Two Birthday Boy

Jhon Sánchez

It was his second birthday, a day he never celebrated, when someone rang the bell. He set his cellphone on the kitchen counter, where a WhatsApp message showed a Venezuelan deliveryman in D.C. being beaten by masked ICE officers. The man's cries were swallowed by the sound of boots and shouting. Tino shook his head and lowered the volume.

"Soldiers, soldiers now deporting people," he muttered.

The bell rang again, longer this time. He froze. Habit made him glance at the door, then the peephole, but he didn't move closer. He never opened a door without checking first; that was a painful lesson from when he was new to New York. Back then, he'd opened the door of his rented room and two men had forced their way in, dragged him by his ponytail outside, and beaten him while his landlord tossed his belongings into the street. The landlord had found out about his HIV status after opening a letter from his doctor.

It was the '90s, and things were different then. So different that now, many men didn't care about his status, as long as he assured them he was undetectable.

"Mister Tino," came a voice from behind the peephole.

It was Paulo, young, polite, too formal. How many times had Tino told him not to call him *Mister*? That kind of talk belonged to Colombia, to the way people showed respect (or sometimes submission) to the *gringos* and their generous dollars. The *Mister*, a word hardly anyone used in New York, unsettled him. It placed him in a class that wasn't his, an empty echo of colonial deference that gave him no power, only the uneasy sense of being complicit in the privilege once afforded to white Americans.

He let him in.

"You haven't congratulated me for my birthday today," Tino said and watched Paulo slip off his black sneakers from work, exposing neon-green socklets that clashed brightly with the gray overalls of his uniform. He had been working, but, as always, had managed to duck away from his cleaning tasks for a moment.

"*Pura mierda,*" Paulo said, examining his fingernails, meticulous as always, afraid that even by taking off his shoes he might pick up some shameful speck of dirt.

Tino smiled with mischief. It was true—that was pure bullshit. His real birthday had been back in March, not on August 28, the date his mother had chosen to register him, so he'd share the feast day of Saint Augustine and bear the name of the father who never recognized him. "He'll remember his son, no matter what," she'd said. Years later he learned that Saint Augustine's own father hadn't recognized him either. Still, the fact that his name had become a weapon to force his father's memory was something he disliked. So when he arrived in New York and people began calling him by the short form—*Tino*—it was a relief.

"Check your Facebook. They sent me greetings," Tino said.

"*Qué va!* You only wrote that date there because you wanted to take off a few years."

It wasn't like that. August 28 wouldn't have existed for him at all if not for Facebook. Facebook brought it back.

August had always been there: on his driver's license, on both passports, the American and the Colombian, even on his birth certificate. Still, he'd managed to forget it for years. March 23, the real birthday, according to his mother, appeared nowhere. It existed only in her word.

So his family lit the candles in March. August 28 was just a date on a calendar, never a birthday.

For a while in New York, the confusion amused him; friends posting twice, some in March, others in August. But now everyone close to him knew the story. They ignored August. And today, despite the reminders, nobody had called or sent a message. Still, today he felt like teasing Paulo, letting him wonder which one was true.

"I can show you my driver's license."

"Mr. Tino, why do you say so many lies?"

Tino laughed, but the question brought a sudden chill. That same doubt would have terrified him back when he applied for asylum in the United States, in 1994. At the time, he was afraid he might confuse his real birthday with the official one. His lawyer had warned him that,

in asylum cases, credibility was everything. *"Many people impersonate others,"* the lawyer had said, *"and they even fake stories."*

So he'd kept quiet about his two birthdays. How could a *gringo* possibly understand all that? Yet every part of his story was true: the five police officers who raped him and stubbed their cigarette butts on his back; the one who later tattooed over the scar; the militiamen who burned his long hair because it looked too feminine; the same hair his lovers used to caress and tell him, *"You take good care of it."*

His fingers lingered on the rough scalp. The hair was thin now, the birthday dates still different, but the life was one. He hadn't lied; he'd simply been born twice. *I'm the same,* he thought. *Two birthdays, one body.*

Paulo showed him his phone with the charger, looking for a place to plug it in.

Tino nodded toward the outlet near the kitchen counter. "Instead of buying me a gift, buy yourself a new phone, for God's sake. It's dying all the time."

"No, Mr. Tino, I need to pay you first."

It was an ongoing thing. Tino lent Paulo money, and Paulo paid him back, slowly, but now the debt had reached almost a thousand dollars. Still, Tino trusted him.

Many believed they were lovers. Never. Paulo was too young, in his late twenties, and too stubborn. That's what Tino would have said aloud if anyone had asked. But there were other reasons too: his HIV status, the fear of disclosing it, the memory of the rape that sometimes still made him panic during a sexual encounter—scared and desperate at the same time. *Weird,* he thought. It was like the heart racing as if being hunted. Not exactly pleasure, but a reminder that one was still a living thing.

"By the way, they gave me four days off," Paulo said, taking out his wallet to make a payment toward his debt.

Four days off—that was big news. Ever since Tino had met him, five years ago, Paulo had never had more than one day off a week.

"What are you planning to do?" Tino asked.

Paulo began talking fast, excited, but without anything concrete. The only thing he was sure about was that he'd spend at least one day with his sisters. "One day together," he said, "all of us."

He had two sisters. Tino had met Anita once; the woman was almost Paulo's replica, the same bony nose, the same clear skin, the same fastidiousness, but shorter, and with hair dyed blond. Yet they carried life differently. Paulo kept his like a shopping list, everything to be done, checked, and put in order. Anita's, instead, was like tracing steps along the beach—marks to return to if needed, and if the sea erased them, it didn't matter; you just kept walking.

That was the impression she left on him the day they met, when she said, "Mr. Tino, what can I do if they deport me? Live my life there, *pa' delante.* But I'm staying here until they catch me."

Two sisters. He wondered now what the other one looked like, and whether she was as strict as Paulo or more like Anita.

Paulo counted out two hundred dollars and handed it to him, then unplugged his phone. After scrolling for a moment, he checked the tally of the debt on the screen. “We’re now at eight-thirty,” he said.

But waving his hand, Tino refused the payment.

“Don’t pay me this week. I don’t need you to pay me soon. Just keep that money and go enjoy yourself with your sisters.”

He turned around to make coffee, swirling hot water over the glass filter.

“Thank you, Mr. Tino. That helps a lot. Anita and I are going to meet our sister in Florida.”

“Florida?” Tino almost yelled. He nearly lost his grip on the electric kettle, took a deep breath, and set it down before turning around. “Of all the places—why Florida?”

Paulo began talking fast, as if he’d prepared the speech beforehand. “This is the last opportunity to see each other. She’s going back to Colombia.” The other sister had lived in the United States for more than twenty years, but she couldn’t bear the persecution anymore. She’d sold everything she had and bought tickets for herself and her children—born here—to return to Colombia.

“You guys don’t have papers. Don’t you understand? It’s a felony to enter the state without papers—”

“We’re not going by airplane.”

“The bus company can ask for IDs, or there could be a raid, and all of you will end up in that jail full of crocodiles.”

“Well, a friend can drive us there.”

He leaned against the counter, his palms flat on the cold surface. The laminate was worn smooth at the edges, and he pressed harder, as if the counter itself could steady him. He wanted to yell, but he held himself back. Instead, he chuckled.

“Oh yes, you guys are going to be safe. The police can stop you for speeding or bad parking and…” He chuckled again. “And then charge your friend with human trafficking.”

“You’re such an alarmist. *Meta y meta miedo.* What do you want—to remind me that I’m illegal while you have all your papers?”

“None of us is safe. They can take your citizenship—people like me. For something on the papers. Something from back then. For not saying it right. Something small.” *Anything*. That’s what he kept hearing everywhere—Trump going back, checking applications. Looking for something.

“So when am I supposed to see my sister? She’s my sister. You don’t understand because you have no one. Right?”

Tino said nothing. The words could have hurt, but his mind was fixed on one thing: Stopping that trip to Florida. It was too dangerous.

Paulo left after that, without even tying his shoes.

Tino stayed where he was, his hands still resting on the counter. The coffee sat cooling beside him. He poured himself a cup and took a sip; it tasted bitter, very bitter, and it was black like a well without a bottom. He set the cup down and didn't touch it again.

He's crazy. Florida, for God's sake. To risk everything for just one day.

Tino picked up his cellphone and dialed Anita, telling himself to stay calm. Don't rush. Let her speak. Persuade her.

She answered quickly, which meant she didn't have to work that day. He began casually, "I heard you guys are having a family reunion."

She went on almost without breathing, full of excitement, telling him everything. Then, after a pause, she added, "It was my idea."

"Anita, *por favor*. You can't go to Florida."

"I went last year and nothing happened. Everybody said it was scary, but nothing happened. No cop even looked at me to *echarme un piropo.*"

"That was last year. You've noticed we have a new president," he said, with irony. "Trump. And DeSantis—the damned one—is coming after immigrants. The risk is too high."

"Mr. Tino…"

"You're going to end up in jail. Don't you understand? At least here in New York, for now, it's safer. Have you seen Washington on TV?"

"I don't want to watch the news," she said.

It took him some time to convince her. "Soldiers were for wars," he said, "not for people on the streets. Still, Trump sent them to hunt immigrants." He even sent her the video he'd been watching when Paulo rang the bell.

"Tell him you don't want to go anymore. Say you're afraid—that a twenty-four-hour trip just to see your sister isn't worth the risk."

She sighed. "Okay, but you know how he is—"

"No—tell him you're not going, no matter what. Your sister can say she doesn't have a room for you, or she doesn't have the time. I don't know. Say anything—no space, *lo que sea.* Get sick and go to the ER; better you spend a night in a hospital than go into that *fosa de los leones,* that lions' den called Florida," he breathed. "No—actually, it's a crocodile's den."

They hung up, and he turned on the computer to watch *Democracy Now!* He stared at the headlines: masked agents, National Guard troops, officers smashing car windshields to arrest people. Still, he couldn't focus. For the next thirty minutes, his mind replayed the scene he feared most—the knock on the door, the handcuffs, the notice of arrest.

God, he remembered, Paulo had dismissed his recommendation to carry any proof that he'd been in the country for more than two years. They could be deported in less than twenty-four hours.

But maybe they'd grant him bail. He did the math in his head. Maybe he could give them the thousand dollars he'd been saving for emergencies from his meager disability checks. It was

a lot for him, but in the scheme of things, nothing—a bail would be five or six thousand, just for Paulo. And Anita? Who would pay for her?

The phone rang. It was Anita.

He turned the computer's volume off and sighed before swiping right to answer, but it didn't work. It happened to him sometimes. Maybe his finger was wet—the sweat. He was anxious, nervous still. He tried again. Nothing.

These smartphones. What a name! It never happened with the old ones—the push-button phones. *You just picked up the receiver and punched the numbers. That was it.*

But it wasn't like that. He knew very well.

When he'd been raped, the cops had thrown him into the street, bloody, wearing only his jeans, the same ones they'd forced back on him but left unbuttoned. Somehow he dragged himself to a phone booth and managed to stand. He had a single coin, which he slid into the slot, but once he heard the tone, he couldn't see the numbers. His face was so swollen he could barely open his eyes. But that wasn't the hardest part. The hardest part was keeping his finger steady. He couldn't press the right digits, even though he repeated them in his mind, the number of his best friend.

Now he squeezed the smartphone and wiped his finger on his pants. The screen lit up, showing the icons for speaker, clock, and battery. He held it to his ear.

"Sí," he said.

Anita spoke quickly. "It seems he wasn't as stubborn as we thought. *Sabia que es la palmera que con el viento baila.*"

Paulo had said he wasn't going to insist on the trip to Florida. *He must be afraid,* Tino thought. It wasn't that the wise palm dances with the wind, as Anita had said, but that it's wiser to be the palm that bends in the wind than the oak that stands firm and breaks. Still, Paulo had a pride to preserve, and now he had the perfect excuse: it wasn't him who canceled, but Anita.

"Good," Tino said. "And now where are you planning to go?"

"I told him we could go to Luna Park, Coney Island."

"Coney Island? *Ay, por Dios.* You've been in New York—what? Two years—and you haven't seen anything! You work, you sleep, you work again. Then you finally get some time off, and your big plan is rust and seagulls? *Una ciudad de hierro.* This city has the Empire State Building—the one from *King Kong!*—and the Plaza Hotel where they filmed *Sex and the City!* And you want to ride a Ferris wheel and vomit by the sea? *¡Por favor!*"

She made a small sound, half a groan, half a sigh, like someone being scolded. "But where can we go?"

"Central Park—it's summer, dear!"

"I go there every day. To work."

"You just pass by. You don't know Central Park," he said. "It has a castle, a zoo, free concerts. There are lakes, waterfalls, sculptures, beautiful gardens. Central Park isn't just a bush you see from the bus window coming from Ráquira to Bogotá!"

She said nothing.

"We have the Metropolitan Museum—perhaps the best museum in the world. It's so big you can enter through ancient Egypt, wander past Rome and Greece, and still never make it to the nineteenth century! We have Lincoln Center, Broadway shows! But Coney Island?" He exhaled. "That was iconic in the 1920s." He let out a short snort, halfway between laughter and disbelief. "You might as well go eat cotton candy in a playground."

"I also thought…" she said hesitantly. "The Statue of Liberty."

"Ah, well, that's something. Of course, millions of people come to see the Statue of Liberty. Who the hell is coming from India, Ghana, or Brazil to see Coney Island?"

He sighed with indignation, but finally, he had won this little battle. He puffed up his chest like a rooster crowing at sunrise—just as the bell rang.

His eyes caught the corner of the kitchen aisle where Paulo had plugged in his cellphone. The charger was still there; he must have forgotten it.

Tino lowered his voice, covering the phone with his hand. "Someone's knocking on the door," he whispered. "It must be Paulo. Better not say anything…"

He hung up, knowing Paulo wouldn't like feeling handled, and briskly walked to the aisle to grab the charger. Hearing the second ring, he called out, "I know your phone's dying," and opened the door, expecting Paulo.

No. There was no Paulo.

Two tall young men stood there instead. Both strong. One wore a long-sleeved pullover with angular, mouse-gray patterns across the chest. It looked like a brutalist monolith, almost armor, and reminded him of a Tesla. The other, taller and more slender, wore a dark blue shirt buttoned all the way to the top, two pockets, a pen tucked neatly in one. He looked like a security guard, though Tino didn't recognize the face. He was strong too, but in a different way, like the reinforced core of a skyscraper: slender, yet unyielding.

For a moment, Tino relived the night he was raped. The weight of their bodies pressing down, the cop's pelvis grinding above him. He wanted to be a mouse—small enough to dart between their legs and disappear. His hand found the doorknob; he held on for balance.

The one who looked like a security guard pulled a pen from his pocket and slid it across the paper on a clipboard as he read aloud, heavy English accent twisting the Spanish words:

"Augustín Franco Arévalo."

At the sound of the name, Tino drew a deep breath. No one had said his full name in the United States, not since the day he was naturalized. Nobody here knew about "Franco," the name his mother had chosen so he'd appear to have two last names, like a legitimate child in Colombia.

Who were these men?

He wanted to slam the door, but it was too late.

The one in the Tesla-gray pullover leaned forward, resting his arm on the doorframe. Peeking at the sheet of paper, he said, with perfect pronunciation:

"Mr. Franco Arévalo." He smiled. "August 28th—happy birthday."

His blue eyes gleamed with a strange confidence.

"Let me tell you something," he said. "Of all the knocks on your door, I bet the last one you'd want is ICE."

The security-guard type extended a hand holding a slip of paper. Tino's breath caught. He wanted to cry out—*My birthday is not a lie. My life is not a lie.*

It was so unfair. Why had they come for him?

He took the paper. *Don't sign anything,* he remembered from the news. His mind raced—denaturalization, deportation. Who could he call? Any lawyer?

He looked down at the paper. It was colorful, too bright, too dark—like a disco ball in a cave.

"We're with Mamdani," said the Tesla-looking one. "The only candidate who's going to fight Trump's mass deportations."

Rage boiled in his throat. He crumpled the flyer and threw it in the Tesla-guy's face.

"Get out of my house!" he shouted.

The slam of the door sounded like a gunshot and startled him, even though he was the one who'd done it. He stumbled to the bathroom, pressed his hand to his face, and realized he was crying.

"My life is not a lie," he murmured.

He splashed cold water over his face, then went to his bed and lay down. But he didn't want to sleep. He didn't want to see *that* dream again, the one that had haunted him since the night of the rape.

In the dream, the cops' faces reeled, sliding one over another like those TV ads where different faces morph into one. A single face hovered above him, cutting his hair, the hair that always grew back, stronger, longer. He wasn't afraid of the dream itself; he was afraid that one night, the hair would stop growing. He was balding now.

The bed was a bad idea.

He went to the kitchen, poured himself some water, and sipped. Shaking his head, he muttered, half to himself, half in disbelief.

"Oh, yes… I gave my information to some of Mamdani's volunteers a few days ago."

He kept sipping.

"Those poor guys probably think I'm some MAGA fanatic."

Then he thought of Anita and Paulo—*how frightened they must be*.

"Oh my God," he said aloud. "The Statue of Liberty."

He looked toward the kitchen aisle, found his phone, and dialed Anita's number, praying she hadn't left for work yet.

"Don Tino?" she answered.

"Don't go to the Statue of Liberty."

"What?"

"Please—don't go there. Any other place, but not there."

Tanta joda. Que no se puede ir allá. Que no se puede acá. ¿Entonces dónde?

"Anita, the Statue of Liberty is federal territory."

"What's that? You said we can go anywhere in New York."

"Yes… but the Statue of Liberty is like Washington—it's like a Trump land. A Trump's land."

"I don't want to go anywhere."

"No, listen: forget about the Statue of Liberty. Just don't go."

Now he was shaking. "I'll give you three hundred—no, five hundred. We can buy tickets for the…" He stammered, searching for something to say. "*The Lion King*. Yes, *The Lion King*."

He himself had never seen the musical.

"*The Lion King*?" she repeated.

"Just don't go to the Statue of Liberty. Ever."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Okay… but you know how Paulo is…"

"Just don't go."

They hung up without saying goodbye. It felt safer that way, as if keeping the call open might keep them in the same land.

The wrong land, he thought. *The wrong birthday*. *The wrong liberty*.

Jhon Sánchez is a Colombian-born writer and attorney living in New York City. After arriving in the United States seeking political asylum, he earned an MFA in Creative Writing and a law degree, thereby ensuring that both his fiction and his legal briefs would be overanalyzed. His work has appeared in *Bio Sci-Fi: Fiction on the Web*, *Dark Horses Magazine*, *Midway Journal*, *Gemini Magazine*, and numerous anthologies. He has received fellowships and residencies from Byrdcliffe, the Horned Dorset Colony, Newnan Art Rez, and the Edward Albee Foundation. His stories frequently involve mistaken identities, questionable life choices, and people who should probably seek professional help. His forthcoming collection, *Enjoy a Pleasurable Death and Other Stories That Will Kill You*, will ideally be published before the title becomes autobiographical.