



Luis Garcia

Master Printer

“Okay, lemme explain to jou somesing, my son: Jou no fine a yob, I no pay for eschool. Pero jou fine a yob, any yob, and I pay for jour eschool to the finish. Okay?”

That’s my dad.

So I’m like, Okay.

Already it looks like I’m planning to stay in college for the rest of my life anyway. It’s only my first year, my second semester, actually, but still, I already know. It’s the place to be, I’m telling you: *Art and Shamanism. Chemistry in Society. Woody Allen Cinema. Intro to Pharmacology.* These are the entries I have highlighted in this upcoming fall’s catalog. *Jewelry Making. Figure Drawing. Women’s Studies.* I don’t know about you, but I see endless possibilities here.

Figure all I need to make a day is at least ten dollars for my dose. Everything else’s negotiable — food, gas, weed — surely these things’ll work themselves out. Like Dad’s not gonna let me starve is he? And like how am I to drive to school or work without gas? A little pot dealing never hurt anyone.

Right.

Driving along in my bubble of potsmoke I see passing in front of a Blockbuster Video store a guy dressed like a VHS tape standing on the sidewalk waving at me.

I pull over and watch him...

I can get a job like that. Yeah, I can get a job like that and then, after my first paycheck, quit, stealing the costume to boot. Then I can find another similar job and do the same thing. Over and over and over again. Until I amass a bunch of different costumes. Like say a chicken, and an ice cream cone, and a French fry. Then I can recruit friends to dress up. Like...The Far Out Pointless Mascot Brigade: The Gorilla. The Camera. The Hot Dog. The Giant Wad of Cotton Candy. We descend on nightclubs and dance. We crash parties. Carry out panty raids. Hold pointless silent vigils at rallies. We stage public fights. Imagine: a slice of pizza and a pencil throwing hands in the street, a black and white stripe-shirted gorilla between them.

On the Blockbuster Video Tape Man's blue face is a lurid leer.

But happy?

I figure no.

What I seek isn't happy anyway.

It doesn't take long.

I find a job as a taco. I'm put to work immediately.

Miami's a hot and humid place, even in T-shirt shorts and flipflops, but put on a ten-pound costume of foamrubber and plastic and you got you a personal sauna.

In minutes I'm drenched, sloshing around in my Chucks. Every hour or so the Viva Taco manager dude sends out a yellow-visored pimply-faced highschool kid to make sure I get a water break and not die on them up in here.

But I'm fine, thanks, keeping good THC and H₂O levels...

I'm five hours on the sidewalk, waving at cars my green leafy lettuce arms, dancing my green leafy lettuce legs, and rocking a huge smile too. Not because I'm required to, my face hidden behind a screen-like flap of pretend shredded cheddar cheese, but because this is a blast!

It's not happiness, surely, but close.

"Great job today," goes my new boss helping me out the back of the taco. "I like the dancing."

I go, Thanks. Tomorrow same time?

At home I make a sandwich with sandwich gear Dad's got in the fridge: ham, cheese, lettuce, tomato, mayo and mustard on whole wheat bread, whole thing in the toaster oven, kosher dill on the side.

Eating at the kitchen table I fill out an old Master Card application. Where it says Occupation I write Student/Taco.

My fourth day, I sneak the costume into my truck, take it home.

I'm not planning to steal it just yet, first paycheck's still a few days away, I just can't wait anymore to take pictures of it, put Rachel in it and photograph her by the lake by my house. Or anywhere.

Because a giant taco looks great no matter where you put it.

I'm in the living room, inside the taco, checking myself out dancing in the mirror. I got salsa loud on the stereo. Frankie Ruiz.

But then all of a sudden Dad's home. He opens the door, stops, stands in the doorway holding his briefcase, his jacket slung over it. He's got this yellow and green paisley tie on loose around his collar, open, and he's suddenly slackjawed.

I run over to the stereo, shut it off with the very tip of my lettuce arm.

He goes, "Pero te volviste loco o que?"

I flip up my shredded cheddar cheese mask and go, Uh, no. It's for work.

Then he goes, "Pero...What do you do at work?"

And I'm like, Wave at cars.

He sets down the briefcase, takes a step forward, into the house. Then he throws up his arms and goes, "Dass no a job comemierda!"

I go, You said any job, Dad.

"Pero you haf brains! You're in kalleh!" he goes. "Dass a job for people dat haf mental problems! You are not a retarded!"

I go, Dad. Don't overreact. It's just a job.

"Yust a job!" he goes. "Yust a job!" Then he's like, "I am no going to pay for your kalleh if you are going to work like a taco! Okay!"

And I'm like, But.

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Sitting on my bed in my room my green lettuce legs jut straight out in front of me. Soon Rachel comes in. Rachel's my girlfriend. She has red hair and blue eyes. She's the prettiest most understanding girl in the world. Considering she's still with me.

She goes, "Cool costume."

But I don't say anything.

Then she goes, "Hey. What's wrong?"

I don't wanna talk about it, I go and flip down my shredded cheddar cheese.

"Oh poor baby," she goes and comes and sits down next to me. "Talk to me sweetie."

I can feel her stroking gently my tortilla shell.

Days pass and I'm still jobless. Dad's getting on my case. I bitch about it to Rachel but she just stares at me not saying anything.

We're sitting outside Dairy Queen. I'm demolishing a banana split watching Rachel lick chocolate shell off a derby. Her tongue looks like a strawberry.

All of a sudden her face opens up and she's like, "Hey! I got it!" She goes, "Why don't you try that photo lab, the one by the campus. I think they're hiring dude."

I look at her.

"It's totally you," she goes.

A bite of banana split stops midflight.

Totally me, I think.

Then I think, She's right.

Plus it'll be a neat arrangement. It's in the shopping plaza right next door to the clinic.

The place is called Print Masters, A Professional Photolab. The owner's name is Beverly, a chunky lady with squinty eyes and really red hair. I apply.

She interviews me in her office, which is tiny. Between us on this impossibly cluttered desk is a little like placard thing facedown atop a box I can't tell is empty or not of Animal Crackers. I don't know why, but I really wish I knew what it said. The placard.

With nothing to write with or on she asks me questions: Am I in school? How are my grades? My GPA? Do I have an interest in photography? It is an internship I seek? And even what was the last book I read.

I answer honestly, trying but not trying too hard to land this job, suddenly. I keep wanting to flip up the placard, but I restrain myself.

Her hands are doing something on her lap under the desk. She goes, "So, you...don't have a résumé?"

And I'm like, Well, I considered that, considered just making one up, but that'd be lying, because I've never actually had a real, like...job before. Which is in itself kind of a lie. But I don't tell her that, obviously.

Then she smiles a smile I can't honestly say is pretty and goes, "Full time or part time?"

Full time.

"Full time it is then," she goes and gets up and out of her office. I follow. She goes, "You'll be working with Jeff." I look and see Jeff there sitting looking like, Great. He rocks a long graying ponytail and little round spectacles. He looks tall even seated. "You can start training today if you want," she goes, "but tomorrow come in wearing something with a collar. And your jeans shouldn't be all ripped like that. They have to at least look sorta new." But I can wear sneakers, she says, because I'll be standing up a lot. Then she tells me to go in the back there and find

a labcoat that fits and give it to Gloria, who'll put my name on it.

So I go in the back there and try on labcoats until I find one that fits and give it to Gloria, an elfin feathery blond chick I've seen hanging around the shopping plaza smoking cigarettes.

I like the whole labcoat idea. It's gonna have my name on it.

In the morning I'm at the clinic first thing, first in line actually.

"Morning Manny. You're early today. What's up?"

That's Angela, my methadone-dispensing goddess, as she slides my little bottle of cherry-flavored narcotic through the slot under the steel bars.

I got a job at Print Masters, I go. Full time printer.

"Really?"

Yup.

"Well congratulations."

Thanks, I go and take my medicine and leave.

I'm early. I wait outside and burn one in the truck until Jeff pulls up. Then I go meet him at the door.

He goes, "Morning Manny."

And I'm like, Mornin.

But Jeff's eyebrows come crinkly together. Sniffing the air between us he goes, "Is...Is that...Jesus Manny, you smell like a humongous joint. Don't let Beverly catch you smelling like that. She'll fire you in a heartbeat."

I go, No shit, hey. Thanks.

I sit on my truck's hood smoking a Camel chain. From here I can see all the junkies slink in and out of the clinic, out and back to their cars and rides. Already I feel all fuzzy and warm inside, the sky changing a million colors in minutes while cars shush by in the street.

Jeff pokes his head out the door. He goes, "Think you're safe now bub."

I hop down, drop the Camel, squash it into the blacktop under the right one of my freshly laundered Chucks.

Second day training I already got this down. The 1-hour machines are mine. It comes natural. Gradations of colorant primaries, subtractive magenta, yellow, cyan.

Jeff steps back and away and in minutes I got it spitting out piles and piles of 4x6 and 5x7 color and black-and-white prints. It's a lot to see here. I realize. Rachel was right. Totally me.

And when Beverly and Gloria arrive Jeff goes, "Manny's a natural. Lookit him go."

I don't look up. Prodigies don't break their concentration so easy.

“Give him his labcoat.”

You mean my cape.

I expect Gloria to like slip it on me but no, I have to actually stop to put it on.

I hold it out in front of me, at arm’s length like a soiled diaper, and go, Uh, this isn’t my name.

It says *Danny, Print Masters Printer*

“Oh. Whoops,” goes the dumb blonde.

I’m still holding it out. Kind of pissed.

Beverly goes, “Oh don’t worry about that. Give it here.

Gloria’ll have it fixed tomorrow.”

I work the whole day without my coat, feeling jilted. But tomorrow’ll be better. I’m gonna look sharp in my good-as-new Chucks, my Levi’s, my bright red LaCoste shirt and my super white labcoat with my name on it. I feel like asking Beverly could she have it read Master Printer instead of just Printer.

But no.

In time.

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At my job I kill hours printing people’s photos: Sticky cake-faced kids in party hats and wild sugar eyes. Starry-eyed couples in front of Eiffel Towers, Gizan Pyramids, Statues of Liberty. Friends propping Leaning Pisas, flashing Vs and signs of peace. Cows and horses on pastures, Anyplace America. Big fat women all oiled-up on the sand like beached whales. Dogs and cats, playing or fighting, can’t tell and it doesn’t matter. And all these happy accidents, cameras going off unintentionally: A dog’s blurred mug pawing the shutter. A kid’s-eye-view of a mom’s spectral figure giving chase.

And I have feelings I’ve never felt.

My heart an egg boiling in water.

Falling almost in love.

A sort of peepingtom.

I am.

“So how do you like it?” goes Rachel.

We sit sucking thick fresh fruit shakes on a wooden bench watching giant ancient tortoises munch lettuce heads. Rachel’s got a thin red with white polkadot scarf on tight around her neck, pointless but for its flair. The scarf.

I go, Dude it’s the best job on the planet. I’m the ultimate voyeur there. Looking in.

We can hear distant children, the crunch of vegetables.

She goes, “Lemme taste.”

And I'm like, I got an idea.
"Hold mine," she goes and takes my cup.
It's art, though humble, in its purest form, I go, babe.

I am the one who gets to look in on those intimate moments of your life, moments you and yours alone share. But you never really think about me. Looking in. Moments you think only you get to see.

I start printing doubles of the good shots, stealthily slipping them into the pockets of my labcoat, taking them home.
The best shots are accidents. Like the one of the setting sun on a horizon askew through a car's grimy rear window, a milky orange cast to it. Next frame on the roll's the pretty postcard sunset picture they intended to take, which sucks totally.

It's pictures like these I don't have to worry about printing doubles of, surely to be rejected, relegated to the shredbin.

The shredbin's my treasure chest. I pillage daily.

But soon Beverly starts noticing. She goes, "The rejects've been pretty light these days," to no one in particular.

Hoping she attributes it to my excellent printing I pretend to not hear.

But just in case, after sorting through the rejects at home, I bring my rejects back, dropping them furtively into the bin, piecemeal so there's a little more each day.

Rachel's modeling for me espadrilles, going, "So, be honest."

And I'm like, I like. Because I like her toes, and her toenails' livid red.

Then in the mirror I see her. She's behind me behind Rachel facing away from me but in the mirror facing me. I turn around to look. It's the girl from the picture.

I turn and go, Hey little missy...

In the picture she juggles three oranges, her hair up in honeynut pigtails, her electric-blue T the inverse to orange. The background's all lush earthtones: healthy green lawn, live oak leaves dripping down from the top of the frame, and in the back a chainlink strangled in kudzu. The colors pop as if neon-painted, the way I imagine color TV looked during its advent. All three oranges are frozen in midair. You can tell she won't catch them all, biting her little red tongue poking out her lips. The photo's all tension and joy. I have it at home.

...how's that juggling comin along?

She stops, looks at me googly-eyed, her mouth open.

She goes, "Huh?"

Then all of a sudden her mom comes and snatches her hand up

and drags her away still looking at me.

I go, Bye.

Watching her get tinier and tinier into the crowd of the mall, waving at me.

Then Rachel goes, “You know her?”

And I’m like, Yeah.

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I start seeing pictures of small dead animals — lizards, mice, sparrows, etcetera — all usually on a welcome mat or a leaf-littered driveway or a raw concrete sidewalk. And there are lots of them. All of them aerial views. Back to back to back on the roll. Something about them. Never any sky or sense of up or down but always always different times of day. You can tell by the lengths of shadows. Uniform, coherent matter-of-fact documents of little morbid trophies. Presents. Damn good work.

They’re for a Mrs. Jennifer Delgado.

I wait for her.

I go, These pictures are really great Missus Delgado.

Probably in her midthirties she’s slim and attractive in green scrubs and big trendy sunglasses.

“Thanks but they’re not really mine,” she goes. “My son takes them. I got him a camera for his eighth birthday and, sheesh, now he’s taken to this craze. I don’t know what’s gotten into him. Personally I think it’s gross.”

They’re actually really good though. If you look. Good composition, lighting, coherence. He’s thinking visually. It’s tight. I see lots of pictures Missus Delgado, but not many like this. In fact I thought this was some college art student’s work but, you say he’s eight? Jeez. If this ain’t the acumen of greatness I don’t know what is.

“Really? You think?”

Sure of it. Comes natural to him. It seems. You might have a little genius on your hands Missus Delgado.

Today’s a week later. She brings him in.

“Here’s my little genius,” she goes. “Say hi Luca.”

“Hi.”

Just like his mom he has black eyes and black hair and the small mouth and pointy chin of an anime cartoon.

I pull his photos from the envelope. Lemme show you my favorite one Luca. Look. See this one here, how all the little leaves make like a big explosion, and the tail makes a neat swirl.

“Yeah,” he goes.

And look at the guts.

“It’s like a little brain.”

Exactly.

“Cool.”

No. Totally cool. Keep up the good work, I go and slide him his pictures across the micatop.

Mrs. Delgado thanks me, pays, and they leave.

Then Beverly comes and tells me what I did was nice, that I should have a kid.

Print Masters has an Anything Goes policy. Meaning people bring in porn. Both soft and hard, but mostly soft. The only thing we’re supposed to report authorityward is anything that looks “almost questionable.”

Almost Questionable is Beverly’s term.

Jeff and I are alone in the lab. We pull out all the porn, check it out.

“Wow Manny. Lookit this lady. She’s huge.”

Yeah. I counted four vaginas.

“Stop it.”

With a possible fifth.

“That’s gross.”

No dude. Check this lady. She’s like a million.

“Oh my god that’s Missus Anderson.”

Missus Anderson could pass for a mummy in this one.

“Stop. I don’t wanna see anymore.”

Nono. Check these out.

“....”

Now is that incredible or what?

“I — ”

All I can think is stick figure. Next to her.

“That’s amazing.”

Yeah.

But no.

Because what’s amazing is Ms. Vasquez has apparently hired a professional to take her naked modeling pictures. The lighting is good, the exposures perfect, every detail showing nicely. In the last month I’ve seen literally hundreds of images of her. In every possible pose. Always alone on a bed or a chair or a sheet on the floor. Sometimes right on the carpet.

The lady is gorgeous. Very short hair like a boy, dark brown, frowsy, like windswept, but with nothing boyish about her. Anfractuous hips and ass on down and waistless. Calves strong and shapely, tits enormous globes. Sometimes I get a boner but I can’t jack off here. I fuck her with my mind. When I’m inside Rachel.

Once during my lunch break at McDonald’s across the street in came Ms. Vasquez. I was sitting eating. I watched her in line,

stripped her mentally and then watched her eat a Big Mac in nothing but her Nikes.

I've got this one picture of her. She's like crawling across a plush red carpet, back arched, ass in the air, arms fully extended with her palms flat on the floor but still her nipples are nearly dragging on the carpet.

I've got this one in my wall.

Two months pass and I amass about three hundred photos. Give or take. All 4x6 color prints. I arrange and re-arrange them in a tight grid on a wall in my room. Actually it takes up one whole wall, floor to ceiling and half another.

It's huge. Really something.

But I don't know. Maybe I'm deluded. Maybe it's not such a great idea after all.

So I look at it high and I look at it sober and I try being hard on myself.

But damn, it still looks good.

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"I like what you're doing Manny."

Rachel's got this sexy husky voice that with the way her every last syllable of every sentence sort of drops like drives me nuts.

I go, Really? You think it works?

"Yeah," she goes walking slowly back and forth in front of it, her hands behind her. "Looks pretty solid. Like what's happening. It's like chaotic and slipshod at first glance but...imposing. And like arranged by color and content...Dude it really melds now looking at it close."

....

"It's like a big random slice of life made up of a bunch of little random slices of life."

It's intimate, I go.

"Exactly," she goes. "And real. And also some of the photos are actually really good. Like this one here with the kid in the superman costume. I mean he's really flying."

He's on a trampoline.

"Awesome."

I know.

"But I don't know though Manny. What about the whole like plagiarism issue?"

Not an issue. This is readymade.

"Yeah. I guess...I guess you have a point there."

Course I have a point. Plus what the hell does she know? She's all stoned too.

“So bro like check it out bro: Do you like...like acid?”

That’s my little sister, Jennifer. We’re standing in my mom’s kitchen at my mom’s house where despite my coming here a lot for free meals and holidays and stuff I’ve never actually had a room of my own. When I sleep here I sleep on the couch.

And here I am, now, to eat and that’s it and here’s my sister, in gigantic hoop earrings a tubetop and hotpants, plus I think she’s a Latin Queen now or something, coming at me with this shit.

I go, You’re selling acid?

And she’s like, “Don’t tell Mom.”

And I’m like, Promise, locking my lips with a pretend key. But what the hell are you doing selling acid? I go.

Because Jennifer is fourteen.

She goes, “It’s not mine it’s Papo’s. You know Papo, my boyfriend?”

Yeah. Papo. The Latin King guy.

I go, Yeah, I remember.

She goes, “It’s white bladder.”

And I’m like, Okay. Let’s see it.

Saturday morning, about six, I drop the four hits I finaged off my sister. Then I go to the clinic and get my dose. Then I come back home, sit in a chair in front of the wall and wait...

Watch...

Listen to the art historian, critic, child lunatic talk. In-head to my...self how pointless I am. It all is. Putting down the work’s body’s purpose, stealing personal documents, giving meaning meaninglessness...

But it’s no use the more I ponder, watch, the more changes in the coalescing wall’s grid and the stranger, stronger my conviction becomes. I am...a sort of demigod of sorts here, tinkering, whose job’s existence points only at tipping balance’s tender — so tender — murals. I —

“Oye. Que haces?”

Uh.

“No trabajas hoy?”

Oh shit.

Sorry I’m late.

That’s me, outside of me, with a smile hurting my face I can’t wipe off thinking I think Jeff knows what’s up Jeff what’s up?

“Hey.”

I sit at my station to work immediately concealing my looming...insane...

And everyone’s lives in my hands now, what I see like a movie,

roll after roll each roll a reel of moving pictures, someone's life.
Doing my best making lives colorful again. Because somewhere
along these lines lines have been lost to my job's making, making
memories.

Here I am.

Creator of memories in color of color.

The means by which we stop time's coil, the only means to
take short breaks and just...look.

Time's breather.

Where time's out of Time.

Proud to be here, part of it, tinkering around, making it all
happen...blowing candles off numbers, big bears and dolls of the
kewpie or teddy types at carnivals and fairs, private homes'
birthdays, balloons at parks...kids swimming and playing and
goggles and gaptooth smiles...

The whole world three colors' gradations, components...tap
tap...reds're just right now print...little cyan, that's it...all right plus
three magenta, tap, minus one yellow, nice...tap tap...

...kite flyers and ice cream cones, the world's people drinking
and licking and smiling and thinking...

"Uh, Manny, these prints are looking kinda magenta."

It's Beverly. Holding a stack of fresh prints.

I go, Really? Lemme see.

"Yeah, look. See for yourself," she goes and hands them over.

And I take them, standing up.

Hm. I guess you're right but it kind of works don't you think
look: they're all pictures of sports cars. I guess it's a car show or
something and the images are all crap so why not just like make
them all crappy-colored, uniform I thought you know I'm just
trying to help with the aesthetics.

"Uh...Just print them again Manny. And print them right."

Fine. Fyou say so...

I see Jeff stop and look at me what I'm doing what am I saying?
Crumbling.

...What is right anyway?

And she's like, "What did you say?"

And I'm like, Nothing.

Then she goes, "Okay well, when your done there come see
me. I need your help."

This is ridiculous. I can't help everyone Beverly. I mean I
know our lives are all real messed up and I know it, I know that
and I'm really trying my best to help over here but no one sees that
I figured and now neither do you. Is your life all messed up too?

"Uh — "

This place is dark.

"What are you talking about?"

Darkness, lighten up, and I'm talking about what we're talking here, doing here, what's so important you don't see it. No one does. These pictures, they're the world to us too! They should be. We're part! The whole! I go holding up a stack of garish car photos, shaking them at her. But no, it's just work to you, just money but this is life is art is life and you don't see it!

"Calm down Manny."

No. I am calm. Real calm inside outside me I should be running this place. In charge. We're in charge of these peoples' eyes' memories, their lives, these fragile moments and all we have to do is just stop and look don't you see just look! Don't you see that!? L O O...

"Manny? Are you taking drugs?"

Jeff shakes his head at his lap. Beverly is before me, arms akimbo — a-kim-bo — peering at me from slits atop fat cheeks. And there's Gloria now, who'd poked her head out the back room where she works the slide machine but now suddenly standing there with her mouth hanging open.

I go, You mean besides the methadone?

Beverly's chins jerk back...

Did I just say that?

...and an unsightly crease forms between her...eyes.

She goes, "You're a patient at the methadone clinic?"

Jeff looks up, shakes his head at me.

I go, Um...Nnno.

"Manny. Put those photos down. You're fired."

But wait how can you? I'm your Master Printer! I'm good with kids!

"You're fired Manny. Gimme the coat."

The coat but it's my coat! My coat my name on it! Look!

"Manny. Please."

I'll run outta here with it, grip its lapels, cut under the counter. Go now, but.

No. Hell. Screw it. You can have your damn coat. I already have all I need from you, this place.

I take it off and hand it to her.

You didn't fire me Beverly. I quit. A long time ago I quit. Like a hundred million years ago I quit and now, I never actually worked here, you'll be nothing.

Nada.

Zip.

Zero.

Because I...am gone.

These are my words, remember.

And I leave, but I know not where, exactly, because out here, it sure is pretty out here.

Luis García was born and raised in Miami, FL. An avid spear fisherman and outdoorsman, he studied Fine Art and Art History at Florida International University. Then later he spent 8-1/2 years in prison, filling many, many pages, longhand. Now self-employed, he volunteers as a speaker and a teacher at rehabs all over Miami. His work has appeared in The Cafe Irreal.