

Cliffs

by Laura Zapico

“Danielle’s in pieces,” Chloe said. Her voice sounded tiny and far away. “She’s in ICU, on life support. They’re keeping her sedated.”

“What happened?” I said, and my skin grew hot.

“She fell off a cliff,” she said. “Fifty feet. They don’t know if she’s gonna make it.”

“Have you seen her?” I asked.

Chloe started to cry. “She looks bad. Really fucking bad.”

In the waiting room at the hospital, the visitors were divided into camps. Family and friends on one side and Ricky on the other. Danielle had been dating him only four months and we wished he would just go away. Chloe and I had met him once before, and he seemed arrogant, aloof; the same bald, tattooed, wifebeater-wearing asshole Danielle always chose. We knew only a handful of things about him; that he did five years for making speed; that he was a brick-layer (though Danielle had been supporting him since he moved in with her); that he was supposedly trying to get his shit together. **He’d been sleeping in the waiting room since the accident, waiting in queue for his turn in ICU. We didn’t know anything for sure, except that Danielle had been at Point Fermin with Ricky and some Brazilian guy named Fausto she’d met at work, taking pictures with her new camera.**

“Gonna need to get the keys to the apartment,” Danielle’s father said to Ricky when they met in the hall outside ICU, “and the keys to her car.”

“I don’t have ‘em, Mr. Hernandez,” Ricky said, looking down at the linoleum tile and running his hand over the stubble on his head.

Danielle’s dad grabbed a handful of Ricky’s shirt and pinned him to the wall. “You did this, you piece of shit,” he said.

“Eduardo, stop!” Danielle’s mother cried, and a security guard appeared to pull the men apart.

We had to wear ridiculous-looking yellow paper gowns and slippers and latex gloves to visit Danielle, and we were afraid she might be scared of us. Chloe looked like a giant duckling, and when she pulled a sterile paper bonnet around her hair, I wanted to laugh but I couldn’t. Danielle had awakened from the coma earlier in the

day and she'd said her name already, which we took as a good sign. Her hands were bruised, with black dirt under the fingernails, and her hair was filled with sticks and chunks of clay. A square, Post-It-sized patch of hair had been shaved at the hairline and a tube snaked out from her forehead.

Chloe raised her eyebrows at me. "She's gonna shit when she sees that."

She recognized us right away, then began to move her legs and moan, and we wished we hadn't woken her.

When we scrolled through the pictures on Danielle's camera it was apparent that Ricky had been the one taking them. Of the twenty or so shot at the cliffs, nearly all of them were of Danielle with the Brazilian guy, carefree and shit-faced, with her arm around his shoulder, and Fausto, laughing, his big arm around Danielle's waist.

"What the hell?" Chloe said. "What was Ricky thinking?"

Fausto had been standing stoically in the waiting room, carefully avoiding Ricky, and we pulled him into the hallway.

"How long have you known Ricky," I asked. Fausto leaned back against the wall and I stepped closer.

"I don't know him," he said. "I don't know anything about him."

Fausto's accent was nearly undetectable. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a big chest, and deep-set, light-green eyes. His teeth were crowded in his mouth; one lower front tooth hung back from the rest, and when he spoke his tongue stuck and rested on it.

Chloe crossed her arms across her chest. "Well, what the fuck happened?"

"I was at the gas station on Crenshaw," he said, "and I saw Danielle and Ricky walking down the street. Danielle had just worked the morning shift at the bar, and they asked me for a ride downtown. They were hammered, especially Danielle."

"In the middle of the day?" asked Chloe, and Fausto nodded.

"Halfway there," he said, "Danielle changed her mind and asked me to take them to the cliffs. She wanted to take pictures for her photography class."

"And then what?" Chloe said.

"I took them up there," Fausto said. "I don't know why I did. Danielle went right up to the edge. Ricky was next to her. And then all of a sudden she was gone. I ran over there, but she was already fifty feet down, stuck in a crevice, like you saw her on the news."

“We haven’t seen the news,” I said. I lifted my hand and pushed one of his shirt buttons until he lost his balance.

I don’t know how he got my number, but the next day Fausto called. Chloe and I were driving to the hospital and when I flipped my phone shut, she laughed.

“What did he want?” she said.

“I don’t know,” I said, “he wants to talk to me.”

“I bet,” she said, and we drove the rest of the way in silence. At the entrance to the hospital, the rear end of broken-down Chrysler hung out into traffic, and a little girl dangled her corn-rowed head from the window.

Danielle was still in ICU but she looked better. She was more alert, less sedated, and when we walked in, she was already awake. We couldn’t understand what she was saying, but we were glad she was talking, and we nodded our heads and smiled. Outside, in the hall, we collapsed into each other’s arms and cried.

“I don’t trust Ricky,” Fausto said later, over dinner, at a Japanese restaurant near the hospital. He narrowed his eyes and poked at an octopus tentacle. “Danielle’s dad checked his record.”

“And?” I said.

“He’s got a domestic violence case.”

When we finished eating, Fausto pulled a wad of cash from his back pocket and tossed a few twenties on the table. He drank the last shot of sake and leaned forward.

“I’m telling you,” he said, “I don’t trust this guy at all.”

I didn’t trust Ricky either. Chloe didn’t trust Fausto. She couldn’t believe I was confiding in him.

“You don’t know him from a hole in your ass,” she said.

“You mean a hole in the wall,” I said.

“Whatever.”

The next day a blood clot developed and burst in Danielle’s brain and she died. Chloe and I were in the waiting room. Ricky was in ICU. Danielle’s father was in the bathroom. Her mother was at home, taking a shower.

That night Fausto came over and we went out on the balcony and drank an entire bottle of Bushmill's, straight. The funeral wouldn't be for days and I couldn't look at Chloe anymore. The sky was dark and moonless, with hardly any stars. I leaned over the railing and looked into the courtyard and the succulent garden below. The agave looked waxy and foreign and blue. The water in the fountain was stagnant and a layer of dead bugs lined its surface.

"It's a long way down," I said.

"Here," he said, handing me the bottle, "you kill it."

I downed the last gulp and reached for Fausto's arm to steady myself. He pushed his hand against the rail and it flexed and vibrated against my ribs but I didn't care. The world was spinning and I couldn't keep my balance. The whiskey bottle slipped from my hand and shattered at my feet. Around my ankles, tiny shards of glass glittered like ice, and drops of blood began to form.

"Oh, shit," Fausto said.

"Leave it," I said. "It doesn't matter."

I leaned into Fausto's big chest and he hooked his arm around my neck and stroked my hair. His heartbeat was steady and I pressed my ear against his shirt.

In the morning, he gathered his clothes from the floor and dressed, and I watched him from the edge of the bed. His fingers moved slowly and mechanically, and his eyes looked dull. The vibrancy I had seen so clearly in him before was gone, and I wondered whether it had been there at all.

"Am I gonna see you again?" he said.

"Probably not," I said.

"Bitch," he muttered, and slammed the door on his way out.

At the funeral, Chloe and I sat rows apart. We hadn't spoken in days and we continued our silence. After the service I followed her outside but before I could get her attention, she and Ricky got into her car and she drove away.