

CHANNEL 59

Andrew Boryga

—Least you got one, he said.

Yeah, but she nags me all fuckin' day. Marc feed Krystal; Marc watch Joy, don't let her play with that; Marc, get your ass up stairs! Don't make me come down and embarrass you in front of your friends; Marc, do I have a boyfriend at Con-Ed? Turn off these fucking lights; Marc, clean the cat litter, please; Marc, ask Juanita next door for Sazón, and some oil too; Marc, Marc, Marc, Marc, Marc.

Whiner, he said, punting an empty Heineken up the block.

Seriously, she annoys me.

Mine fell asleep; fell asleep in the tub and drowned.

You keep telling me that story, you tell everyone that story, Ozzy.

So?

My Titi Nilda drowned at the beach when I was eight. I met her one Christmas. She gave me a shitty present and her breath smelt like onions.

Better than yours. Yours smells like the crack of my ass, Ozzy said, plunging his fat hand down the back of his shorts. Come here, smell it, smell it!

He chased me up the block, across the street and into our building where he found me crouched in the lobby pounding my downstairs buzzer for dear life. Chill, don't do that, I said, as he stood in the doorway, tightening the straps of his book bag.

Give me a dollar, he countered, aiming one, foul, finger at my face.

He was fat, with pudgy fingers and a round face — and he was short. His cheeks puffed and his mouth curled a curl as tight as the ones cluttered atop his fat fuckin' head. He inched closer, and with each inch I fought, grabbing his wrist and pushing it toward the ceiling.

Who's ringing my bell like that, said Moms on the speaker.

We stopped our struggle and looked at each other. I let go of his wrist. He took his finger and shoved it in his pocket.

Hello?

It's me, Ma.

Coño, you ring like the police. Listen, before you come upstairs go to the bodega and get milk.

I don't have money.

Tell Papo I'll pay him back.

Before I responded, Ozzy poked me in the rib, Ask her, he whispered.

Can I go to Ozzy's house after? It's been two weeks.

You spent the day at school with him, that isn't enough?

It's Friday.

Fine. But pull some shit with eggs, or stink bombs, and you're punished for the rest of your life. Got it? And, you have to eat dinner first; Mercedes isn't responsible for feeding you, she has enough to deal with.

Ozzy and I smiled.

Ok, Ma.

#

I gave Mercedes a quick hug when she opened the door. She was a small woman, with a halfpenny size mole below her left nostril, short, neat grey hair, and for a while I thought her left hand might be glued to her waist because she always held it there as she spoke.

You eat? I'm giving Ozzy money to go down to Kennedy Fried Chicken.

No thanks.

I skirted around her, into the apartment, past the kitchen and past Gerry.

Marky Marc!

Gerry, why you call me that?

That's grandpa Gerry to you. He placed a hand on the back of my neck and led me in the kitchen. Listen, Marky Marc, I need you to do something for me, and I need it done fast. His body smelled sour and bitter. He took his hand off my neck and placed it on his belly. Ohh, ohh, it hurts so bad, Marky Marc, he said, coiling, taking a seat on his wooden stool. Oh the pain, ohh the pain.

What?

I need you to do this thing, Marky Marc, will you do it? There's something inside me, it needs to be released. He put forward his other hand, the glossy hand that stayed open all the time, the one Moms warned me not to stare at. Pull my hand, please, he said clenching his stomach, Please, oh please.

Fine, I said, gripping the hand.

Harder, Marky Marc, harder, harder.

I pulled with all my might and the hand popped off, sending me flying backwards and Gerry into a fit of laughter, and flappy farts. Boy, Marky Marc, you sure are strong. You popped my hand right off. Ozzy, be strong like Marky here, stop eating that greasy chicken. Ozzy stood in the doorway of the kitchen and I stared up at Gerry's ashy stump before standing and giving back his hand.

I ever tell you how this fell off, he asked, sticking it in place.

Wasn't it some war?

War? No, not war, boy, he leaned forward and whispered in my ear, I chopped it myself! Then, another fit of laughter, coughing and coiling.

The fuck's wrong with him, I whispered to Ozzy as we left the apartment.

Too many bombs in Nam Grandma said.

#

Wanna play basketball, I asked.

Where?

Fire escape.

Nah.

Stickball?

Not today.

Manhunt?

Eh.

What the fuck? I'm bored.

Ozzy pulled out the crinkled bills Mercedes gave him and began counting as we walked. You ever drink?

What?

Alcohol, beer; like my Grandpa.

Once, at a barbeque, my Tio Ralph let me sip his Corona.

I wanna get drunk. Grandpa's so happy all the time.

That'd be hard to steal from the bodega. I just got off punishment.

At recess Nick told me Mr. Levy said regular things have alcohol in it, like mouthwash.

Mouthwash burns my mouth.

If we forced ourselves to drink it, we'd get drunk.

You think?

It has alcohol in it. If you drink something with alcohol you get drunk.

What if it's nasty and nothing happens?

I'm older than you; trust me.

You got left back.

Whatever, we're gonna check out Papo's after I eat.

We pushed open the tall glass door plastered with pictures of chicken, hamburger and pizza combos, and a small bell rang, announcing our entrance.

#

Mouthwash is too hard to steal from the bodega. It's on a small wall near the counter, since no one goes to the bodega to buy that shit. We would've had to wait around for Papo to go to the back for something and try sneaking behind the counter and grabbing it — way too much work. Plan B, was to walk down the Concourse for a bit, check out the payphones, see if any quarters were left in them; no dice. So Plan C, Ozzy decided, was to steal money from Mercedes.

Ozzy's windows were around the back of the building, near the abandoned lot we played manhunt in, and by climbing the fire escape and jimmying a window, he could get inside his apartment. I stayed on the ground to keep lookout and had a ball watching his fat ass climb the rusty, paint-chipped ladder. He crawled on his hands and knees to his grandparents' window, pecked through cracks in the dusty blinds making sure no one was inside, jimmied it, grabbed ten bucks from Mercedes' purse and zipped out as fast he could.

Got some extra, for snacks, once we feel nice like my Grandpa, he said, jumping off the ladder's final rung.

We walked to C-Town and searched the personal hygiene aisle, comparing prices and flavors, ultimately deciding on regular black-capped forest-green Listerine.

Doritos, I said.

Juice too, he added, Might need to wash out that taste.

In the snack aisle we dodged abuelas with shopping carts, pillars of discount cereal and twenty-pound Vitaroz rice bags, and while debating between Ranch and Nacho Cheese flavoring, Nikki interrupted us.

Coming outside?

Don't have time, said Ozzy, got something better planned.

Wasn't asking you. Wanna play catch, Marc?

Before Ozzy could retaliate, I nudged him quiet and nodded toward Ms. Rivas not too far down the aisle, picking out snacks for Nikki.

What is it, Nikki asked, noticing our shift in gaze, Ya'll are acting weird.

It's a secret, I grinned, flicking her creased Yankee cap with the tip of my finger, We'll tell you later.

Yeah, we'll tell you later, Ozzy chimed, squeezing a hand around her cap's brim.

Losers, she said, removing the cap.

#

Mortal Kombat.

Spider-man.

Mortal Kombat, we play fucking Spiderman all day. Come on, Ozzy.

Fine. He dug around for the cartridge in a crate full of games and when he found it, took a big breath and blew the inside before jamming it in his Super Nintendo.

Think Nikki's cute, I asked, as the main menu appeared on his small black T.V.

She's a tomboy.
Her eyes are nice, hair too; she should lose the hat.

Tomboy. But don't worry, I'll change her. I'll show her my dick one day.
And if she doesn't like it?
She will. Especially when it gets big like the guys on channel 59.

Channel 59?
You don't know about channel 59?
I shrugged, and as he was about to speak Mercedes barged into the room.

You boys OK?
Grandma, leave me alone, Ozzy snapped, not looking toward the door.
I paused the game for a second, Yes, we're fine. Want something to eat?
I literally came back from Kennedy an hour ago. I'm not hungry, Mercedes.

Mercedes nodded and began to pace around Ozzy's room, picking up and folding a couple dirty t-shirts from the floor. How about some Tang, she asked coming forward and rubbing the back of his head.

Ozzy stared at the screen. Grandma, leave us alone.
She stopped rubbing and looked for a second at her reflection in the mirror above his dresser. Marc, if you plan on staying over, call your Mom. She left the room and closed the door.

What's with you? My mom never asks if I'm hungry more than once.
She's not my mom. She shouldn't act like she is. In some ways she—
She's my Grandma. My mom died eight years ago. Call yours so we can drink.

I shrugged and reached for the cordless phone lying near the bars of the firescape window. Wish I had my own phone, my own room; sharing sucks.
He said nothing as the phone rang.
Hello.
It's me.
When are you coming home?
I want to stay over.
Did you ask Mercedes?
She said yes.

You have that dentist appointment tomorrow at 12 and you can't miss it. You've missed your last three. I'll knock your ass out and drag you to the office myself this time.

I'll be home before 12.
This can't be one of those sleepovers that goes to next week.

I get it.

See you tomorrow.

#

An hour passed before Mercedes came into the room for her final checkup. We'd switched to Spiderman. When she closed the door Ozzy grabbed the mouthwash from under his bed and unknotted the plastic grocery bag we'd concealed it in. We studied its shape, untwisted the black cap, peeled away the protective covering and took a whiff.

Burns my nose, I said.
It'll be worth it, he said, snatching the bottle back and studying it some more, It'll make us happy. He placed the bottle between us on the floor. We're gonna need cups.

Don't forget juice, I said, scowling from my whiff.

He stood and placed his ear to the door. It's clear now. He opened it slowly and tiptoed his way to the kitchen, careful not create too much creak on the wood floors, and returned with two plastic cups and a carton of fruit punch. After each of us filled half our cup with mouthwash, we looked at each other.

Ozzy grinned. Let's do it.
I thought of the movies and lifted my cup towards him, Toast.

Fuck that. He clutched his cup with both hands and lifted its bottom toward the ceiling. I did the same. The green liquid made its way down our throats, engulfing it in flames that furiously spread down to our stomachs. We coughed uncontrollably, we teared at the eyes, then reached desperately for the carton of juice.

I'm crying, give it to me, I said, struggling to get a firm grip.

I'm crying too, he said, tugging the juice away and guzzling gulp after gulp as I watched helplessly until he decided to pass it my way.

I can't drink this shit, I said.

Me neither, he replied.
We devised a plan to steal some brown liquor Gerry kept in a dusty living room cabinet. Ozzy sneaked back into the kitchen and grabbed the biggest coffee mug he could find, which he handed to me, being the lighter of foot to go down the hallway, past Mercedes and Gerry's door and the soulful ballad radiating from their boom box speakers. I opened the cabinet and randomly chose one tall glass bottle, and poured its contents in the cup. When I returned we mixed the brown liquid with the remaining fruit punch in our cups and created a concoction.

This burns too, I said, taking a sip and grimacing.

Not too bad, better than that, Ozzy said, pointing toward the Listerine.

We took small sips, taking a few minutes in between each to give our taste buds a breather and our contorted faces a chance to return to normal. Spiderman was one player, which was why I hated it so much. Ozzy was a lot better at games than I was. He stayed alive longer, and left me sitting there, twirling my thumbs like an idiot. I continued to drink, the sips becoming more bearable as time passed. When Ozzy finally lost, he drank too, leading to a back and forth that ended with an empty coffee mug and both of us feeling woozy and lightheaded in separate corners of his bedroom.

#

Channel 59, do you wanna see it, Ozzy asked. Still haven't told me what it's about.

It's. Just watch, just watch. He stood, unsteadily, and patted the navy blue comforter of his bed until he found a firm grip of his black television remote. He flipped to channel 59 and a woman appeared on the screen.

She was pretty, with straight, pitch-black hair. But she seemed scared. She walked barefoot along a path of ice. Her body was bare too, for the most part, minus a fur coat covering her tits and privates. The ice seemed cold, but for some reason she didn't; wasn't shivering or anything, weird since she had no shoes and barely any clothes. Music played in the background, trance like, similar to the Sonic theme song, way too upbeat for the situation. She kept walking, passing large pointy (obviously fake) ice sculptures — they weren't even moist.

This is weird, I said.

Shhh, just watch.

I did, and a few moments later, the camera expanded out and revealed a man on the left hand side of the screen, unseen by the woman, but walking in her direction. A built guy, with bulging forearms and calves and long dirty blond hair that tickled the small of his back.

Tarzan on steroids.

Pay attention.

They didn't notice each other until their paths crossed, and when they did, they stopped in their tracks and looked at each other like they'd never seen such a species before.

Why aren't they saying anything, I asked.

Ozzy kept his eyes fixated on the screen, It's gonna get good.

The man moved closer, and delicately touched the woman, uncertainly, like he thought she might disappear. He lightly stroked her face and ran his fingers through her hair.

She's letting this random dude feel her up?

Ozzy shot me a quick and brutal stare.

The woman moaned softly, and my face flushed red. A weird stirring sensation grew in my gut. I thought it was the liquor, but as the man's hands moved from her hair, to her arms, to her shoulders, and down to her tits, and my mouth became dry as the desert, I realized it wasn't.

The man kissed the woman, and with one wild, yet easy motion lifted off her fur coat and unveiled her huge, round tits he forcefully palmed like basketballs. The stirring sensation moved below my stomach and down to my cargo shorts.

Told you this channel is good, Ozzy said.

I took a big gulp, searching to no avail for a drop of saliva. They gonna?

Watch.

They stopped kissing and the man moved his lips down from the woman's cheeks to her neck and to her chest where he circled around her dark nipples with his tongue. The woman moaned louder and louder and louder, so loud Ozzy had to grab the remote and lower the volume. The man looked up from the woman's tits and the camera focused on his fierce eyes. With each hand he grabbed a handful of butt cheek and lifted her off the ground, laying her down on a nearby slab of ice as tall as my desk at school.

He kissed her again, moving from her tits down to her bellybutton and looked up slightly before shoving his face between her legs and shaking his head back and forth. She moaned and tightened her limbs. I felt red. The stirring sensation in my cargo shorts grew and grew and grew. I stood, disturbing Ozzy's trance for a moment and took a pillow off his bed, draping it over my lap. He looked my way but remained quiet.

The man lifted his head and removed the cloth shorts he wore and positioned himself between the woman's legs and began thrusting, violently, forward and back, forward and back, forward and back. The woman stopped moaning and shifted to a seizure-like noise much closer to screaming. Her eyes bulged and she clawed at the fake ice with her fingers tips. The stirring sensation in my shorts evolved into a pointy bulge that throbbed uncontrollably. I lifted the pillow to take a peek.

Is yours big, Ozzy asked.

What?

He pointed toward the pillow, Bet it's small,
Nikki would probably laugh.

Fuck you.

Let me see it.

No way.

He reached toward the pillow and I pushed him
aside. Stop, seriously.

He giggled and tried to force his way on top of
me, Don't be a baby, let me see.

I pushed him again, but harder, sending him
backwards to the ground. Seriously, stop.

Ozzy stopped giggling and his face became as
fierce as the man on channel 59. We both stood and
he charged at me, sending me flying into his dresser,
knocking my head against a gold plated knob. He
grasped both my wrists and struggled them into
submission, Just let me, he said, Stop being
a—

I squirmed and kicked, creating enough space
between us to swing my elbows violently enough to
hit his face. He jumped off me and his fat hands
shot straight up to his mouth. We heaved and
struggled to catch our breath, but continued to glare
at each other. When he removed his hands there
was blood on his lip. He looked down at his fingers,
the tips were stained red.

Told you to stop, I said.

He delicately touched his lip with one finger,
checking it to see if blood stuck, and looked into his
mirror before sitting on his bed.

My mom didn't drown in a bathtub, Marc.

I straightened up and looked at my elbow, red
and bleeding, not as bad as Ozzy.

They just tell me that. Grandma says it to be
nice. It wasn't an accident.

What do you mean?

She didn't love me. She didn't want me.

How do you kn—

There's no other reason.

But Mercedes loves you.

It's not the same, Marc. You don't understand,
you'll never understand.

I remained silent and looked toward the
television where the man and the woman had
stopped thrusting and lay together, side by side on
the slab of ice. Ozzy watched too and when the
scene faded to black, he stood and turned off the
television.

I'll get the sleeping bag out now.

Papo raise the security gate in the bodega; the loud
crash it made when it reached the top of the
awning. I gathered my things quietly as Ozzy lay
sprawled on his mattress, clutching his pillow tight,
and tiptoed out the apartment, careful not to let the
door slam.

I took the stairs down to the lobby and crossed to
the west side of the building, riding the elevator
seven flights to my apartment. I rang my doorbell
for five minutes before Moms answered, sleep still
very much on her mind.

Marc, she said uncertainly, looking through the
peephole.

Yeah.

She unlocked the door and opened it slightly,
What time is it?

Early.

Wasn't expecting you for a few hours. Is
everything OK?

I nodded and watched as she ran her fingers
through her matted hair and fiddled with her
glasses. Yeah, I said, everything is fine.

#

I woke at 8am. The apartment was silent, and
outside was an overcast Saturday morning. I heard
vandal v // page 22