

The Bow-Wow Palooza Interfaith Blessing at Temple Israel

These days Diego pays me to round up his migrants soon as they make land after five arrivals on Hallandale unstrapped the diesel engine from their raft, accepted water from journalists and asked them how to get to South Beach. Turns out they'd blown all this way on Tropical Storm Ella, bang into a meet and greet with Border Protection.

I'm D's pay-as-you-go girl, hustling illegals into trailers until he can move them on; if there's too many, the leftovers end up with me in the pool room at the condo. After that, they're in the fields for little or nothing until they've paid their *obligations*.

Today, I'm counting what Diego calls his 'bonus' for documentation and soon as his back's turned, I skim some off to my tin box, then shove it back behind the vented bricks of the poolside wall and replace the grille.

I know this isn't smart, but I haven't got enough; despite living in this chemically-fugged hothouse, showering poolside, and eating the \$2 late-night specials at the corner bodega, I haven't got enough to bring the family here. Nowhere near. On bad days I think I never will.

'Last frost was February, you'all need to get the *jitomate* out,' commands Diego, jabbing a finger in the direction of the latest arrivals. 'I'll be back with the truck,' he says to me, 'soon as.'

It's late evening before anyone's home from the fields. I leave them lounging on their sleeping bags, smoking – though I tell them not to, what with the pool chemicals and all – and take the service lift to the top floor.

I'm no stalker, but I have this thing, see, for Chantal, the girl who lives in the penthouse. She's totally *sabrosa* and all the little kids cluster round her when she's in the park doing *Qigong* or whatever, and sometimes she stops and gives them *Tico Ticos* and lets them pat her dog, Balou. Tonight, I watch her through the air unit outside her door, from where I can see approximately nine inches of her brightly lit apartment, nine inches of her

brightly lit life, spilling out into the night, see the back of Chantal's head, the outline of her braided hair undulating in the reflection of the pool filter: a prettier, slimmer, cooler version of me – of how I might have turned out had things been different.

'Come here, *chola*,' whispers a voice in my ear. I turn and see Diego. He pulls me so close I can smell the grease and motor oil seeping from the folds of his red bandana. He's got a viper tatt slithering down his left eyebrow and its eyes wink purple at me under the efficiency lighting. He calls us all *chola*, so I don't take it too serious.

'Don't think I don't know you been skimming...' This I do take serious.

Chantal appears at her front door with Balou on the lead and Diego yanks me into the dark of the stairwell.

Suddenly, there's a muffled bang, a thunder-rumble, and we're shaken down. D's liquored breath is still in my face as we watch the whole Atlantic side of the apartments shear off from the main tower, crumbling, wavering, folding in on itself.

The force of the blast blows Chantal's front door clean off its hinges and flings her into the air. I'm tossed hard against the metal railings. '*What the fuck?*' For a second I think I'm going over after her.

Balou runs towards us, frenzied and barking.

Diego kicks the dog out the way and heads for the fire escape, dragging me with him. Soon we're at ground level by the pool utility.

I dodge Diego when he loosens his grip on me somewhere between the vacuum hose and the plastic sweepers. I want to go back for Chantal, I do, but instead I grab the long-handled skimmer they use to suck up insects from the pool's surface and start crashing my way through the fallen debris, trying to reach what's left of the pool room.

The first thing I see is the place is empty and a large hole's been smashed in the brick vent: last night's arrivals and the money are gone.

Shit! I begin squeezing myself back down the narrow shaft, about to step onto the main pool deck when, just in time, I realize it's not there, just a gaping hole between me, the sand, and the ocean.

And that's when I see Balou's still loose, lead trailing.

I don't like dogs, I really don't, but he's Chantal's and that counts for something. I wriggle over and grab his lead.

He's straining against me, head snapping side to side, but somehow, I gather him up into the shaft, all the time thinking how grateful Chantal's gonna be when she finds out I saved him.

I've no idea what's happened but the place is crawling with feds, so we lie low.

Next morning, I drink the remains of the bottled water and eat a stale tamale the men have left behind. We clamber outside and Balou has a pee.

I need to find Chantal.

With Balou on his lead, we skirt the twisted railings of what was the lawned area, scrambling over a couple of upturned palm trees. It's hard going, but I figure we can reach Chantal's condo from behind.

Then Balou slips on the cracked sidewalk, which is slick with salt spray and his front left scrapes the side of a spiked metal girder, blood pouring everywhere.

'Shit! Fuck!' I yell at him, which scares him more than the pain.

My screen's all shot up, but the phone's good. The nearest low-income pet care turns out to be close – on the corner of Doral.

'Papers,' says the receptionist, holding out her hand.

'I'm sorry, there was an emergency at home, and I kinda forgot ...'

‘Not you, the dog.’

‘Him too.’

‘This dog yours though, right?’ She eyes the state of me.

‘You homeless? ‘Cos if you are, we can take him to the pound, they’ll help him.’

‘No!’ I picture Chantal’s face when I tell her Balou’s in the pound. ‘It’s just a cut paw.’

‘Well, if y’all’s got no papers, I can have the nurse just take a look, clean it up some - okay?’

‘Okay.’

On the way back I buy Balou a packet of kibble.

When we get to the pool everything street-side’s covered by tarps and the only way in is by sneaking through the vent shaft outside the barriers.

Homeland Security trucks are everywhere, radios blaring. There’s talk of a bomb, but who knows. Someone says maybe the concrete just gave way. Someone else claims he saw a big wave.

By afternoon, there’s even more activity. I grab a discarded Search and Rescue jacket that’s hanging off a steel bar and shrug into it: not a great look but it hides my ragged T and cowgirl belt. It’s a risk but I need to find out what’s going on.

When we reach Chantal’s part of the condo the whole penthouse floor’s gone, balconies and all.

The middle section’s leaning crazy-wise, steel uprights shrouded under a dust cloud, and there’s screaming and shouting from behind us for everyone to step-the-hell-away.

I’m running with the rest of them, tugging Balou after me.

When I reach the far tower, there's one section of the ground floor still standing. I pick my way around it and that's when I see a flash of red and a sliver of purple tongue poking out of a collapsed sewer up ahead.

I try to scuff over the bandana in the dirt with my heel, but Balou uncovers it again. That dog sticks by Diego like he's waiting for another kicking.

'Leave it!' I order him, but a few paces on, Balou starts pulling on the lead, reversing his tracks.

I look down at him. He stares up at me. No contest. We go back. We go back to the scrap of red, which he immediately starts to worry with his teeth. A clump of Diego's greasy black hair appears from beneath the rubble. Balou starts barking like the hound from hell. Someone waves a camera across the ground, orange lights pulsing brightly at its tip.

'Hey Martinez! We got a live one here!' A bunch of guys in S & R dayglo rush at the scrap of red and start tearing at the earth with their hands.

Balou and I back off towards what looks like a staging area on the perimeter.

'This the only live one today?' I ask one of the rescue crew.

'Only live one, period. Whole thing buckled under the weight of the parking garage they reckon - didn't stand a chance.' His eyes focus, as if he's only now seeing me.

'You not from Dade?'

'Out of county,' I improvise, which is true, as far as it goes.

'Where's his work coat?' he asks, nodding at Balou.

'Lost it,' I say, 'in all this...'

'Wait, I got a spare here somewhere.' He rummages in his pack. 'Should fit good enough.'

I take the coat. Balou sits on a concrete slab and licks his paw.

‘He’s hurt – you need to get yourself over to the 311 – they’ve set up an emergency center at The Temple for you folks with the dogs – just follow the signs – same as the Blessing.’

So, now we’re in the back row of the Bow-Wow Palooza Interfaith Blessing at Temple Israel. The main Sanctuary’s a mix of stained glass and tropical tile, with seats that wouldn’t look out of place at the local CMX.

‘Last month it was the Catholics, tonight’s the United Methodists,’ says a man with a green ponytail, clutching a French bulldog to his chest, ‘but they all do the same thing.’

He looks down at Balou. ‘Search and Rescue, huh? Vet’s on 9th and Walnut’ll sort him out, just show them your card.’

‘Card might be a problem,’ I say, keeping my face in shadow.

‘Let me guess – off the boat?’

When I don’t reply, he says ‘How long?’

‘Two years.’ He raises one pierced eyebrow, turning a page in his head.

I must still be in shock, ‘cos before I know it, I’m telling him about the raft and the pool, about Diego, the money he sends home for me from my wages every month.

‘Okay,’ he says, slowly. ‘Okay, well, I’m sorry to tell you but that’s long gone, *asere*, it’s what they do, the smugglers – keep you working, keep your money, keep you tight.’ He makes a fist closing in on itself. Then tells me he came here in an inflatable with ten friends. He’s the only one made shore.

His name’s Ernesto, he says.

We sit a-while, watching a pot-bellied pig and a speckled hen at the blessing table.

‘Dogs next.’

‘Oh, we’re just waiting on the clinic to open back there, given the deal with the vet an’all.’

‘Get him blessed while you’re waiting – what’s the harm?’

So, when they call dogs we step up.

A wizened man in a faded button-down puts his hands on Balou’s ears, murmuring under his breath. I don’t know what I was expecting but it wasn’t this.

On the way out, Ernesto taps me on the shoulder, takes a card from the back pocket of his jeans. ‘They’ll help you – it’s how I’m still here – and legal.’

There’s a queue for 311 services that snakes across the floor of the sanctuary.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t have his papers, or money,’ I say, when it’s finally our turn.

‘If he was injured while working, Canine Medical Fund’ll cover him, and if you don’t have your SARDUS registration we’ll just scan his chip.’ She passes the scanner over the fur in his neck and soon she’s tapping at her iPad. ‘So, this is Balou and you’re ... Chantal Perez, right?’ There’s a pause.

‘Chantal,’ I say, ‘yeah, right.’