



PROJECT MUSE®

Brotherly Love

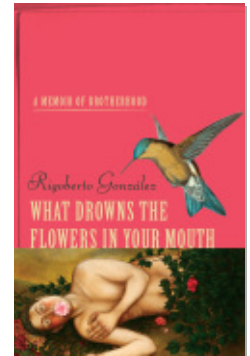
Published by

González, Rigoberto.

What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth: A Memoir of Brotherhood.

University of Wisconsin Press, 2018.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/113340>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/113340>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[172.69.195.168] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 20:56 GMT)

returned. Unlike my father, I didn't wake up one morning, rattled by the sounds of sirens and street traffic, and decide that this wasn't where I belonged. How he must have been eager to save his earnings, how he must have skipped a few nights out with the guys in order to buy his little brother a pair of sunglasses and his mother one of those red vases from Chinatown. And then one evening, the pull of those stones in his pocket became too much. The others did not object. They had seen this before. They knew who had it in them to endure the isolation and who was going to crack after a week or a month. They were fine saying good-bye because there was always another man ready to take over for the one who left.

Apá turned in his key without ceremony and made his way to the bus station alone, carrying the same duffle bag he arrived with. What a relief he must have felt when the bus finally squeezed out of the Manhattan bustle and made its way through the open roads of Pennsylvania where the sky was clear and the clouds appeared to breathe. Besides the stones in his pocket, he also had a small wad of cash to prove to his father that he could earn a living on his own, though he didn't want to. On his own, that is. On that score, his father was right: one suffered apart from family. But time and distance heals all wounds. And money, my father added as he scratched the bills he had stuffed into his sock. He couldn't help but let out a laugh thinking that he had to buy his way back into the family nest. Abuelo wouldn't have it any other way. His laughter caught the attention of the man across the aisle.

"Going home, son?" the man asked.

My father smiled and said, "Yes, sir, I certainly am." And the phrase pirouetted in the air because it also said he knew where he was meant to be. Life was hard with family but life was harder without it. How fortunate he was to learn the difference. His place was among his loved ones and—father, forgive me; mother, receive me; brother, stay near me—I'll never ever ever leave again.



BROTHERLY LOVE

Summer 2014. My mobility had improved under the care of a new doctor. The formula was actually quite simple: rest, diet, and exercise. But simple formulas were the easiest to neglect, particularly as an academic. Meetings took precedence over meals, grading and class preparation ate up my sleep time, and the commute to the university stressed my body, especially when no one on the crowded subway trains offered me a seat even though I struggled to maintain my balance while leaning on a cane. But as soon as summer arrived, I stayed close to home, taking early morning walks and regulating my eating and sleeping schedules. By now, I had distanced myself from most of my acquaintances, so I had all the permission I needed to hide out and focus on my writing, which was the only pleasure I had left. Writing allowed me to vacate this body and its inconvenient limitations. Sometimes, I became so consternated when I woke up to the reality of my weaknesses that I scrambled to the computer in order to flee all over again.

Yet somehow I managed to start a new relationship. I had given up on the notion of dating, let alone becoming intimate with anyone, because I couldn't imagine anyone being attracted to a man on a cane, whose disability became more prominent than this age or ethnicity. I still experienced desire, but it remained an unreachable horizon since I lost the nerve to flirt, afraid that if

anyone flirted back, it was a response fueled by sympathy. The last thing I wanted was a pity fuck.

I had seen Roger a few times before during my morning walk when the same group of commuters passed me on the sidewalk to catch the train. I stayed close to the wall and out of the way. Perhaps it was the look of approval I gave each time I saw him in his starched white shirt and solid-colored tie that finally prompted Roger to say hello. I almost tumbled into the wall, caught off guard by the attention.

“Easy there, buddy, you all right?” he said. He stopped to place his hand on my shoulder.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m fine, thank you.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “I’ve seen you out here every day this week. You doing some kind of therapy for an injury?”

“Right. A leg injury.”

“Well, keep it up,” he said before rushing off. “You’re looking better and better each time.” He winked.

Flattered after getting noticed by a younger man, I made sure to stick to the same schedule and to say good morning to Roger a few more times before I dared ask him to meet up for coffee. And then it was dinner. And eventually we took turns sleeping over at each other’s apartments.

Roger’s affection offered me a different kind of solace. Nude, we shared our physical imperfections and didn’t mind them. He was ten years younger, but he confessed that he had a huge insecurity about his weight. Faced with such honesty, I decided to come clean about the cane. I admitted to him that I had lied about the leg injury, that I was battling an illness.

“I might end up in a wheelchair someday,” I said.

After an uncomfortable pause, Roger leaned over and kissed me. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” he said. I was so moved by his response that I promised I wouldn’t deny him anything. That was my first mistake.

My brother, on the other hand, was still dealing with the stress of a troubled marriage, with the feelings of failure that came from being unable to hold onto a job because the stiffness in his elbows and knuckles was making it impossible to perform even the simplest of tasks.

“I can’t even fucking sweep, Turrútut, or lift a crate of bread.”

“But I told you, Alex, to rest. I can send you more money. Don’t worry about that,” I pleaded.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “I don’t want people to see me not working. It’s a different world down here—a man who lets his wife do all the labor is no man at all. I see her family judging me whenever they see me. I see Guadalupe judging me each time she comes home from her job. I don’t think she loves me anymore.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Alex; of course she loves you. You have two children together and together you built a home.”

“And what kind of a home is a home without a man?”

I finally understood the role of parents in the grown-up stage of a person’s life. I finally understood how we had been cheated out of a valuable resource because we had no mother to console us during our heartbreaks and no father to counsel us during our headaches. As his gay older brother with a long history of failed relationships, I had very little to offer Alex. We had traveled very different paths toward adulthood. He was married and had children; I was single. He had returned to México; I had fled to New York. His paradise was sailing out into the open sea; mine was to sink into the whirlpool of the computer screen. I had been depending on that escape more lately because my relationship with Roger was beginning to strain.

Maybe it had been there from the beginning, but my gratitude had kept me blind. Or rather, I allowed it to happen because it was a relief to have someone else take control during a time I felt I had lost control over my ailing body. Roger made every decision

in the relationship: he decided when we should see each other, when to have sex, what to eat, where to meet, where to go, what to do. The few times I made alternate suggestions or even dared to protest, Roger snapped at me, threatening to cancel our plans altogether. Afraid of upsetting him further, I relented. What began as casual requests (shave your face if you want me to kiss you, don't wear earrings when we go out, wear boxer briefs, you look better in boxer briefs) became deal-breakers that sent him reeling into fits of anger because I had ruined the mood. Once, we met up in his apartment, and he became annoyed because I had bought the wrong brand of cranberry juice for his Cape Cods.

Frustrated, I blurted out, "What's the big fucking deal, Roger?"

"The big fucking deal is that you don't follow directions," he said.

"Directions? Am I not housebroken enough for you? Are you going to discipline me like an animal too?"

"That's a great idea," he said. So he grabbed my cane and threw it out into the hallway. "Go fetch!"

A light went out inside of me, and I couldn't react. Instead, I crawled along the furniture and walls to retrieve my cane. The sight of my jittery movements must have softened Roger's disposition because he pleaded for forgiveness. But I had come across men like Roger before. I didn't know what was more pathetic: that I had allowed myself to become involved with an abusive man again, or that I knew that even this display of humiliation wasn't enough to convince me to leave him.

If my brother shared the most private details of his marital problems, I didn't reciprocate by telling him about Roger. Roger had become increasingly more selfish in bed, content with satisfying himself and pushing me away when he decided the moment of intimacy was over. He would ask me to come over, and halfway

to his apartment, I would get a text that something had come up, that he couldn't see me after all, and I would walk back home and wait for an apology or an explanation, but neither ever came. I was afraid to let go of Roger because I knew I would need a shoulder to cry on. I sensed something dramatic coming my way because my weekly conversations with my brother were becoming more and more distressing. I proposed once again that he see a counselor, but he rebuffed my suggestion—that was not what he was about.

“Well, do you have a friend you can talk to at least?” I said.

“I don't have those kinds of friends here,” he said. “I only have you.”

What a sad prospect, I thought to myself, that my brother's only hope is a man who lets his lover mistreat him because it's the only love he thinks he can get. We were both fucked.

I thought of making a trip down to Baja California Sur to see my brother, to offer him an embrace, but my body couldn't handle travel anymore. I had begun to turn down professional offers to read or lecture in other parts of the country, which cut into my annual income, and each month I had to scramble to meet my brother's financial needs. So I did my best the only way I knew how, the only thing I could do confined to my apartment: I wrote. I wrote essays, interviews, book reviews, highlighting other writers, escaping into their words. The momentary haven of their imaginations was more rewarding than the paltry payments, but eventually the money added up to a remittance. Meanwhile, I was juggling a full-time university teaching job, a few online courses, and a ghostwriting gig—these last two were freelancing opportunities I had once scoffed at, but I set aside my arrogance and snobbery for the extra income. Rising every day at 4:00 a.m. to sit in front of the computer to work on someone else's drab life story was draining the pleasure out of writing. I began to resent my weak body, my brother, the stale tasks I had seized on to earn money. By the end

of the year, I had not replenished my savings and, wallowing in despair, spent what little I had on alcohol.

Inevitably, that phone call I was dreading came. I was on my couch at home, looking over a student's thesis. Roger had not contacted me in over a week, and I was fine with that for the time being. We had been seeing each other for less than a year, but during the last month, our dates had become more and more sporadic.

"Hey, Alex," I said when I answered the phone. It didn't dawn on me that it was usually me who dialed him in order to deal with the expense of the international call.

"I'm so depressed," he said. "I think I'm going to kill myself."

My body slumped over on the couch and I dropped the phone. I had no clue what had just happened to my body—I was conscious, so I hadn't fainted. But I couldn't worry about that; I had to talk my brother through this. I didn't hang up until I was satisfied that he wasn't going to harm himself or anyone else around him. The frightening headlines that announced domestic tragedies flashed in my head, so I resorted to the most desperate of measures—I told my brother a horrible truth.

"If you kill yourself, Alex, you might as well take me with you. Because I am not going to be left alone in this world."

Though I kept myself composed during the conversation, as soon as we ended the call, I began to shiver. I texted Roger, and to my surprise, he agreed to let me come over.

"Oh, Roger," I said as soon as he opened his door. I wanted to throw myself into his arms, but he stepped back.

"What is this?" he said.

"What is what? I need you right now. I need you to be here for me. I just finished talking to my brother and—"

"Look, no offense, but I didn't sign up to listen to your family problems. We can hang out, we can fuck, but I'm zero percent here for drama."

I sighed. I tried to push back inside me all the grief I had been prepared to share with Roger, but it was too much, too devastating. Numb, I sat down on his couch and stared at the blank television screen.

“And if you’re going to sit there like a paraplegic, you might as well do that at home,” Roger said. “Not having it.”

I turned to face him. “Why would you use that word?” I said.

“What word?”

“Paraplegic. Why do you have to be so cruel about my disability?”

“I don’t understand you people. You want to be treated just like everybody else, but then you’re all touchy about little things like words.”

My eyes narrowed. I suddenly saw Roger as far away as he had kept himself all along. Whatever had anchored me to his conditional affection had begun to lose its hold.

“You’re not going to start crying, are you?”

I had the urge to knock him down with my cane, or to do some disarray to his beloved orderly place. His apartment was as clean and uncluttered as a showroom, and it bothered him once when I moved one of the coasters on the coffee table closer to where I was sitting. “Why don’t you move closer to the coaster?” he had suggested. But I didn’t want to go that route. I was a man in my forties; I should know better.

“Listen, Roger,” I said. “I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “Just don’t do it again.”

“Let me finish,” I said.

His eyes widened.

“But I’m even sorrier that I wasted mine.” I picked myself up and headed for the door.

“You walk out on me now, that’s forever,” he said.

“God, I certainly hope so.”

I knew as soon as I said it that it was one back talk too many. And maybe that's why I said it, because I wanted what was about to come next to take place. Otherwise I wouldn't reach the moment of reckoning. Roger pushed his fist into my body and knocked me off balance. My face struck the door, and then I slid down to the floor.

"You see—"

I looked up at him and finished his sentence. "—what I made you do?"

He remained silent and expressionless as I picked myself up and started to exit his apartment. Just as I was about to shut the door behind me, I heard him mumble something in that remorseful tone he liked to use whenever he hurt me, but I didn't even feel the urge to disrupt the momentum. Whatever he said would have to stay inside with him. And I would keep myself out.

A calm came over me when I got to the main boulevard and joined the flow of pedestrians on the sidewalk, everyone going about their business, each person walking with purpose. How good to have a direction and a destination. How comforting to know that every step forward made a memory of the previous step.

I called my brother the next day to check on his emotional state. I called him the day after that and the day after that. And after each phone call, I had to drink a few martinis in order to cope with the stress of trying to remain calm while he voiced the most frightening thoughts. I had to keep it together in order to call him the next day. I had to keep it together in order to maintain the semblance of composure as I commuted to work to teach class and sat patiently through meetings while my head spun. Was it my brother or was it the alcohol? Maybe it was both. Meanwhile, I could feel my body declining because I began to neglect my diet and exercise. The weight gain aggravated my joints because of the extra pressure I placed on the cane. My doctor wasn't pleased.

“You’re adding to your list of complications, my friend,” he said. “Your blood pressure is up; your cholesterol is up. You’re looking at a dire future if you don’t lose some weight.”

“And lose weight how?” I snapped. “I can barely move.”

“Weight loss is mostly about what you eat,” the doctor said. “And what you drink.” He raised his eyebrows by way of indictment, and I blushed.

Since my brother and I communicated exclusively by phone, he wasn’t seeing the negative changes in my body, and neither was I seeing them in his. But our voices betrayed our anxieties—the long pauses, the distracted conversations, the exchanges that were now stripped of banter or memory triggers. *Do you remember?* we used to ask each other, just like my father used to do when he wanted to set journey into motion. But we weren’t going anywhere anymore. Phone call after phone call, we were stuck in the same dark corner.

“Maybe Guadalupe and I should split up,” he proposed one time. “Just for a little while.”

And I thought how unfortunate that our parents weren’t around to offer him refuge, and that I was so far away, it was impractical, since he wanted to stay close to his kids.

“Maybe that will help,” I said. “Don’t worry about the money. I can take care of that.”

I swallowed hard because it wasn’t that easy anymore. I had continued to pile up the freelancing work, which had become physically demanding as I hunched over the computer for hours in order to make deadlines. I resigned myself to the possibility that at any moment I was going to collapse from exhaustion.

“And how are you doing, Turrútut?”

For a second, I didn’t recognize that strange sound. It had been months since we had uttered it over the phone. I had also forgotten what it was like for Alex to reciprocate, to inquire about *my* emotional state.

“Me?” I said, uncertainly.

“Yes, who else? How are *you* doing?”

I must have been waiting for his permission, because I opened the floodgates and everything came pouring out: the still uncertain medical diagnosis, the shitty relationship, my weight gain, my isolation, the stress on my finances, and the exertion from taking on too many freelance projects that left me moving about with only a few hours of sleep and not enough energy to even masturbate. I had become this workaholic alcoholic who had buried himself like a mole in order to avoid facing the hard truth that before I could do something like take care of my little brother, I had to take care of myself.

Maybe Alex hadn't expected such a thorough response, but he got it anyway.

“Why didn't you tell me any of this?” he said. “I've been spilling my guts out on the phone every time, and you just kept holding out? I feel like an asshole.”

“Don't, please don't, Alex. I wasn't ready. I had to get to that place. It's always like that with me. I have to hit rock bottom first.”

“Well, okay, but that didn't sound like rock bottom; that sounded like fucking hell.”

I couldn't resist a chuckle, which made him laugh as well. That was the first time in a long while that we had laughed with each other, and it felt refreshing, rejuvenating.

“I mean, I imagine you dragging your ass off to work looking like the hunchback of Notre Dame.”

I followed his lead. “And I imagine you dragging your knuckles on the ground like a bloated gorilla.”

“Isn't it time to ring the church bells?”

“No, it's show time at the circus. Don't forget to wear your fez.”

We kept piling on the teasing until I had tears in my eyes. And when the laughter finally died down, my brother said, “Do you

think our parents would've been disappointed with the mess we made of our lives?"

"We have to stop looking at ourselves like that, Turrútut. We got fucked over badly—no parents, no inheritance, no other relatives to ask for help—but we didn't end up drug dealers or in prison. I don't think we did all that bad considering."

"Well, you did alright. You're a professor and a writer. That's something."

"And you're a good father and a good man. That's something too."

"Maybe this is how we should have started our conversation all those months ago."

"Or maybe it took all those other conversations to get to this one. I think this is how it goes, Turrútut. For everyone."

After a brief moment of reflection, Alex said, "So now what?"

"Now comes the next day, except we're not alone. It's the two of us now; we have to look out for each other."

"You mean you shouldn't have to be my substitute father just because you're my older brother."

"No, I mean we have to look out for each other. That's all."

Maybe the phrase I was looking for was "man up," but that implied that our mistakes were a result of immaturity, and that wasn't true. We had been men all this time—flawed, imperfect, emotionally vulnerable. Our manhood was shaped by what our father taught us and what he didn't teach us, by his presence and his absence, by those things he did and what he couldn't do for his two oldest sons. But brotherhood—that was shaped by the two of us from the very beginning, and that relationship was still in progress.

I wasn't sure exactly how that was going to work out, but it felt like the best way to let my brother know I needed some time to work through my health issues. We also had to figure out a monthly allowance that wasn't going to leave me bankrupt, and