that blows in from Alamogordo. I wanted to make some conversation, but this poor *gabacho* just drove quietly on, both hands on the wheel, can of beer in his crotch, dash throwing light up on his sadly mottled features. I knew he was thinking of her.

Irving had a swarm of freckles all over his face that kinda turned purple whenever he saw a hot-looking chick. He had no control over it. We called it his horn-o-meter. It always cracked me up to see him fire up like that, except that one time he went purple in front of my mom. I almost kicked his ass then.

I love Bobbie, he said. I love that bitch.

Then maybe you shouldn't talk about *mole* in the future.

I know what it is. It's that damned teddy bear. She's

been all freaked ever since her teddy bear fell apart. She's had that thing for years. Her first dad gave it to her when she was little. Her third dad stitched her name on it.

What about daddy number two?

Don't even go there. He's in the federal pen for beating up number three. How do you guys call it? *La Pinta*.

I was beginning to wonder if that's where we were headed, too.

Are we going to buy her a new teddy bear, Irving?

Irving got that wild honky smirk on his face again, bit into a soggy *taquito* left over from his Chico's Tacos bag, and said, Even better.

I should have said no. I should have not come to the door. But here I was sitting next to bad luck and trouble at two in the morning. It was exactly like that time he asked me to help him steal his own dog. I knew I should have said no then, but I went with him anyway. He'd got this idea that he could make some easy bucks by putting his Doberman up for sale in the classifieds and then stealing it back before anyone knew what was up. So a week later, we went to the buyer's house up at Five Points and waited for the dude to go out for the night. Then we jumped into the backyard filled with all these junky cars and Irving called for his dog.

Mr. T. Yo. Mr. T.

You named your dog Mr. T?

He's my bodyguard, man. We're the A-Team.

I shook my head. Ese, you are something else.

I could barely see shit except his jug ears sticking out. He bumped into a case of Coke empties which made a crazy rattle and then we heard this low growl. In that dense moonless dark, I saw Irving's shape move a little more ahead of me calling: Mr. T, hey boy, it's me. It's me, boy.

Again that low growl, coming from the vicinity of this old junked-out Packard.

Are you sure we have the right house, dude?

I see him. I see my dog. Here boy. Here, Mr. T.

That's when I saw this huge black flash of fur come lunging out of the back seat straight for us, teeth bared. Irving picked up a lawn chair to fend him off while I ran like a *pinchi* jackrabbit for the *pinchi* fence. Still, that dog bit off as much of us as he could take. We had to get tetanus shots and those bitches are painful. Irving just shook his head and marveled at how quickly his beast had changed

loyalties. He knew it was me, he kept saying. He knew it was me.

That was almost a year ago, but Mr. T still haunted us both. Him more than me.

Finally Irving pulled the truck over to the side of the road right on North Loop. He finished off his beer and waited for the lights of passing traffic to go their way. He said get out and I helped him gather some rope, potato sacking, a ten-foot ladder, and flashlights from the bed of the truck, and we walked across the street to the north side of the big compound. I recognized it immediately.

Shit. What are we doing here, *vato*?

Just do what I say and this'll be over in no time.

Irving, this is J.J. Armes's house.

I know what it is.

We're going to bust into J.J. Armes's house? Are you crazy, dude? Do you want to die?

Anyone familiar with El Paso lore knows about J.J. Armes. He's a private investigator famous for rescuing Marlon Brando's son from these ruthless kidnapers in Mexico or something to that effect. He's always solving these *pinchis* cases, which is how come he's so loaded. The ironic thing about this J.J. Armes is that he doesn't have any arms. I don't mean weapons; I mean arms. When he was a kid playing on the track for the Southern Pacific, he found some railroad explosives which blew both of them off at the elbow. I had just seen the dude on *Hawaii Five-O* playing this hired assassin who could build a high-powered rifle in seconds with his two titanium clamps and hooks. He got my respect just for that shit.

But there was something else about this *vato*. He was so rich he lived in this huge compound fenced off real high with bamboo and shit, and inside of this place guess what? He had a bunch of wild animals roaming around: a camel, a zebra, a giraffe, some peacocks, and, it was rumored, a couple of big cats like lions and tigers. Just in case this detail escaped Irving's recollection, I repeated my question.

Do you want to fuckin' die? Do you want to be eaten?

He shushed me and whispered real fierce in my face. Lissen. Lissen. I know it for a fact. I saw it in the paper. He just bought himself a juvenile koala bear from Australia. And he keeps it in a cage outside his house. If I could just get it for Bobbie, then I know all my shit will be forgiven.

I tried to tell the *pendejo* that a koala ain't no teddy bear; in fact, it ain't really a bear at all—and that the lions would most likely eat both him and the koala if he tried this stunt. But Irving insisted that the peacocks were still loose on the grounds, and if they were running around, then it meant that all the predators were probably caged up for the night. He made me peek through the slivers in the bamboo fence just so I could see those peacocks sitting peacefully on the front porch of the house. I had to admit he had a point, but before I could tell him, he was already up the ladder. He tied the rope off on a tree branch nearby and then hoisted the ladder to the other side. He said to wait and be the lookout and watch for the ladder when it came back over. Then he was gone. That dude always could move like a cat.

I sat against the fence in the dark wishing I had another Miller Lite to quit my shaking. There wasn't a sound at all but the occasional swish of a passing car and some far-off dog barking to keep time with it. I thought of all the stupid things Irving had done since I'd known him, and it occurred to me that they were all done for the attention of some girl. Whatever gifts he lacked in his character, and hell knows he lacked them all, he surely was a gutsy motherfucker. What had I done in my life this daring? For whom had I made this kinda effort? Would I ever know what it means to risk everything for the sake of a woman? I started to believe in Irving's love for la Bobbie Mendoza.

Then the sound of this crash sprung me to my feet and I heard the rapid clunk-clunk-clunk of Irving scaling the ladder. I looked up and saw his jug ears flaring wide in the moonlight. Take this, don't drop it, here, he shouted and the next thing I knew: foom! The sacking landed in my arms and I felt the wriggling form inside. The ladder came flying over next, and soon we were both dashing across the street for the truck as floodlights came on all over the compound behind us. Irving tossed me the keys and said *drive* and I passed him the bundle. We tore down North Loop toward Ysleta as fast as his crate could take us, panting like dogs.

We didn't say hardly nothing between us the whole time until Irving slowly pried open the sacking and we saw that leathery nose come popping out. *Hijo de la chingada*, I said.

It's a beauty.



## JESSICA DUNNE

*Escape from the Zoo, 2003*  
Oil on Linen, 96 x 71 in



PRIVATE COLLECTION, PHOTO CREDIT: DONALD FELTEN

He knows it's missing.

It's okay.

Okay? Fuck you, Irving, he's a detective! He lives to do this kinda shit!

He won't find us.

Are you kidding me? He found the son of Marlon Brando! If he can do that, he can sure as hell find his own damn marsupial!

His what?

It's a marsupial. It's not a bear. I told you!

She won't know the difference.

Where do we go now?

Where else? To her place.

So there we went, driving like escaped cons for the border. As a matter of fact, her house was pretty near the actual border, in this old run-down neighborhood out by Ysleta High School. We took a bunch of rights and lefts on the way, to lose what we thought was J.J. Armes in his trademark bulletproofed limo. The whole time, I was imagining my throat getting torn apart by these gleaming titanium hooks or being fed alive to his Bengal tigers. Irving was trying to feed the koala some of the leftover Chico's Tacos straight outta the bag. The little thing wasn't having none of it.

What do these marsupials eat?

Leaves, man. Some *pinchi* leaves that grow only in Australia.

Hell's bells.

We pulled up at her house at close to four in the morning. Irving insisted I come with him to the porch with the wilted cactus, just for moral support. He knocked on the door real loud to make sure people woke up, and about a minute later, the door opened and it was her old man. He was an unshaven unhappy mess in a Scooby-Doo T-shirt.

¿Si?

Sir, may I have a word with Roberta please?

¿Saben que hora es?

Irving looked at me and I spoke to the old guy.

¿Podemos hablar con Roberta por favor?

No está, he said. *Se fué a California hace una semana.*

*A vivir con su tía en Fresno.*

Irving, she's gone. She's moved to her aunt's house in Fresno.

Wait. That can't be.

She's been gone for a week, dude.

That just can't be.

The old guy peered down at the furry clump in Irving's arms and said in English, Where did you get the monkey?

We got back in the truck and I started us home. Light was breaking slowly beyond the trees. The cars were pale ghosts streaming through the blueness of dawn.

She has to know.

We need to take this thing back, *ese*.

This is badass shit I done for her. But how is she gonna know, if she's blown town? How the hell am I gonna get this to California?

You're not. You're taking it back.

And just like that, he turned. His ears went all red and he pounded the dash with his fist, causing the glove box to fly open.

No! he cried. Mundo, you and me are going to Fresno! We are taking this stupid bear to Bobbie one way or the other!

Something in me gave too, 'cause without even thinking, I yanked the truck off to the gravel shoulder, slammed the brakes, and got out in a rage. I stomped to the passenger side, but he was already there spitting into the dirt, bracing for a fight.

You dumb fuck, when are you gonna learn? There's nothin' you can do that'll make her come back to you! She's done, *ese*! She don't want you no more! Accept that and move the fuck on!

What do you care? You don't know her!

I explained to him with all the expletives at my disposal that I knew Bobbie better than he ever would, and that, in fact, she had confided in me her desire to go to Fresno long before they even broke up. Irving kept shaking his head, but I told him that nothing he'd ever done had really impressed anybody but me. And that now I too had reached my limit. You can go to Fresno if you want, I said, but you're going without me.

His face went slack and he blinked twice. She actually told you she was goin'?

In so many words. She just didn't know when.

Irving looked at me like it was my fault we'd come to this pass, like it was 'cause of me that we'd stolen a koala bear from J.J. Armes and ruined a perfectly good beer buzz



and possibly a friendship on this wild-goose chase. I think we both swallowed hard at exactly the same time.

It's probably gonna die, huh?

If you take it to *Califas*, it will.

He nodded and kicked at the gravel like he was kicking away something essential from himself, and I guessed that, after this, we'd never see the kind of delirious gallantry we'd come to expect of Irving. Standing in the first rays of morning, I felt sorry for the next girl he'd get mixed up with. Hell, I felt sorry for myself.

Back in the truck, he looked down on the sleeping koala in his arms like it was Mr. T all over again, and started miserably eating his own stale leftover *taquitos*. His whole face was blotched with purple while he kept mumbling, she's gonna know, some way, I'll make sure she knows. I detoured back by J.J. Armes's compound, which we were surprised to see wasn't crawling with cop cars, and slowed down long enough for Irving to jump out and leave the sack by the front gate. I dropped myself off at home and fell straight to bed. All that morning I had dreams of ladders, lions, and angry dogs.

Later in the week, I saw in the papers how Irving Childress III of El Paso had turned himself in for singlehandedly stealing a koala bear from the home of J.J. Armes, famed private detective and budding TV star, and how the suspect was expected to plead guilty to the multiple charges being brought against him. I took a sip of my mom's coffee, shook my head, and said to myself, it's not a bear, fool, it's a *marsupial*.

**Octavio Solis** is a playwright whose works *Se Llama Cristina*, *Cloudlands*, *The Pastures of Heaven*, *Ghosts of the River*, *Lydia*, *Gibraltar*, *The Ballad of Pancho and Lucy*, *Dreamlandia*, *El Otro*, *Santos & Santos*, and many others have been mounted throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and across the country. His drama and poetry have been published in *Arroyo Literary Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Zyzyva*, and *Catamaran Literary Reader*. His anthology *The River Plays* is published by NoPassport Press. He is a United States Artists Fellow, and has most recently been awarded the PEN Center USA Literary Award for Drama for *Se Llama Cristina*.

## JESSICA DUNNE

*44th and Quintara, 2014*

Oil on Linen, 126 x 66 in



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