



## Jhon Sanchez Green Shit

Once outside his home, Rodrigo reconsidered taking a cab; it would be too expensive, but he didn't want the recruiter to see him riding the bus. The delinquent bills stacked on the table came to his mind, but he tried to forget them as he folded into two squares the meager ten thousand pesos his mother had given him. *I barely have enough for lunch and transportation*, he thought. He started to make mental notes, listing the answers to possible questions he would face during the job interview, his first since graduating from college. He needed the job. His mother said he must begin to help with paying some bills. It occurred to Rodrigo that debts were like mustard snakes: dark yellow and brown, shit-colored, even.

He had seen a snake like the image of a yellow phone wire constricting the skin of his mother's arm, which would normally droop. That was today before breakfast. Sitting on the place where the stairs curved, he witnessed how his mother, Fabiola, shouted at his father through the receiver. With each of her cries, she spun a yellow curve around her left arm.

"Bernabe! I am talking right now, Bernabe!" She wanted to know when he would pay her back the money he owed her.

"Sell your old wreck, donate your liver, rob a...a corpse! I don't care how you do it, but I need my money!... If I have to bring you to court, I will... I heard you have another million-dollar deal! Listen to me..."

Rodrigo shook his head. None of his father's businesses ever hit

the jackpot, neither the sales of women's clothes from Miami nor the Brazilian stones. His fingers combed his straight, almost spiky, hair. Suddenly his mother's large collection of dresses rotated in his mind. He felt embarrassed for his father's once-successful smuggling business, for his mother's dresses made in the USA, for the sneakers his father gave him two years ago for Christmas with a note: "ORIGINAL ADIDAS." *They are as fishy as they are cheap*, Rodrigo thought.

Rodrigo hailed a cab. As he got in, he dried the sweat along the collar of his shirt and asked the driver to lower the loud music. The cab went up and down roads built through the mountains and slopes, among them a gigantic garbage dump called Moravia. There people lived off the garbage, and his father transported debris to pay for the younger woman he got pregnant. *Another brother*, Rodrigo thought.

Medellin, the city with the poor who scraped the mountain and the rich who dreamed that the mountains would never fall to bury them. Going down to the valley, the car naturally sped up to find the valley and its dreams, its pools, hotels' stars, concierges with golden buttons, business executives' briefcases, beauty that made Rodrigo feel dizzy.

Rodrigo wanted to vomit when he remembered his dream last night. He was in a green room on the second floor of his house. As he started to look closer, he noticed that all the walls were seeded with spinach. This was his room beneath the leaves, and he smelled that the other rooms were painted with different foods: corn, wheat, and rice. He left his room and went down the hall and passed many closed doors. At the end of the hall, he opened a door and stepped into a room. As he pushed the door shut, he found the doorknob was smeared with green shit that grimed his hand. Pasted to his hand was a one-dollar bill. He shook his hand trying to get rid of the bill, but he couldn't. Then he found himself in a bathroom where a nonstop flushing toilet reeked of the sulfuric odor of human feces.

In the cab he remembered David, his youngest brother, lying on the twin bed, wearing horizontally-striped pajamas. Rodrigo had thought it looked like a prison uniform. "I have to get this job. In two years, David may want to go to college," he muttered, keeping quiet whenever the cabdriver peeked back at him. The sun shone like the artificial lights of gambling machines.

The cab stopped at a building covered with mirrors, the Chamber of Commerce. The surface of the building reflected the sky, the greens of the mountains, and it seemed that one could almost walk through it. As Rodrigo got out of the car, the maintenance staff was sweeping dead birds off the ground, birds that had attempted to reach the mirage of mountains.

The sound of a bird hitting glass accompanied him all the way up

to the twentieth floor. He sat in a waiting room among other candidates who looked like a collection of suits with heads, smiling only when the recruiter, a tall man with a broad jaw, opened the door. He waited to be called. With the pronunciation of each name, the recruiter's face looked smaller in comparison to his larger lower jaw, which opened like a bull ant's mandibles, ready to bite.

"Mr. Bello," he heard, and then stood up with a smile. The recruiter extended his hand and asked Rodrigo about his not-so-common family name. His family was neither the one that had cattle farms in Cordoba, nor the descendants of the famous Chilean jurist who wrote the civil code.

"Please come in, and let me see your resume," he said as he took from Rodrigo's hand a chart containing four pages of family history, education, and college life. The price of the resume came to Rodrigo's mind: 7,500 pesos, not including the picture. When he saw the poster announcing transcription of resumes and papers, he never imagined someone like Silvia, a blondish woman who, after graduating from a school of microbiology, bought a computer and made a living as a typist. Rodrigo felt scared of ending up that way. "Well, that's what happens when you go to school to study piss and shit," he giggled, simultaneously paling as he remembered with disgust the green shit of his dream.

The office was a long rectangle with a single window from wall to wall that framed Medellin. The scattered corporate towers, orderly and clean, were placed like the lower teeth of a mouth, but inside of that was a black, smelly tooth, Moravia. *When is it going to be removed with all its worms, including my father?* Rodrigo wondered as he turned toward the contrast of the black furniture against the touch of gray on the walls. He did not feel like he was walking but rather marching toward an altar, the desk, passing by a leather sofa bigger than the one at Rodrigo's house. As the recruiter took his place behind the solid, well-crafted wooden structure, Rodrigo noticed that above the recruiter's head there was a painting of pirates attacking the port of Cartagena, and on the other walls were posters tinted in yellow, blue, and red, the colors of the Colombian flag. The one to Rodrigo's right said, *Don't buy smuggled goods, buy Colombian goods for good.*

With Rodrigo's resume in his hands, the recruiter smirked when he saw that the suit and tie Rodrigo was now wearing were the same as the ones in the photo. The recruiter scanned the first page. Rodrigo was sure that he was looking for private schools instead of Antioquia State University, Rodrigo's school.

"What does it mean that your father is a merchant? Or do you mean a public vendor?" the recruiter asked.

"He imports—"

“We are looking for a high-profile employee with knowledge of the law who is able to manage Public Relations. It’s entry level, though. We just opened a new branch of the Chamber of Commerce in the valley of Rionegro. It is very important for us that the person we are going to hire be the kind of person who is able to deal diplomatically with *high-class* people.” He threw Rodrigo’s resume onto a pile at the farthest corner of his desk. The impact of the folder against the others muted Rodrigo’s questions about the position, duties, and possible salary. Rodrigo turned pale and hoped for something to comment on, his high grades in college or even a quick joke.

The recruiter removed a planner from underneath a folded newspaper. He opened the planner, and with his long pale finger traced the appointments for the following week.

“Well...my question is...” Then he closed the planner, “I guess...my question is...how did you hear about this job?” the recruiter asked while putting his hand on his chin, his fingers across his mouth, and finishing his question with a long “Mmmmh?”

“I was recommended by Dr. Fernando Mendoza...”

“Hmmm?”

“The Medellin presidential advisor...”

“Ahhh, Dr. Mendoza, of course,” and he clapped his hand on the desk. “He is on the board of trustees.” He stretched to pick out Rodrigo’s resume and looked at him with a smile. “Did you work for him?”

“No.”

“How did you meet him?”

Rodrigo remembered how he had filled out an application to receive therapy for families coping with the repercussions of the kidnapping of a loved one. He was holding the application and talking to the secretary when suddenly she stopped talking and smiled. He turned and saw that the presidential advisor had been standing behind him. Rodrigo paled, shook his hand, and mentioned the article that Dr. Mendoza wrote about the job opportunities that should be given to displaced people. From that office he got support therapy for his parents, but they did not go. David did not want to go to the psychologist either. Rodrigo, on the contrary, went to the social worker and participated in the employment program. During that time Dr. Mendoza told him about this job and asked for a resume. With the resume came an implicit promise for Rodrigo to volunteer in Mendoza’s political campaign.

Leaving behind the memory of Dr. Mendoza, he hesitated before answering under the recruiter’s insisting eyes.

“Well, my brother was kidnapped, so I applied to Dr. Mendoza’s program.”

“Kidnapped!” the recruiter said, moving his body forward.

Rodrigo directed his eyes toward the newspaper whose headline read “CONGRESS DEBATES INSURANCE FOR KIDNAPPING/AS HIGH AS US\$10 MILLION,” and said sadly, “If only *we* had had insurance against kidnapping.”

The recruiter brought his hand to his mouth. His strict facial features drooped, showing their cranial bones with fear as if he had been diagnosed with cancer.

*This is my time*, Rodrigo thought. He stood up and looked the recruiter in the eyes. He covered his forehead with his right hand and declared, “My father used to have an import and export business that employed at least twenty-five people.” He remembered he himself and his brother packing the merchandise along with his mother and all the cousins who would come over to help... Maybe there were twenty-five or so...and they all got free lunch for helping. Fearing that twenty-five people would sound too small, he quickly corrected himself, “Twenty-five people at *the managerial level*, of course.”

Strolling around the room, he purposely turned his back to the poster on his right, *Don't buy smuggled goods, buy Colombian goods for good*. He spoke, intending to sound honest, trying to keep his voice from breaking. “The import and export business. Of course, my father paid all his taxes.” In a sudden turn, his eyes met the poster, *Don't buy smuggled goods...* Embarrassment caused blood to swirl around his face as he remembered his father, Bernabe, bringing cases of whiskey to Colonel Sandoval, who let the merchandise in without a problem. The merchandise passing through customs before any offices were open. The tax form listed only 10% of the items Bernabe had shipped. When he landed at the airport, his bags always went to the lost and found. As a child, Rodrigo always wondered why his father lost his luggage every trip. Later, during his adolescence, Rodrigo wondered why his father never claimed compensation from the airline for its constant carelessness. One day Bernabe handed money to Colonel Sandoval in front of Rodrigo, the green color of the dollars and Colonel Sandoval's mouth dribbling made him think of the squeezing of a lime. *His head is full of shit*. Rodrigo had thought back then.

The recruiter looked vacantly for a moment. “My wife told me yesterday that kidnapping is now an industry. We have to be very careful because there are a lot of infiltrators whose job is selling lists of wealthy people.” He hesitated. “I am sorry if I am prying, but I would like to know how the kidnapping happened.”

Hope returned to Rodrigo's face with a smile that he quickly masked with a grimace. Shuffling his thoughts like cards, he took in the luxury around him, the polished wood of the desk, the marble of the floors, the diamond-like stopper of the decanter half-full with amber

color. He imagined himself sitting at the recruiter's desk, deciding between silky ties and whiskey glasses, the price of famine and sin.

His first words were purposely inaudible. "That day the alarm did not go off...and men and women with weapons got into the house." Rodrigo lifted his nose and landed his eyes on the painting, aiming at the pirates' weapons. "They woke us and made us sit in the living room," he said as his pupils dropped slowly to detail the carvings of the recruiter's desk.

Rodrigo made an effort to peer up once more to see the recruiter's face, but was distracted by a pirate's eye patch in the painting. "The one who came to my bedroom had a missing eye and a scar across his cheek." He noticed that his description caused the recruiter to cover his forehead with his right hand as if trying to avoid imagining the scene. In reality, one person had indeed come to his bedroom, but without any scar or missing eye. His only striking feature was an open shirt showing a hickey on his neck. Rodrigo congratulated himself for not mentioning the hickey, which would have made the scene vulgar, almost like a porno flick.

Rodrigo's memories rushed to his brain. That day his father had been anxious because Mr. Wolf, Bernabe's new partner, had not called after 3:00 p.m. The day faded with Bernabe asking for Wolf on the phone. Rodrigo was studying when he heard the bell. Later, at the door, he heard his mother speaking to Doña Marina, Bernabe's other partner, who wore several golden bracelets and had once given one to Rodrigo. "What are you doing here so late?" Fabiola asked Doña Marina. The always-creaking door and the conversation turned into a crash with yells. Shortly after a man with a small machine-gun entered Rodrigo's room, ordering him out with a single nod. He was not allowed even to turn off his study lamp. Downstairs he found his father sitting in the television chair, wearing only underwear, socks, and his glasses tilted to the right. His mother was seated stiffly on the couch, wearing a pink bathrobe with feathers that his father had given her two days before. Her head was lowered toward her chest while her lips muttered a prayer. Next to her his little brother's body was crumpled on the sofa, sleeping. David opened his eyes and closed his legs so Rodrigo could sit. David closed his eyes again and rested his head against the cushion.

"David, this is not a video game, this is *real* life—"

"Shut up!" Doña Marina yelled at him. Her face resembled a fox's snout. This was the same face that with a pudding voice gave him the tickets to go with his classmates to Cartagena.

"Now tell me, Don Bernabe, where is the money?" Bernabe's old-ox dewlap only trembled incessantly like gel. "Where is the money?" Doña Marina took a pistol from one of the bullies around her and put it

to his temple.

Rodrigo's mother cried, "No, *por Dios*, what are you doing?" She tried to move forward, but the man behind her pulled her back against the sofa. David opened his eyes and looked at his father. Rodrigo could not breathe. It was difficult to believe that Marina was the same woman, the woman who brought his mother a painting with promises of good fortune. That very picture of a yellow-hooded blackbird flying was right there in front of Rodrigo and behind his father.

"I do not know... Wolf has the money," Bernabe muttered and finished the sentence by repeating "Wolf, Wolf."

"Don Bernabe, this is a business and you know you are responsible for that money," Doña Marina cut him off in a scolding, motherly tone.

Remembering all of this, Rodrigo kept his eyes on the carvings of the recruiter's desk, breathless.

"It was a tragedy," Rodrigo said to the recruiter. "They wanted one of us for the ransom. They made a raffle between my brother and me. I chose tails and the coin indicated heads." He lowered his chin, almost touching his chest.

Before the raffle, Rodrigo thought of offering himself to Marina's bodyguards, but instead waited, hoping that either Wolf would ring the bell, or the police would come to the rescue, or the weapons might shoot absurdly colored water and they all would laugh. As the oldest of the brothers, Rodrigo was fourteen when his father told him, "You need to learn how to drive because you are the one responsible to bring your mother to the hospital if needed." At the same time, he considered his five years in college. He would be the first in his family to obtain a university degree. *David did not like school*, he thought for months after the kidnapping, but for those months, every night in his dreams, the scene reappeared and the voice of Doña Marina beat in his head saying, "One of you needs to come with us as a *warranty*."

It was the same dream: the faces of Doña Marina, his father, his mother, David, the gunmen, and the picture with the bird rotated in a roulette that ended up with a shot. The men grabbed David by his arm. As they pushed him away, he lifted his hand, indicating to Rodrigo to remain seated, and gave him a half-smile. Fabiola looked around and swung her body, escaping the arms of the man behind her. When Fabiola stood up in-between David and the armed men, the picture with the bird on it crashed to the floor. His father jumped over the sofa, but Rodrigo was paralyzed. It was like a knot of people. Fabiola gripped her son by the arm. But she and David were dragged like two rags cleaning the floor. She moaned and seemed not to feel any pain when one of the men kicked her. The slam of the door was a slap to Fabiola's intentions to reach them. The slam struck like a Japanese drum, and Bernabe

continued the percussion with hits against the wall, crying. From his seat Rodrigo could see his mother's legs on the floor and listened to her moan, "*Mi muchacho, mi muchacho.*"

The image of his mother's face, breathless and suffocated, diluted as Rodrigo realized that the cabriole legs of the recruiter's desk were snakes. Rodrigo counted the seconds by swallowing his saliva. Then the recruiter asked him, "How much money did they ask for?"

"Unbelievable...unbelievable...unbelievable...one million dollars." Rodrigo straightened his posture and looked straight into the recruiter's eyes, feeling comfortable for giving the truthful amount.

One day his father had come home with a great business deal offered to him by Doña Marina. He and his new partner, Mr. Wolf, must find buyers for one million dollars at half price. The morning trips to the airport ended. Instead, Bernabe talked on the phone more than three times a day with Mr. Wolf. The house that used to look like a storage room started to have nicer new furniture: the couch, the dining table, and a watercolor painting of a bird flying.

Rodrigo's mother took all the money from her savings account and lent it to her husband. The days went on amongst international phone calls, advertisements, and Wolf's visits.

Wolf resembled a character in a Hollywood movie, big like everything from the USA, with white hair and a huge stomach. He always ate. A piece of bread, a hamburger, grapes, or bacon with eggs. Rodrigo's mother used to feel sorry for him.

"He needs to eat. He is bigger than us," she said. So he always got more meat than even Rodrigo's father.

That Thursday around 2:00 p.m., Bernabe opened a champagne bottle and laughed like Vivaldi's "Spring" from *The Four Seasons*. "One million greens," his father yelled from the living room.

*The laundering business was done*, Rodrigo thought.

"Wolf was supposed to exchange the equivalent of \$500,000 dollars in Colombian currency for \$1 million dollars in bundles of twenties," he said.

"We are millionaires," said his father after Wolf left with the briefcase full of bills. Wolf promised to call in an hour when he got the money from Doña Marina.

An hour. The hour turned out to be an hour and ten minutes, then an hour and twenty minutes, later into two hours and six hours. Wolf never called.

Rodrigo was reading when he heard his father yelling, "Why did you give him the money?" Then in a pleading tone he said, "I do not have a penny... He has it... He is supposed to give you the money... He has my money too." Bernabe left the house and came back, while Fabiola



knelt praying.

Every time that door opened, Rodrigo hoped to hear that everything was fine, but instead he heard the same words from Bernabe: Nothing. Late that night Rodrigo listened to how Fabiola blamed Marina. “That bitch with her sugary voice...she was the one who stole the money.”

“One million dollars,” Rodrigo repeated as he looked at the legs of the recruiter’s desk, their snakelike shape. He raised his eyes and saw that a picture of a poster that had emeralds on it. “My family sold everything, everything that they had, even the precious emerald necklace that my mother had.”

It was in a picture in his geography class that Rodrigo saw an emerald for the first time. A green emerald in a picture that stated below, “Colombia is the foremost emerald producer in the world.”

His uncle lent them money; his father borrowed money from neighbors and pawnshops; they had to mortgage their home, their only property. But all that together did not reach a tenth of a million dollars.

“We lost everything; all our privileges, our country house, a farm in Casanare state, and the club actions...it was a catastrophe, a fall from grace.” He put his hand to his chest and sighed.

“Would you like some water?” the recruiter asked.

As Rodrigo drank, he saw through the glass the distorted and colossally big figure of the recruiter.

“We paid until the last penny was gone,” he said, swallowing the last gulp of water.

David was given back on a sunny day with a note stating, “WE FORGIVE YOUR BOY’S LIFE. YOUR DEBT IS A PIECE OF SHIT.” His mother hugged him, checked each of his fingers, counting them as if he were a newborn. No missing fingers. No bruises. No marks of a rope on his wrist. But a ponytail.

Bernabe, who had been sleeping in David’s bedroom, came back to sleep with his wife for a while. Tons of cousins, uncles, and aunts came to see David. Measuring up David’s new inches in height, they forgot, for a couple of weeks, the money they lent to Bernabe. During those days, the newspaper noted that the body of Aaron Wolf, an American citizen, was found in the Medellin River. The reporter remarked that his belly was as big as the belly of a pregnant woman.

After swallowing a gulp of water, Rodrigo said, “David was alive,” he sighed, “but he was traumatized by being locked up in a room smaller than a car for more...” He was about to say “more than three months.” But what if it was too short a time? What if the recruiter inquired how they could sell the properties in only three months? Negotiations on liberation need years. “More than three years,” he said, and repeated the

word “years.” Suddenly his eyes caught the title of a novel on one of the shelves: *The Green Mile*, in which Eduard Delacroix tamed a little mouse. “David’s only friend was a mouse that one day he killed in desperation, as he confessed to me.” He bit his plump lower lip.

After three months of “captivity,” and except for his long blond hair, new sneakers, and a chunky golden chain, David had not changed very much.

When Fabiola mentioned the word “kidnap,” David bragged, “You are nuts, what kidnapping?... These are your fantasies.” He repeated to Rodrigo, “No school. No Mom. No schedules. It was like a vacation for three fucking months.”

What most impressed Rodrigo was the description of the luxurious cars in the place where David was confined: Mercedes, BMWs, Cadillacs, Jaguars. “I could play video games all the time and eat anything I wanted. I even tried Japanese food.” At night, he could go to the clubs with the guardians. “I tasted everything, green pot, I learned how to play tennis, and I screwed a couple girls.” He secretly told Rodrigo, “They wanted me to work with them. They could have taught me how to drive airplanes and with three or four trips I would have been able to pay all the money we owed.” He stared at the light bulb, blinking as if announcing the cutting of service for no payment, and he said, “One day, I will do it.”

Looking straight into the recruiter’s eyes, Rodrigo decided to argue like a politician, inflating his chest to say, “Kidnapping is a disgrace, our disgrace!” Rodrigo stood up and walked around the room. Then he leaned his body against the desk. “Look at these people,” he pointed to the end of the valley where the mountain of garbage, Moravia, was. “They want to climb up here and they would kill us if it is necessary to get what they want! We need to protect each other.”

Rodrigo sat and the recruiter took a handkerchief and wiped his pale white face.

“You’re a superb candidate for the job. I will include you among the three candidates for the next interview...but let me be honest with you...if we offer you this position, you might want to relocate. Yours isn’t a nice neighborhood.” He said the word “relocate” almost in a whisper, as if he were fearful that one of the secretaries could hear him. Then he added, “You are going to have access to the private information of a lot of businessmen, and we do not want you or your family to be at risk again.”

The recruiter stood up, moved around his desk, and put his hand on Rodrigo’s shoulder. Rodrigo stood up and, for the first time, felt taller than the recruiter. “Tell me now, how is your father doing?”

“Well, like all honest people in this country, as he tries to rebuild

his business with work and more work, he is getting out of debt... It is difficult.”

He did not mention that his father was driving an old yellow truck. Bernabe woke up early in the morning to transport debris and scrap iron out from Moravia, his new neighborhood. And to avoid a garnishment, the yellow truck was not registered under his name; instead it was under his new mistress’s name, a woman of only eighteen years of age.

After the interview Rodrigo wanted to wear sunglasses to beat the glare of the sun against the gates of the Chamber of Commerce. Leaving the building, he almost stepped on the body of a dead bird. It was a yellow-hooded blackbird, the same as the one in the painting Doña Marina had given to his mother. Rodrigo’s brown squinty eyes observed the bird’s feathers from black to yellow. For one second he, himself, flew up into the sky. Right in front there was a beautiful green mountain. He wanted to continue but the mountain was fake. His head hit the green mirror and he fell against the marble sidewalk. Then he remembered the recruiter’s voice behind him when he left the waiting room.

“Mr. Noble—you are the ex-minister Noble’s grandson? It is very nice to meet you! So why would you like to work with us? Come in and let’s talk...” The voice vanished while Rodrigo walked toward the exit and the recruiter shut the office door.

With that in mind, he undid his tie and decided to take the bus.

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*A native of Colombia, Jhon Sanchez immigrated to the United States seventeen years ago, seeking political asylum. He has a law degree from Indiana University and an MFA in English and creative writing from Long Island University. His work includes “The Vinegar Scent of Books,” available in Swamp Ape Review, “Acacia and the Thief of Names,” available in Existere, “A Cab Fare to John Lennon’s,” available in Foliate Oak Review, “Danuvius Application,” available in 34thParallel and “The Fragrant Flavor of the Strawberry Rhubarb Pie,” forthcoming in Newfound Journal. His short story “Major Ascension Luna” was nominated for The Best of the Net Anthology 2016, and his pieces “The Japanese Rice Cooker” and “The Kiss” were nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2015 and 2016, respectively. He has studied extensively with Clark Blaise, Brenda Coultas, Martha Hughes, Kaylie Jones, John Reed, Don Scotti, Charlie Vázquez, and Lewis Warsh. Currently, he is a practicing attorney in New York.*