

from: *Brownsville* (2003),
by Oscar Casares

Chango

Bony was walking back from the Jiffy-Mart when he found the monkey's head. There it was, under the small palm tree in the front yard, just staring up at him like an old friend who couldn't remember his name. It freaked him out bad. The dude had to check around to make sure nobody had seen him jump back and almost drop his beer in the dirt. It was still lunchtime and cars were parked up and down the street. For a second, it looked like the head might be growing out of the ground. Maybe somebody had buried the monkey up to its neck the way people did to other people at the beach

when they ran out of things to do. Maybe it was still alive. Bony grabbed a broom off the porch and swung hard. He stopped an inch away from the monkey's little black eyes, and it didn't blink. He poked the head with the straw end of the broom and it tipped back and forth. The short black hairs on its head were pointed straight up at the cloudy sky. The nose was flat and wrinkled around the edges like it'd been a normal nose and then God decided to push it in with His big thumb. The ears were old man's ears with whiskers growing on them and in them. And it kept smiling. It smiled from one monkey ear to the other.

Bony's mother said it was the ugliest thing she'd ever seen. ¡Qué feo! She wanted it out of her yard. What were the neighbors going to think? What were her customers going to say? Who would want to buy perfume from a woman who lived with such an ugly thing in her front yard? She wouldn't.

His father said it was a dead chango. He didn't care how it died or where it came from. All he knew was that Bony needed to stop lying around in his calzoncillos every morning and go out and find a job, earn some money. He was tired of coming home for lunch and seeing him sleeping on the sofa. He didn't know how a police sergeant's son could be so damn lazy. Brownsville wasn't that big a town. People talked. Bony was thirty-one years old. Ya, it was time to go do something with his life. His older brothers had good jobs. What was wrong with him? That chango wasn't going to get him anywhere. It was dead.

"I want to keep him," Bony said.

"Keep him?" his father said. "¿Estás loco o qué? You want to live with monkeys, I'll drive you to the zoo. Come on, get in the car, I'll take you right now. Marta, por favor, help your son put some clothes in a bag. He wants to live at the zoo."

"You're making your father mad, Bony."

"I didn't do anything," Bony said.

"No," his father said. "All you want to do is drink beer with your new best friend, your compadre, instead of going out to make a living."

Bony should have known his parents would say something like that. So what if he didn't have a job? Everybody had his own life.

His father drove away in the patrol car. His mother walked back inside the house. And Bony stayed in the yard with the monkey. It wasn't so bad. It's not like the head had been chopped off right there in front of the house. Except for it not having a body, the monkey was in perfect condition. The head must have come from the alley that was next to the house. People were always walking by and throwing things in the yard. It was Bony's job to keep the yard clean. His father said it was the least he could do. Every few days Bony found something new: candy wrappers, empty beer bottles, used fireworks, a dollar bill ripped in half, a fishing knife with dried blood. A few weeks earlier he'd found a busted pocket watch in the grass. Another time he found a bunch of letters from a man named Joaquín to a woman named Verónica. The letters were in Spanish, and as best as Bony could tell,

Joaquín loved Verónica and things would've worked out if he hadn't had a wife and five kids.

Most afternoons Bony sat on the tailgate of his dark blue troquita, the sound system cranked up to some Led Zeppelin or Pink Floyd. He'd been listening to the same music since high school and said he would change if another band ever came out with anything better. That afternoon was different, though. He forgot about the music and sat in a lawn chair on the grass. The shade from the fresno tree covered most of the yard. The wind was blowing some, but it was a warm breeze that made him feel like he was sitting in a Laundromat waiting for his pants to dry. He stayed cool in his chanclas, baggy blue jean shorts, and San Antonio Spurs jersey. Across the street, a crow walked in circles in front of Mando Gomez's house. Bony cracked open his first beer. The palm tree stood between him and the street. He liked being the only one who could see the monkey as people walked by that afternoon. He stared at the monkey and the monkey stared back at him.

The first ones to pass by were the chavalones walking home from school with their mommies. A few of the mommies were young and fine, but they never looked Bony's way. Next were the older kids from the junior high who lived in the neighborhood and knew better than to walk by without saying hello. "Ese Bony," they said. He pitched his head back slightly, just to let them know he'd heard them and he was cool with them.

Later, people in the neighborhood drove home from work. Some of them waved hello, some didn't. Mrs. Rivas, who lived at the other end of the street, waved only because she

was friends with his mother. The old lady worked part-time in the church office and led the Rosary whenever anybody from the neighborhood died. Every Christmas, for as long as Bony could remember, she added a new animal to her Baby Jesus setting. A few years ago they sent a guy from the newspaper to take her picture surrounded by all the plastic sheep and cows in the manger. Bony did his best to avoid Mrs. Rivas, but one time she stopped her car in front of the house and invited him to a prayer group for men who were having trouble finding God. He said he wasn't having any trouble. Mrs. Rivas told him he wasn't going to find Nuestro Señor, Jesucristo, inside a can of beer. She got back in her car when Bony looked inside the can he was drinking from and said, "Hey, anybody in there?"

Domingo, the old guy who cleaned yards, usually walked by in the late afternoon and waved. Bony figured he had to be at least eighty or ninety. He'd been old like forever. Every time Bony saw Domingo he was working in people's yards and only getting older and darker. He wasn't getting rich pushing a lawn mower, that was for sure.

If it was the weekend, Ruben Ortiz might drive by. He grew up on this same street and now he was a teacher. The guy drove a nice car, wore nice clothes, even had a good-looking wife. He lived on the other side of town and came over to visit his parents. Bony could tell the guy had changed since he left the neighborhood. He'd stay in his car and wave like he was passing by in a parade. Bony thought it looked like a good life, but it wasn't for everybody, not for him anyway.

His friend Mando had big plans and look what happened

to him. He was working full-time and taking drafting classes at the college. The army paid for the classes, but he needed extra money because his girlfriend was about to have a baby. He wanted to marry her after the baby was born and buy a house, maybe a trailer to get started. Mando worked for a shuttle service that took businessmen into Matamoros. It was his job to drive them to their offices at the maquiladoras, unload any extra packages from the van, drive back across the bridge, and then pick up the same businessmen later that day. So he was driving back alone one morning, right? It was foggy on this narrow road and a truck hit him head-on. Mando died instantly, at least that's what his family hoped. Because if he didn't, it meant he was still alive when somebody stole his wallet, his gold chain with the cross, and his favorite pair of boots right off his feet. The owner of the shuttle service said the company would pay for the funeral and set aside \$5,000 to give Mando's kid when he turned eighteen, but nothing more for the family. Nada más, the owner was nice enough to translate for Mando's father. The family hired a lawyer to represent them, but he was young and inexperienced and the company's lawyers weren't. Nada más ended up being all the family got. Mando's girlfriend and the baby moved in with his parents.

This thing with Mando happened a few years ago. Bony had an okay job around that time. He worked for the city, in the Parks Division, where his job was to open one of the gyms in the afternoon, hand out basketballs, break up any fights before they started, and make sure nobody stuffed anything down the toilets. He played ball if a team needed an

extra player, and he had a killer jump shot from the baseline, three-point range. Nothing but net. *Swoosh!!!* Then one night he sneaks inside the gym with a girl he met at a party. She's a gordita who weighs almost twice as much as Bony, but she wants it and he has a set of gym keys that are burning a hole in his pocket. And they're having a good time, when all of a sudden the security guard pops the lights on and catches Bony and the girl rolling around at center court like they're wrestling for a loose ball. The guard is an old guy who's serious about his job. He walks into the Parks Division office the next morning and reports Bony. By the end of the week, the dude's at home without a job.

Now Bony made his money installing car stereos on the side. People paid him what they could — twenty or thirty dollars was the usual — but if he knew them, he might let them slide with a case of Corona or Negra Modelo. He also helped out his mom with her Avon deliveries. She paid him a few dollars for this. At first he thought there might be some nice-looking women buying perfume, but they all turned out to be as old or older than his mom, viejitas like Mrs. Rivas. Some of the women would tip him a couple of dollars, which was better than nothing. He was getting by, and except for his parents hassling him about finding a real job, he didn't have any complaints.

It was dark when his father came home with dinner. He'd picked up a family box from Kentucky Fried Chicken. Bony liked the chicken at Church's better, liked those papitas they

served, but the manager at KFC gave his dad a discount for being a police officer, and that was that. If Bony wanted Church's, he'd have to buy it with Bony's money.

His mother set the table with paper plates and napkins. Bony sat by the open blinds so he could keep an eye on the monkey. He served himself a chicken breast and some mashed potatoes. His father served himself two legs and a roll. His mother liked the wings and coleslaw. They ate without talking. The opening and closing of the red and white box was the only sound in the room. Bony's mother stood up once to find the salt. His father was scooping up the last of his mashed potatoes when he finally spoke.

"Did you know that Colonel Sanders, the man who invented Kentucky Fried Chicken, tried one hundred and twenty-four recipes before he made the perfect one? One hundred and twenty-four. What does that tell you, Bony?"

"That he should've gone to Church's."

"Why do I even try to talk sense to you?" His father shook his head and looked at Bony's mother, who stared back like she was waiting for the answer. He bit another piece off his roll, chewed it, swallowed, and spoke again.

"The Colonel, he didn't give up because he didn't get it right the first time. That's what I'm trying to say here."

"What was he a colonel of?" Bony asked.

"¿Pues, quién sabe? He was just a colonel, of the army, of the marines, of all the chickens and roosters. It doesn't matter, Bony. The point is, the man didn't give up and you shouldn't, either. You can't stay home the rest of your life be-

cause a job didn't work out. Look at the Colonel. Let him be your example."

"I'm not going to wear one of those uniforms they wear at Kentucky Fried Chicken, no way."

"Bony, all I'm saying is, there are people I can call. People who know the name Sergeant Timo Hinojosa and could help you."

"What's wrong with that?" his mother asked. "What's wrong with accepting some help from your father? That's what parents are for."

"Nothing." Bony glanced out the window.

"Don't be thinking you're going to keep that chango," his father said.

"Why not?"

"It's a dead chango," his mother said. "Do you need another reason?"

Bony walked outside and sat in the lawn chair. The porch light was on and he could see the monkey watching him. There were only three cans left in his twelve-pack. In an hour, the beer would be gone. He was about to walk to the Jiffy-Mart again, but instead he decided to hang out in the yard with the monkey. Back when Mando was around, the two of them partied all night. One time they stayed up until five in the morning, taking hits off some hash, drinking beer, and eating Doritos. Bony had heard that a volcano erupted in Mexico and was going to turn the moon a different color. And sure enough, the moon turned a dark red like there was a heart inside of it pumping blood. Mando called it the werewolf moon.

Bony stood in the middle of the street and howled as loud as he could. He howled like he'd been bitten and he was turning into a werewolf, growing fur and fangs and claws and a tail. He howled until his father opened the window and told him to shut the hell up.

Bony was sitting in the lawn chair when his father turned off the porch light. It was almost eleven o'clock. He sat in the dark staring at the monkey and barely making out the shape of its head. Usually there would've been more light in the yard, but some pendejo had busted out the streetlight again. Bony finished his last beer and closed his eyes. When he woke up a few minutes later, a cat was sniffing the monkey. "¡Pinche gato!" Bony yelled and threw a rock at it. He pegged the cat on its backside right as it was starting to lick the monkey's ear. Bony went over to make sure the monkey was all right. He cleared the dirt around the palm tree so there wouldn't be any bugs crawling on the head.

It was time to go to sleep, but he couldn't leave the monkey outside. Not if he wanted to see it again. If you left anything in the yard overnight, it was as good as gone. People chained their barbecue pits to trees. Unless you drove some cucaracha, your car better have an alarm on it. Most of the neighbors who could afford them had steel bars installed on the windows and doors of their houses, and even that didn't always keep the cabrones out if they thought there was something worth stealing. The Sanchez family had a full-grown

chow in their backyard, and one day it disappeared forever. No way was he leaving the monkey in the yard.

Bony found a plastic trash bag on the porch, but he wasn't sure how to put the monkey's head inside it. He hadn't really touched the monkey, and the truth was that actually putting his hands on it was kind of freaky to him. He told himself it wasn't because he was afraid — he just didn't want to mess up its hair. If he were a monkey, he wouldn't want some guy grabbing him by the head. He wrapped his hand inside the white bag and held the head against the palm tree until he could scoop it up. When he walked into his room, Bony could see the monkey's black face pressed against the white plastic.

Where to put the monkey was the next question. There was room on the dresser if he moved his boom box, except he liked having it right under his team poster of the Dallas Cowboys. He also had a poster of the cheerleaders hanging on the back of the door, where nobody could see it and his mother wouldn't complain every time people came to the house. Two leather basketballs were sitting on the recliner he didn't use anymore. He tossed the basketballs in the closet and placed the monkey's head on the recliner. The monkey looked sharp, looked like a king sitting on his throne.

Bony turned off the lights and climbed into bed. It was pitch-black in the room except for the eyes and shiny white teeth that he swore he could see on the chair. Bony turned towards the wall, but he kept seeing the smile in his mind. He imagined what would happen if the monkey grew back its body in the middle of the night. Hairy arms and legs, long

skinny tail, sharp pointy teeth, hands that looked like feet, feet that looked like hands. And what if this new monkey was out for revenge against the people who had cut off its head, but since it was a monkey, it didn't know any better and attacked the first person it saw? It started by ripping out the person's eyes so he couldn't fight back and then it chomped on his face and neck, eating up his cheeks and tongue, gnawing on the bones and cartilage, until the whole room was covered with blood. Bony folded the pillow around his head and tried to make himself fall asleep. After a while, he stood up and put the monkey in the closet and pushed the chair against the door.

He woke up earlier than usual the next morning. His parents were sitting at the kitchen table when he walked in holding the plastic bag. The monkey was pressed against the white plastic, staring at the chorizo con huevo on the table.

"¡Ay, Bony!" his mother said, "No me digas que you brought that chango inside my house."

"I didn't want somebody to steal him."

"Who's going to steal a monkey head?" his father said.

"You never know."

"Take him outside, ahorita mero!" his mother said. "I will not have a dead chango inside my house. No señor, you're going to ruin my business."

"You heard your mother. You better get that chango out of here."

Bony walked outside and placed the monkey back in the same spot where it had been the day before. This time he went

ahead and held the monkey in his hands. Its fur was soft and its ears felt like human ears, kind of. His parents, as usual, were freaking out about nothing. The fur around the monkey's left ear was messed up from being inside the bag. Bony licked his palm and smoothed down the fur.

The sun was already up and it was getting warm in the neighborhood. Bony grabbed a can of Coke from the refrigerator and sat in the lawn chair. The *Herald* was lying next to the fresno tree. He opened the paper and checked out the local news, halfway expecting to see an article about somebody finding a monkey's body without a head. There was news about two Canadians getting busted at the International Bridge with heroin sealed inside cans of tuna, news about even more Border Patrol agents being hired, news about the farmers needing rain, news about the effects of the peso devaluation on downtown, news about the owner of El Chueco Bar on Fourteenth Street being attacked with a machete and surviving, but nothing about the monkey.

After he finished with the first section, he turned to the want ads. They were taking applications at the Levis plant. Parra Furniture needed a deliveryman. The security job at Amigoland Mall looked cool. All those guys did was drive around the mall and make sure your car didn't get ripped off while you were shopping. How hard could that be?

People had it wrong when they thought Bony didn't want to work. He was only trying to have a good time before it was too late. Bony used to think he and Mando would be partying for the rest of their lives. Mando had told him about school and getting married, but he never took him seriously.

Guys talked, and lots of times that's all it was, talk. It wasn't until the accident that he realized Mando had a whole different life he was planning. At first, Bony couldn't believe he was dead. It messed him up. He didn't know how to make sense of his friend dying. Bony hadn't been doing much except hanging out and partying. So why did God take Mando and not him? A couple of times he'd seen Mando's kid playing alone in the front yard and had gone over. He was a happy kid, but playing with him made Bony miss his friend, so he didn't go over that much anymore. It was better just to wave at him from this side of the street.

"¿Todavía?" Bony's father was standing on the front porch. "I thought we told you to get that chango out of here."

"I thought you meant later, or tomorrow."

"Now, Bony."

"Pues, I don't know where to take him."

"That's not my problem, Bony. That's your problem. You can drive it all the way back to Africa, or wherever it came from. I don't care." His father crossed his arms and leaned against the porch. "And I'm going to wait right here until you do it."

Bony took his time standing up and putting the monkey back in the plastic bag. He could feel his father's eyes on his back, but he didn't let it get to him. He walked down the street, trying to look like any other guy walking down the street with a monkey's head in a plastic bag. No worries. He waved to Domingo, but the old man was busy trimming the grass around a neighbor's tree. A few houses later, Bony threw a rock at the same cat from the night before.

Lincoln Park was at the end of the block. It looked more like a long, skinny island than it did a park. The palm trees were one of the few things that stood out when the resaca flooded. The water usually took a couple of weeks to go back down to its normal level, which was more than enough time for all the mosquitoes to show up.

He crossed the small bridge over the resaca. The park was empty at that hour. He climbed the wooden fort that the little kids played on during the day. This was also the fort where Mando and Bony convinced a couple of girls to come hang out with them one night. The guys were sixteen, the girls were fifteen. Bony scored two bottles of strawberry wine and they took turns going down the slide. After a while, Mando and his girl went for a long walk. Bony stayed with his girl in the fort, where she let him do everything but go inside her.

He took the monkey out of the plastic bag and set it next to him. From where he was sitting on the fort, Bony could see most of the park. If you played basketball here, you had to be a fast runner or the ball was going to be rolling into the water every game. This was the court where Bony first got his shot down. Next to the basket were the picnic tables that filled up fast on the weekends. You could forget barbecuing here unless you started setting up way before noon. If they were having a lowrider show in the park, you'd be lucky to find a place to sit.

By the water fountains was where Bony had stopped a guy named Javier Ortiz. The girl Mando had been with that night in the park was Javier's old girlfriend, and now Javier was saying he was going to jump Mando.

"I heard you were talking shit about Mando."

"What's it to you?"

"You got a problem with Mando, you got a problem with me."

"No, man, I don't have no problems with you," Javier said. "It's cool."

"I think you do, puto. And I think I'm going to kick your ass," Bony said.

And then he did.

Bony looked down and saw that flies were buzzing around the monkey's head and landing on its nose. He shooed them away with his hand, but they kept coming back. Looking at the long whiskers on the monkey's cheeks, the deep lines around its eyes, made him want to find out where the head had come from. Bony thought about calling the zoo and asking them if they were missing any monkeys, but then he figured that if a monkey had been kidnapped, they might be tracing the phone calls and he'd get blamed for the whole thing. He didn't need that kind of trouble.

He walked back to the house remembering all the monkeys he'd seen on TV or at the movies, but none of them looked like his monkey. He thought how weird it was that he'd never seen one like this before. When he made it home, he put the monkey in the truck and drove out of the neighborhood. He passed the park and headed down International, in the direction of the library. Pink Floyd was on the stereo and the woofers were maxed out enough for people to feel the vibrations two cars over. The monkey was riding shotgun.

The library parking lot was full, so Bony had to circle around a few times to find a spot. He left the monkey on the floor mat, where people couldn't see it. As soon as he felt how cold it was inside the library, he wished he'd worn long pants. The encyclopedias were on a short bookcase close to the entrance. He sat in a chair and read about the differences between monkeys and apes. The most interesting part was how much they were related to humans. He'd never been completely comfortable with that idea, but at the same time he didn't know what to make of the story of Adam and Eve and a talking snake. Even if he did believe people came from monkeys, he had to ask where the monkeys came from.

The encyclopedia had a life-size picture of a gorilla's hand. Bony placed his own hand on top of the gorilla's hand, and although his was a lot smaller, they did match. The encyclopedia had pictures of more monkeys and apes than he ever knew existed, but he couldn't find a picture that looked exactly like his monkey's head. He finally spotted one in a book called *Monkeys of the New World*. In the picture, the black monkey was standing on a tree branch picking fruit. It was a spider monkey, from Ecuador. Bony read about what they ate, how long they lived, how they took care of their babies. He even checked out a picture of two spider monkeys having sex, which he didn't look at for too long because he didn't want the library lady walking by and thinking he was some weirdo.

He put the monkey back on the passenger seat as he drove home. Now that Bony had learned something about the

monkey, he wanted to name it. The first thing that popped into his mind was to call it Spider Man because he kind of liked the guy in the comics. He thought about naming it Blackie, but he knew that was dumb. Zorro was kind of a cool name, but there was already a black dog on his street named Zorro. He couldn't remember Tarzan's monkey's name, or that might have worked. Then he tried to think of a name in Spanish, but the only name he came up with was the easiest, Chango. He hadn't liked it when his parents used the word because they only used it to say it was a dead chango. But the more he thought about it, it fit. He liked the way it sounded when he said it to himself: Chango, Chango, Chango. Ese Chango. Bony and Chango.

Bony stopped at the Jiffy-Mart and bought a twelve-pack. It was three o'clock by the time he stopped in front of the house. His mother and Mrs. Rivas were standing next to the palm tree. Mrs. Rivas held a small plastic bottle upside down and squirted water on the ground. Bony placed Chango on the floor mat and grabbed the beer as he stepped out of the truck.

"Agua bendita," Mrs. Rivas said as he walked up.

He stepped back when he realized it really was holy water.

"¿Dónde está el chango, Bony?" she asked.

"What chango?"

"I already told Mrs. Rivas what you found," his mother said. "She says somebody's trying to put a curse on our house, maybe on my business."

"No they're not, it's just a monkey's head. What's the big deal?"

"¿Qué crees, Bony?" Mrs. Rivas said. "Eh, you think God opened the heavens and dropped that chango's head in your yard so you could tell him your jokes? No, mi'jo, that's the work of brujas."

"That's crazy. There's no brujas."

"Listen to her, Bony." His mother held his arm.

"You think brujas are like you see them on the television, flying around on brooms, but that's not the way it is. You don't know. ¿Tú qué sabes? They shop at the mall, eat at Luby's, go to bailes and dance cumbias. Brujas are everywhere, Bony, probably in this neighborhood."

The old lady looked down the street and then back at Bony.

"Go ask Mrs. Molina, on the next block. Ask her what happened to her mother. Andale, she'll tell you how somebody threw a dead snake in her mother's yard, y la pobre mujer, she stepped on it barefoot. The very next morning her skin started falling off. I wouldn't lie to you, Bony, *her skin*. Until there was nothing left of the woman. Tell me that's not the work of brujas."

"¿Ya ves? You're bringing curses into my house."

"Now tell us where you put that chango's head," Mrs. Rivas said.

"We already checked in your room, mi'jo," his mother said.

"You what?"

"Your mother was worried about the curses."

"He wasn't hurting anybody."

"Tell us where it is, Bony," Mrs. Rivas said.

"I threw him away already."

"Where, Bony?" his mother said.

"In the trash, behind the Jiffy-Mart."

"Are you telling your mother the truth, Bony?" Mrs. Rivas said.

"Go see for yourself if you don't believe me."

Mrs. Rivas and his mother looked at each other. Bony walked to the porch and leaned back in the lawn chair. It was just another afternoon in the neighborhood. After a few minutes Mrs. Rivas drove away.

"Más vale que me estés diciendo la verdad, Bony," his mother said. "I better not see that monkey in my house again."

Bony shook his head. "Don't worry."

She walked into the house and let the screen door slam shut.

Bony stayed on the porch. Across the street, Mando's kid was riding his tricycle through the front yard. It was quiet in the neighborhood. Bony cracked open his first beer. The can was sweating in his hand and down onto the porch. He took a drink and kicked back. He wasn't going to let anybody take Chango.

Except for walking inside to grab a piece of leftover chicken, Bony sat on the porch for the rest of the afternoon. He thought his mother might be watching him through the window and he didn't want to make her suspicious. The beer was cold. What more did he need, right?

His parents ate dinner at seven, but Bony stayed outside on the porch. He went in later and microwaved what was left of the tacos they'd had for dinner. His father was in the

kitchen cleaning his work shoes. The patent leather was shiny and Bony kept looking at his own reflection.

"You drink too much," his father said.

"So what?"

"So what? This isn't a cantina, where you can get pedo and stare at somebody's shoes. What's wrong with you?"

Bony didn't answer and took another bite of his taco.

"Your mother says you're sad because we made you throw away the chango."

"I'm not sad."

"You look sad."

"I'm just thinking."

"Are you thinking about what kind of job you're going to look for tomorrow?"

"Not really."

"I didn't think so."

After Bony was done eating, he drank another beer and watched a baseball game on TV. He hated baseball, but he was waiting for his parents to go to sleep, which they finally did a little after ten. He grabbed Chango from the truck and put him under the small palm tree. The moon was almost full and its glow filled the yard with light. Bony brought out his lawn chair, just like old times. There was half a can of beer left, which he placed next to Chango. He could see himself doing this every night. His parents never had to find out. Maybe one of these nights when they were away from the house, he and Chango would cook out in the backyard. Some fajitas, some chicken, some beer. It'd be badass. People would

be walking by and going, "¿Qué onda, Bony?" And he'd be like, "Aquí nomás. Just cooking out, man." And they'd walk away thinking the dude knew how to do it right.

It was after midnight when Bony put away the lawn chair and carried Chango back to the truck. He didn't want to risk taking him inside the house and his parents finding out. Earlier he'd left a crack at the top of the windows, but now he rolled them up in case there was rain. He locked the truck and went inside the house.

He tried to relax in bed and enjoy what was left of his beer buzz. Tomorrow he'd figure out what to do with Chango. Maybe his mother would forget about what Mrs. Rivas had said. His father might be okay with him keeping Chango if he went out and found a job. Bony thought anything could happen. He might even fall asleep and turn into a monkey overnight, and then his parents would have to keep him and Chango.

It felt like he'd only been asleep for five minutes when he heard a fire engine driving through the front yard. He sat up in bed and realized it was already morning and the siren was really the alarm on his truck. His father was standing next to the truck with his hands cupped over his ears. Bony's mother walked towards the house when he opened the front door. He deactivated the alarm and then locked the truck again before his father could open the door.

"¡Ya lo vi, Bony!" his mother said. "I knew you were lying. ¡Güerco embustero! ¡Ahora verás!"

"What? He's not even close to the house."

"Bony, you knew what I meant."

"Ya fue mucho," his father said. "I'm going to call the city to come pick up the chango and take it away." He walked inside the house and grabbed the phone.

"I'll keep him somewhere else," Bony said.

His father shook his head and opened the phone book.

"What if I get a job?"

"It's too late, Bony." His father dialed a number.

Bony finished getting dressed and went to his truck. He drove out of the neighborhood, not sure where he was going exactly. Chango sat in the passenger seat, smiling as usual. Bony rolled down the windows and listened to the wind. There wasn't that much traffic on International that early in the morning. He drove past Southmost Road and slowed down for the flashing yellow light in front of la Porter, his old high school, so he wouldn't get pulled over by a cop. When he was on the other side of Four Corners, he stopped at a convenience store. A carton of orange juice and a package of cinnamon rolls were what he needed right now. Jumping out of bed so fast had made him feel extra crudo.

The orange juice came with little chunks of ice, the way he liked it, but he had to be careful not to get the steering wheel sticky while he was driving and eating the cinnamon rolls. It felt like a road trip is what it felt like. They could drive anywhere they wanted to, Corpus, San Antonio, Houston, anywhere. He and Mando had always talked about someday taking a trip to see the Dallas Cowboys play. If he had more than two dollars in his pocket, he might have taken off right

then. Instead, he turned down 511 and drove around the edge of town. There were a couple of new subdivisions, but it was still mainly farmland out there. Back in high school, Bony used to like to party and then go cruising. He remembered driving on this road alone one night and almost hitting a cow that was standing in the middle of the road. It came out of nowhere. He blinked and there it was, staring into the headlights. Bony had to swerve to miss it and then swerve back onto the road so he wouldn't hit a telephone pole. It could've easily been his time to go, but it wasn't. And now here he was with Chango.

He drove around for the rest of the morning and tried to come up with a plan. They traveled down Paredes, Coffeeport Road, Fourteenth Street, 802, Central, and Boca Chica. Going everywhere and nowhere at the same time. People were in a hurry to get places, but Bony and Chango were taking their time. On Palm Boulevard, they passed the big, expensive houses with trimmed lawns and then turned left at the first light. They drove another block and stopped in a parking lot across the street from the zoo.

Bony turned off the engine and listened for the animal sounds. He had to wait for a couple of school buses to turn the corner before it was quiet. All he could hear were the birds on the phone lines and a dog barking in the distance. He hadn't been to the zoo in years, but he was almost sure the monkeys were on a little island on the other side of the tall fence. Bony tried to imagine how he would've escaped if he were a monkey. Chango probably had it planned out

months ahead of time, knew when the zoo people left at night, knew the perfect time to make a break for it. Chango was looking for something more than what he was going to find on that little island. Nobody could blame him for that.

Fifteen minutes went by before Bony started up the truck again. He was pulling out of the parking lot when he heard the monkey calls from the other side of the street. He looked at Chango, but Chango kept looking straight ahead.

They drove back to the neighborhood. Bony passed by his street and saw a city truck parked in front of the house. He drove on until he was on the other side of Lincoln Park. Two old men were sitting in a station wagon by the entrance. They were drinking beer and listening to a ranchera station. Bony parked a few spaces away from their car. He put Chango inside the plastic bag. The old men were laughing hard like one of the men had told the other a funny joke. They happened to look up at Bony as he was getting out of the truck, and the man in the driver's seat nodded hello to him. Bony nodded back to him and walked into the park with Chango.

He crossed a short bridge and stepped down to the canal. He took Chango out of the bag and sat by the edge of the water. The resaca that surrounded the park ended up here and then dropped off a small concrete waterfall. Bony and Mando had learned to fish in this canal. They used a couple of branches, some fishing line, hooks, and bread that Bony had taken from his mother's kitchen. Beginner's luck, that's what Mando called it when Bony caught a shiner that first afternoon. He called it luck whenever Bony beat him at some-

thing. In a lot of ways, he was lucky that he'd found Chango. How many guys could say they'd found a monkey's head in their front yard? He'd probably never find anything like this again. He was sure that if Chango were a guy they'd be camaradas. Same thing would go if Bony were a monkey. They'd be hanging out in the jungle, swinging from trees, eating bananas. They'd be putting the moves on all the changuitas, doing it monkey-style. He would miss his truck, but then what would he need it for in the jungle? It's not like there was anywhere to go cruising. And if he were a monkey, nobody would be hassling him to be something else. He'd be a monkey. He wouldn't have to go to school, or work, or file for unemployment. And something else: monkeys were always together. He and Chango would be friends until they were viejitos, all wrinkled and hunched over and walking from tree to tree because they were too old to be swinging. They'd be hanging out forever. "Right?" Bony said. "Right?" It took a second before he realized that he was talking to himself.

The water was browner and greener than he remembered it. A tire had washed up on the other side of the canal. An army boot floated and got stuck on some lily pads. He broke a dead branch into four pieces and pitched them into the water one at a time. When he ran out of branches and twigs, he threw pebbles. Time was passing slowly and he was avoiding doing what he had to do. Bony skipped a few more rocks across the water. He wished people would leave him alone, let him live his own life. If he drank, it was because he wanted to drink. If he stayed at home without a real job, it

was because he wasn't ready for that yet. There wasn't anybody who understood him. He and Chango were hanging out. His mother and father didn't know what they were saying. His mother let herself be talked into crazy ideas by Mrs. Rivas. People were always talking at him and telling him how he should live. Sometimes he listened, but most times he didn't. He was just living. That's the best explanation he could give. Living. Bony leaned over and held Chango a couple of inches above the water. It was the last thing in the world that he wanted to do, but he let go.