

*The Eleventh
Acolyte Reader*



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Santo Domingo

by Kevin Esser

Your story together has ended.

He's finally gone.

Back to the city of his heart, back to his domain of beaches and salsa and tropical sex – a kingdom of pleasure and a kingdom of plague – leaving behind a tattered inventory of caps and sneakers, Santeria beads and sacred medallions, marijuana and rum and boyish dreams. He's gone. This angel of unholy appetites who called you "popi" and needed you as a father more than a lover; this one who slept beside you for five years smelling of incense and wet dreams and sweaty hair, like a midnight bloom of pepper and cloves – this is the one you loved too much, trapping you in a dark stupor of desire that plays on and on long after the bright passion has faded and died.

You remember him most typically in a hot vapor of garlic and onions and steaming rice. That was how Miguel handled any overwhelming attack of emotion, by becoming suddenly fussy and domestic – cleaning house, doing laundry, cooking, especially cooking, taking over the kitchen in a manic commotion of noisy pots and skillets and sizzling grease. You always watched him from the doorway or from the table as he scurried, light on his bare toes, around the room, maybe in his underwear, sometimes naked, a dark-skinned and tight-muscled young athlete in motion, constant motion. Black hair, brown skin, brown eyes – his white flash of teeth was the only thing about him not dark and warm and touched by the sun.

"I'm feelin' hungry tonight," he told you on one of his good days.

"You have an appetite?"

He answered by grinning and starting to sing one of his favorite tunes by Anthony Santos or Los Infantiles, something lively, something to chase away the gloomy shadow of disease. It was like that more and more often as the virus took over, HIV becoming AIDS in a lethal progression of initials, both his health and his moods yo-yoing unpredictably from day to day. Mostly bad, sometimes good. Neither of you was surprised, of course, when he tested positive. Too many rashes and colds and high fevers – and too

many years of turning tricks since he first hit the streets as a kid hustler, using his body every day to earn a living, working Mafia sex parties on weekends for extra cash. He was twelve years old when an uncle got him passed-out drunk at a Super Bowl party and stashed him in the bedroom as a special treat for the other guests, serving him up like an item on a buffet. Miguel guessed conservatively that more than a dozen strangers had fucked him that night. "That's probably when I got this AIDS shit," he said more than once. But then he would think and shake his head and say, "Fuck, man, it coulda been anytime, though. Shit, who knows, right? I never had a chance."

That's right, you always agreed, he never had a chance. By the time you met him at thirteen he was already a fugitive of the streets, a cunning young city beast corrupted by disease and drugs and bitter mistrust. It took several months of cautious maneuvering before you could get him out of New York and back to the haven of Sandburg, back to the Midwest womb of cornfields and vast, starry nights. You loved him because he needed you, because he needed a father, and because you were eager to play that role in his life. For the first time, you were actually teaching a boy about *not* having sex, about the difference between fucking and loving, about relating to someone without using his dick as a prize or a weapon. It seemed to work, at least for a while.

But Miguel never belonged in the deep heart of America. You shuttled him back and forth between Illinois and New York as often as you could afford, but he never stayed in Sandburg more than two or three weeks before restlessness and boredom drove him back once again to the streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn and Queens – and from there, if he could manage it, all the way back to Santo Domingo, where he could strut the beaches *naked* like an island prince, brown and lean and arrogant beneath the sun. "That's where my heart is, man," he always said, his eyes shiny with tears just from thinking about it. "It's my true home, you know. I can't even tell you."

At times like these, made hyper by unspeakable emotion, he would storm into the kitchen for one of his noisy bouts of banging and cooking, usually making some sort of Dominican specialty to remind himself of family and home – maybe *arroz con pollo*, maybe a *mangú* of mashed plátanos and red onions. By the time he was finished, he often had no appetite for his own creations, his hunger replaced by nausea, then vomiting. It was a cause for celebration, then, whenever he found himself with a normal, healthy appetite. "Yo, popi, I feel *mad* hungry tonight," he told you that one day, some good weed and a little vodka no doubt fueling his recovery. He was eating the chicken and rice straight from the pot on the stove, smiling and

singing at the same time. As always, he ate too quickly, in big wolfish bites, cramming food into his own mouth until he nearly choked on it. You watched him standing there in his white underpants as he bounced happily on his toes, and you loved him enough to cry from the fullness of it. This perfect young body in front of you couldn't be sick, you kept telling yourself; there had to be a mistake this time, some misunderstanding; this had to be the one boy who could escape the death sentence, cheating his way past the inevitable with a sly smile and a clever scheme.

You came up behind him and put your hands on his hips. He glanced at you over his shoulder with a slanty-eyed grin, then rubbed back against you with his ass, grinning and rubbing like a naughty young tomcat eager for affection. You slipped your hands into the front of his underpants so that you could feel the frizzy bush of his hair inside. He was still chewing the chicken and rice; his breath and his sweat both smelled oniony as you nuzzled against him from behind. He was getting an erection, and you pushed his underpants down so that you could look over his shoulder and watch it get bigger and harder between his legs. You whispered into his ear that you loved him, saying it in English, then Spanish, then English again, repeating it like a mantra until it became nothing but a whispered sound, losing all meaning. He murmured the sounds back, calling you "popi" and "daddy" and turning his head so that you could kiss him on the mouth, tasting the chicken and rice still spicy on his lips and on his tongue. The underpants had fallen to his feet by then; he stepped out of them as you reached down with one hand and grabbed them, holding them ready until he went shivery against you and started to leak, then spurt. You carefully caught everything in the underpants, all of it, keeping him swaddled in the white cotton until you could feel him going soft inside.

It was always that way: bits of pleasure stolen from the disease, like snatching cheese from a rat trap, passion and danger mingled in equal measure. Several times you had suicidal thoughts about infecting yourself deliberately, about you and Miguel dying together in some sort of final, romantic embrace. It was all nonsense, of course. Melodramatic nonsense. You never wanted to die, even when you hated life the most; you were always a coward around illness and pain; you always treated the boy's semen like a poisonous discharge, afraid to touch it even after it went stale and cold in its wad of tissue or discarded condom. It hurt Miguel to be treated that way, and your sex together was nearly always followed by kisses of apology from you – kisses of apology and desperate, helpless pledges of love.

By the time he was sixteen, then seventeen, his trips to Sandburg

were becoming fewer and briefer and more awkward. The boy had become a young man and now had boyfriends of his own back in New York and Santo Domingo. Sex stopped between you, but you remained lovers, still needing each other in some grim and silent way, like two survivors of a shared tragedy.

You finally decided to join him in Santo Domingo during one of his visits back to the island (usually financed by one of his New York uncles in exchange for drug-running or sex). Your hotel was on the beach, an extravagant mansion of white and turquoise and pink, the colors of coral and seashell, its lobby open to the air like a tropical courtyard. Miguel was living about a mile farther up the same beach in a little wooden house that belonged to an aunt and an uncle and a swarm of cousins. You were invited there a few times, even ate dinner there once, but you always felt uncomfortable, out of place, like a cartoon American Tourist slumming with the colorful natives. It was better, but not much, when Miguel came to the hotel for lunch or to use the shower. There was something about the situation that made both of you self-conscious about your roles, making him feel more like a paid hustler than a friend.

After one of his showers, you had him lie on the bed while you gave him a massage. You noticed that his asshole was getting hairy, and that he smelled older, stronger, like a man. You left him there after a few minutes to take a shower of your own before dinner. Through the crack in the door, barely visible, you could still see him on the bed, on his back, jacking off by himself as he stared at the ceiling.

He got sick the next day. Fever, vomiting, congestion and coughing. One of his younger cousins, a thirteen-year-old named Juan Carlos, brought you the news at your hotel. You gave the boy a Coke from your mini-bar while you finished dressing, then went with him back to the house. He jogged ahead of you most of the way, kicking up dust from the road with his blue plastic sandals. He looked like a smaller, younger version of Miguel, especially when he glanced at you over his shoulder with one quick, slanty-eyed grin.

Miguel was in bed when you got to the house. He was sick, but perfectly alert, and he smiled as soon as you walked in. That smile, more than anything else, made you feel like weeping. He had been losing weight recently, and he looked unusually frail lying there on the rickety little bed. "We need to fatten you up, Miguelito!"

"Shit, popi, I can't eat nothing," he mumbled, his voice husky with congestion. "I keep throwing out."

"Throwing up," you corrected gently.

"Throwing out," he insisted, laughing at his own stubbornness. "I always say throwing out, man."

"I know, I know." You pretended to slap his cheek, then gave him a kiss. "How about some juice?"

"OK, daddy, maybe a little."

You stayed there with him for most of the day, finally getting back to the hotel in time for a late dinner. It seemed to you that Miguel would be all right; you had seen him in the same condition many times, and he had always recovered after a week or two of rest; getting him to eat and drink enough was the hard part. So you went back again the next day, and the day after that, bringing him treats each time to coax his appetite. You knew all his favorites: coconut ice cream, sesame candy and mint candy, wheat milk shakes, fried goat cheese, guava jam, fresh mangos – everything available at the local grocery shops and food stalls.

Juan Carlos ended up as your guide on these shopping trips, even though you didn't need him after the first time. He spoke no English, and you spoke clumsy Spanish, so you didn't bother trying to discourage him. Besides, it was nice to have an eager young companion by your side. It wasn't long before he was holding your hand or walking with his arm around your waist, making it seem totally natural when the two of you started kissing as part of your daily routine, hello in the morning and goodbye at night.

Anybody could have seen it happening. You certainly did, but you let it keep going until Juan Carlos became much more than a casual companion. Getting him in and out of the hotel was no problem; local boys were back and forth through the lobby all the time as messengers and guides; and, besides, most of the hotels on the beach conveniently ignored the young companions of their high-paying guests. Money bought a variety of privileges.

It started gradually enough. Juan Carlos came to fetch you every day for your trips to the grocery shops and your visits to Miguel. You always treated him to a Coke and some crackers or nuts while he waited, his attention riveted by a soccer match or a game show on the big color TV. He sat in a chair to watch it the first day; he sprawled on the bed, making himself more comfortable, the day after that. You quickly recognized the familiar pattern, the utter predictability of it. This curly-haired boy on your bed, this boy in the blue sandals and baggy gym shorts and dirty white T-shirt that said *DOMINICAN REPUBLIC* on the front, would do whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted, happily and without hesitation.

By the end of that first week, Miguel was clearly recovering his health and strength. He was no longer bedridden, but he still couldn't venture outside

without the sun and the heat and the light making him dizzy and nauseated. Even then, he kept smoking his precious marijuana every day, and washing it down with gulps of good Dominican rum. You tsk-tsked your disapproval, as always, scolding him for being so reckless with his own fragile health. But he only laughed, then coughed and coughed and laughed some more. "Don't worry, man, this shit here is what's keeping me *alive*, you know." He held up a smoldering blunt made from herb wrapped in a Bible page. "Anyway, I don't smoke very much, just one or two maybe."

You laughed at him laughing at himself. "You're hopeless, Miguelito."

"Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not, I'm not."

"Shit, you hate me now."

"Stop it, Miguel."

He looked at you and smiled with his eyes full of tears. "Sorry, popi, I'm just talking stupid and shit."

"It's OK, I know you're not feeling well." You touched his shoulder and kissed him until he laughed softly and told you to stop. Juan Carlos was watching from the kitchen table just a few feet away. Miguel pointed at him. "Yo, man, that nigger is *mad* in love with you!"

"Come on, you're crazy."

"Then why he's always with you and shit?"

"He likes to be my helper, I guess."

"He likes to suck your dick, is more like it."

"Now you're just being a jerk."

"I see what shit's been going on with you guys." He looked at Juan Carlos and said something to him in Spanish about getting fucked in the ass. The younger boy sat up straighter and shook his head, obviously surprised by Miguel's comment. You got up to leave. "This is ridiculous. I think I should go." When Juan Carlos jumped up to follow you, Miguel actually started laughing. "Oh, shit, you guys is busted!"

You tried to keep a straight face. "It looks a little suspicious, I admit, but..."

"You guys is totally fuckin' busted, man, you know it's true."

"Anyway, Miguelito, look who's talking about screwing around. Every kid *down* here is one of your boyfriends!"

Miguel shrugged and laughed and took a noisy drag on his blunt. "Just don't be tellin' lies and all that shit."

"I wasn't lying."

"You're trippin' again, man, I know it."

"Miguel, the jealous lover..."

"Shut up, you bastard."

The two of you looked at each other and laughed one more time. "Te quiero mucho," you told him before you left. "I love you very much."

"I know, popi, I love you too."

"I'm glad you're feeling better."

"I know."

You left the little wooden house with its hot metal roof just as the family was gathering for its noon meal of sausage and rice and beans. Juan Carlos was intercepted at the door by his mother and kept behind grudgingly to eat with the rest of the family.

He found you later that afternoon on the beach in front of your hotel. At first, seeing only his silhouette against the sun, you mistook him for just another one of the horde of boys who worked the beaches selling candy and soda and cheap sunglasses. Then you saw who it was as he dropped to his knees beside you on the sand and lifted his hand in a quick, timid greeting. He said something in Spanish, too fast for you to understand, then tried again more slowly, finally making it clear that he wanted to watch a soccer game on your TV. The World Cup was in progress, and the Dominican national team was scheduled to play that afternoon. "Pero tienes una televisión en tu casa," you said, reminding him that he had a television at home – just teasing him really, delaying the inevitable. He said yes, but it was little and black-and-white and the house was full of too many people. Your television was much better, he said, and it would be like a wonderful dream to see the game in color.

OK, you finally agreed, he could watch the game in your room. You bought some coconut ice cream at a nearby stand for yourself and the boy, then went back with him to the hotel. He took his familiar position on the bed after tuning the TV to the proper channel and kicking off his dirty plastic sandals. Between the air-conditioning and the ice cream, which he had just finished, he was chilly enough to have gooseflesh visible on his bare arms and legs. He glanced at you and smiled as he got beneath the covers, still wearing his T-shirt and gym shorts. "Tengo frío," he explained in a sort of sheepish mumble, only his head still uncovered above the white sheet and the pink blanket.

You laughed and pretended to tuck him in like a little child, patting his curly black hair and calling him "muchachito" and "amorcito" and all sorts of other sappy endearments that made him roll his head on the pillow and giggle softly, as if being tickled. The game was on by that time, so you left him to watch it in peace and spent the next thirty or forty minutes writing postcards at the desk across the room. On an extra card, as a joke for

yourself, you wrote, "Dear Miguel: I guess you were right about me and your cousin. I'm a cheating, disloyal bastard. No turning back now, the die is cast, blah blah blah..." You signed your name, then ripped the card into little pieces and threw it away.

The soccer game was between halves when you joined Juan Carlos on the bed. It seemed, at first, that he had actually dozed off beneath the covers; he was curled on his side, facing you, and his eyes were closed. But when you put your hand on his head, and when you scratched behind his ear, he looked at you wide awake with a cheerful grin. You got beneath the covers with him and started feeling up and down his body. He moved against you, then on top of you, not wasting any time. Neither one of you bothered with talking. It wasn't necessary.

He was on top, humping, when you pulled off his T-shirt. You could smell the coconut ice cream still sweet on his breath as you kissed all around his face and his throat. He was pushing with both hands to get his shorts down. You sat up slightly with him still in position and finished the job for him, pushing the covers down at the same time so that you could see him naked on top of you, stark naked and humping, his brown butt working frantically up and down. It only took another moment for you to unfasten your own shorts and get naked beneath him, never even interrupting his rhythm. You kept thinking about the virus, about the disease, about the risk of any sexual contact with one of Miguel's cousins, all of them probably infected from years of fucking one another without rubbers. But you let him keep going anyway. It seemed safe enough with him on top and no penetration. And no sucking. That could come later. Next time. You wanted to get this boy in your mouth. Definitely next time.

You squeezed at the bare cheeks of his ass and waited, knowing it would take a while for him to finish that way, rubbing and rubbing his penis against yours. But he ended up surprising you by finishing first. You heard a funny little mewling noise in his throat, and you felt his ass get shaky and tight in your hands, and then you could feel the warm ooze of his cum as he kept humping, smearing it between his belly and yours. When you finished a few seconds later, the mess was complete.

The two of you took a shower to clean off. Juan Carlos got hard again as soon as you touched him to wash his back. He looked down at himself, then up at you, then down again, both of you laughing at the nasty, impolite thing between his legs. You started jerking it off for him, pausing once because it looked so raw and red that you were afraid of hurting him. "Te duele, chico?" He just smiled wider and shook his head, then touched your hand for you to continue.

Afterwards, still naked, the two of you returned to the bed for the finish of the soccer game. Juan Carlos huddled against you and played with the hair on your chest. You ran your fingertips over and around his nipples. Both of you had erections again. You wanted to spend the rest of your life devouring every inch of this delicious brown body next to you.

But then it was over. By the end of the next week, you were back in Sandburg with a few memories, a few souvenirs, and the taste of desperate farewell kisses still fresh on your lips. Juan Carlos cried when you left, making you promise to send him letters "all the time" and a card for his birthday in November. Maybe, he proposed shyly, he could even come to live with you in America and be your son, just like when Miguel was younger. Yes, you told him, maybe someday that might happen.

Miguel knew everything, of course, just as always. But he understood; you both understood. When you saw him for the last time, he was feeling energetic and strong and playing a wild game of dodge-ball with several of his boyfriends on the beach. It seemed the perfect way to leave him, the perfect picture of him to keep safe and precious in your mind. And it's the way you've tried to remember him ever since – because he's gone now, because your story together has finally ended.