

This Is

How You

Lose Her

Junot Díaz

Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*For Marilyn Duckworth and Mih-Ho Cha
in honor of your friendship, your fierceness, your grace*

The Sun, the Moon, the Stars

Nilda

Alma

Otravida, Otravez

Flaca

The Pura Principle

Invierno

Miss Lora

The Cheater's Guide to Love

*Okay, we didn't work, and all
memories to tell you the truth aren't good.
But sometimes there were good times.
Love was good. I loved your crooked sleep
beside me and never dreamed afraid.*

*There should be stars for great wars
like ours.*

SANDRA CISNEROS

I'M NOT A BAD GUY. I know how that sounds—defensive, unscrupulous—but it's true. I'm like everybody else: weak, full of mistakes, but basically good. Magdalena disagrees though. She considers me a typical Dominican man: a *sucio*, an asshole. See, many months ago, when Magda was still my girl, when I didn't have to be careful about almost anything, I cheated on her with this chick who had tons of eighties freestyle hair. Didn't tell Magda about it, either. You know how it is. A smelly bone like that, better off buried in the backyard of your life. Magda only found out because homegirl wrote her a fucking *letter*. And the letter had *details*. Shit you wouldn't even tell your boys drunk.

The thing is, that particular bit of stupidity had been over for months. Me and Magda were on an upswing. We weren't as distant as we'd been the winter I was cheating. The freeze was over. She was coming over to my place and instead of us hanging with my knucklehead boys—me smoking, her bored out of her skull—we were seeing movies. Driving out to different places to eat. Even caught a play at the Crossroads and I took her picture with some bigwig black playwrights, pictures where she's smiling so much you'd think her wide-ass mouth was going to unhinge. We were a couple again. Visiting each other's family on the weekends. Eating breakfast at diners hours before anybody else was up, rummaging through the New Brunswick library together, the one Carnegie built with his guilt money. A nice rhythm we had going. But then the Letter hits like a *Star Trek* grenade and detonates everything, past, present, future. Suddenly her folks want to kill me. It don't matter that I helped them with their taxes two years running or that I mow their lawn. Her father, who used to treat me like his *hijo*, calls me an asshole on the phone, sounds like he's strangling himself with the cord. You no deserve I speak to you in Spanish, he says. I see one of Magda's girlfriends at the Woodbridge mall—Claribel, the *ecuatoriana* with the biology degree and the *chinita* eyes—and she treats me like I ate somebody's favorite kid.

You don't even want to hear how it went down with Magda. Like a five-train collision. She threw Cassandra's letter at me—it missed and landed under a Volvo—and then she sat down on the curb and started hyperventilating. Oh, God, she wailed. Oh, my God.

This is when my boys claim they would have pulled a Total Fucking Denial. Cassandra *who*? I was too sick to my stomach even to try. I sat down next to her, grabbed her flailing arms, and said some dumb shit like You have to listen to me, Magda. Or you won't understand.

LET ME TELL YOU about Magda. She's a Bergenline original: short with a big mouth and big hips and dark curly hair you could lose a hand in. Her father's a baker, her mother sells kids' clothes door to door. She might be nobody's pendeja but she's also a forgiving soul. A Catholic. Dragged me into church every Sunday for Spanish Mass, and when one of her relatives is sick, especially the ones in Cuba, she writes letters to some nuns in Pennsylvania, asks the sisters to pray for her family. She's the nerd every librarian in town knows, a teacher whose students love her. Always cutting shit out for me from the newspapers, Dominican shit. I see her like, what, every week, and she still sends me corny little notes in the mail: So you won't forget me. You couldn't think of anybody worse to screw than Magda.

Anyway I won't bore you with what happens after she finds out. The begging, the crawling over glass, the crying. Let's just say that after two weeks of this, of my driving out to her house, sending her letters, and calling her at all hours of the night, we put it back together. Didn't mean I ever ate with her family again or that her girlfriends were celebrating. Those cabronas, they were like, No, jamás, never. Even Magda wasn't too hot on the rapprochement at first, but I had the momentum of the past on my side. When she asked me, Why don't you leave me alone? I told her the truth: It's because I love you, mami. I know this sounds like a load of doo-doo, but it's true: Magda's my heart. I didn't want her to leave me; I wasn't about to start looking for a girlfriend because I'd fucked up one lousy time.

Don't think it was a cakewalk, because it wasn't. Magda's stubborn; back when we first started dating, she said she wouldn't sleep with me until we'd been together at least a month, and homegirl stuck to it, no matter how

hard I tried to get into her knickknacks. She's sensitive, too. Takes to hurt the way water takes to paper. You can't imagine how many times she asked (especially after we finished fucking), Were you ever going to tell me? This and Why? were her favorite questions. My favorite answers were Yes and It was a stupid mistake. I wasn't thinking.

We even had some conversation about Cassandra—usually in the dark, when we couldn't see each other. Magda asked me if I'd loved Cassandra and I told her, No, I didn't. Do you still think about her? Nope. Did you like fucking her? To be honest, baby, it was lousy. That one is never very believable but you got to say it anyway no matter how stupid and unreal it sounds: say it.

And for a while after we got back together everything was as fine as it could be.

But only for a little while. Slowly, almost imperceptibly my Magda started turning into another Magda. Who didn't want to sleep over as much or scratch my back when I asked her to. Amazing what you notice. Like how she never used to ask me to call back when she was on the line with somebody else. I always had priority. Not anymore. So of course I blamed all that shit on her girls, who I knew for a fact were still feeding her a bad line about me.

She wasn't the only one with counsel. My boys were like, Fuck her, don't sweat that bitch, but every time I tried I couldn't pull it off. I was into Magda for real. I started working overtime on her again, but nothing seemed to pan out. Every movie we went to, every night drive we took, every time she did sleep over seemed to confirm something negative about me. I felt like I was dying by degrees, but when I brought it up she told me that I was being paranoid.

About a month later, she started making the sort of changes that would have alarmed a paranoid nigger. Cuts her hair, buys better makeup, rocks new clothes, goes out dancing on Friday nights with her friends. When I ask her if we can chill, I'm no longer sure it's a done deal. A lot of the time she Bartlebys me, says, No, I'd rather not. I ask her what the hell she thinks this is and she says, That's what I'm trying to figure out.

I know what she was doing. Making me aware of my precarious position in her life. Like I was not aware.

Then it was June. Hot white clouds stranded in the sky, cars being washed down with hoses, music allowed outside. Everybody getting ready

for summer, even us. We'd planned a trip to Santo Domingo early in the year, an anniversary present, and had to decide whether we were still going or not. It had been on the horizon awhile, but I figured it was something that would resolve itself. When it didn't, I brought the tickets out and asked her, How do you feel about it?

Like it's too much of a commitment.

Could be worse. It's a vacation, for Christ's sake.

I see it as pressure.

Doesn't have to be pressure.

I don't know why I get stuck on it the way I do. Bringing it up every day, trying to get her to commit. Maybe I was getting tired of the situation we were in. Wanted to flex, wanted something to change. Or maybe I'd gotten this idea in my head that if she said, Yes, we're going, then shit would be fine between us. If she said, No, it's not for me, then at least I'd know that it was over.

Her girls, the sorest losers on the planet, advised her to take the trip and then never speak to me again. She, of course, told me this shit, because she couldn't stop herself from telling me everything she's thinking. How do you feel about that suggestion? I asked her.

She shrugged. It's an idea.

Even my boys were like, Nigger, sounds like you're wasting a whole lot of loot on some bullshit, but I really thought it would be good for us. Deep down, where my boys don't know me, I'm an optimist. I thought, Me and her on the Island. What couldn't this cure?

LET ME CONFESS: I love Santo Domingo. I love coming home to the guys in blazers trying to push little cups of Brugal into my hands. Love the plane landing, everybody clapping when the wheels kiss the runway. Love the fact that I'm the only nigger on board without a Cuban link or a flapjack of makeup on my face. Love the redhead woman on her way to meet the daughter she hasn't seen in eleven years. The gifts she holds on her lap, like the bones of a saint. M'ija has tetas now, the woman whispers to her neighbor. Last time I saw her, she could barely speak in sentences. Now she's a woman. Imagine. I love the bags my mother packs, shit for

relatives and something for Magda, a gift. You give this to her no matter what happens.

If this was another kind of story, I'd tell you about the sea. What it looks like after it's been forced into the sky through a blowhole. How when I'm driving in from the airport and see it like this, like shredded silver, I know I'm back for real. I'd tell you how many poor motherfuckers there are. More albinos, more cross-eyed niggers, more tígueres than you'll ever see. And I'd tell you about the traffic: the entire history of late-twentieth-century automobiles swarming across every flat stretch of ground, a cosmology of battered cars, battered motorcycles, battered trucks, and battered buses, and an equal number of repair shops, run by any fool with a wrench. I'd tell you about the shanties and our no-running-water faucets and the sambos on the billboards and the fact that my family house comes equipped with an ever-reliable latrine. I'd tell you about my abuelo and his campo hands, how unhappy he is that I'm not sticking around, and I'd tell you about the street where I was born, Calle XXI, how it hasn't decided yet if it wants to be a slum or not and how it's been in this state of indecision for years.

But that would make it another kind of story, and I'm having enough trouble with this one as it is. You'll have to take my word for it. Santo Domingo is Santo Domingo. Let's pretend we all know what goes on there.

I MUST HAVE been smoking dust, because I thought we were fine those first couple of days. Sure, staying locked up at my abuelo's house bored Magda to tears, she even said so—I'm bored, Yunior—but I'd warned her about the obligatory Visit with Abuelo. I thought she wouldn't mind; she's normally mad cool with the viejitos. But she didn't say much to him. Just fidgeted in the heat and drank fifteen bottles of water. Point is, we were out of the capital and on a guagua to the interior before the second day had even begun. The landscapes were superfly—even though there was a drought on and the whole campo, even the houses, was covered in that red dust. There I was. Pointing out all the shit that had changed since the year before. The new Pizzarelli and the little plastic bags of water the tigueros were selling. Even kicked the historicals. This is where Trujillo and his Marine pals slaughtered the gavilleros, here's where the Jefe used to take his girls, here's where Balaguer sold his soul to the Devil. And Magda seemed to be

enjoying herself. Nodded her head. Talked back a little. What can I tell you? I thought we were on a positive vibe.

I guess when I look back there were signs. First off, Magda's not quiet. She's a talker, a fucking boca, and we used to have this thing where I would lift my hand and say, Time out, and she would have to be quiet for at least two minutes, just so I could process some of the information she'd been spouting. She'd be embarrassed and chastened, but not so embarrassed and chastened that when I said, OK, time's up, she didn't launch right into it again.

Maybe it was my good mood. It was like the first time in weeks that I felt relaxed, that I wasn't acting like something was about to give at any moment. It bothered me that she insisted on reporting to her girls every night—like they were expecting me to kill her or something—but, fuck it, I still thought we were doing better than anytime before.

We were in this crazy budget hotel near Pucamaima. I was standing on the balcony staring at the Septentrionales and the blacked-out city when I heard her crying. I thought it was something serious, found the flashlight, and fanned the light over her heat-swollen face. Are you OK?

She shook her head. I don't want to be here.

What do you mean?

What don't you understand? I. Don't. Want. To. Be. Here.

This was not the Magda I knew. The Magda I knew was super courteous. Knocked on a door before she opened it.

I almost shouted, What is your fucking problem! But I didn't. I ended up hugging and babying her and asking her what was wrong. She cried for a long time and then after a silence started talking. By then the lights had flickered back on. Turned out she didn't want to travel around like a hobo. I thought we'd be on a beach, she said.

We're going to be on a beach. The day after tomorrow.

Can't we go now?

What could I do? She was in her underwear, waiting for me to say something. So what jumped out of my mouth? Baby, we'll do whatever you want. I called the hotel in La Romana, asked if we could come early, and the next morning I put us on an express guagua to the capital and then a second one to La Romana. I didn't say a fucking word to her and she didn't say nothing to me. She seemed tired and watched the world outside like maybe she was expecting it to speak to her.

By the middle of Day 3 of our All-Quisqueya Redemption Tour we were in an air-conditioned bungalow watching HBO. Exactly where I want to be when I'm in Santo Domingo. In a fucking resort. Magda was reading a book by a Trappist, in a better mood, I guessed, and I was sitting on the edge of the bed, fingering my useless map.

I was thinking, For this I deserve something nice. Something physical. Me and Magda were pretty damn casual about sex, but since the breakup shit has gotten weird. First of all, it ain't regular like before. I'm lucky to score some once a week. I have to nudge her, start things up, or we won't fuck at all. And she plays like she doesn't want it, and sometimes she doesn't and then I have to cool it, but other times she does want it and I have to touch her pussy, which is my way of initiating things, of saying, So, how about we kick it, mami? And she'll turn her head, which is her way of saying, I'm too proud to acquiesce openly to your animal desires, but if you continue to put your finger in me I won't stop you.

Today we started no problem, but then halfway through she said, Wait, we shouldn't.

I wanted to know why.

She closed her eyes like she was embarrassed at herself. Forget about it, she said, moving her hips under me. Just forget about it.

I DON'T EVEN want to tell you where we're at. We're in Casa de Campo. The Resort That Shame Forgot. The average asshole would love this place. It's the largest, wealthiest resort on the Island, which means it's a goddamn fortress, walled away from everybody else. Guachimanes and peacocks and ambitious topiaries everywhere. Advertises itself in the States as its own country, and it might as well be. Has its own airport, thirty-six holes of golf, beaches so white they ache to be trampled, and the only Island Dominicans you're guaranteed to see are either caked up or changing your sheets. Let's just say my abuelo has never been here, and neither has yours. This is where the Garcías and the Colóns come to relax after a long month of oppressing the masses, where the tutumpotes can trade tips with their colleagues from abroad. Chill here too long and you'll be sure to have your ghetto pass revoked, no questions asked.

We wake up bright and early for the buffet, get served by cheerful women in Aunt Jemima costumes. I shit you not: these sisters even have to wear hankies on their heads. Magda is scratching out a couple of cards to her family. I want to talk about the day before, but when I bring it up she puts down her pen. Jams on her shades.

I feel like you're pressuring me.

How am I pressuring you? I ask.

I just want some space to myself every now and then. Every time I'm with you I have this sense that you want something from me.

Time to yourself, I say. What does that mean?

Like maybe once a day, you do one thing, I do another.

Like when? Now?

It doesn't have to be now. She looks exasperated. Why don't we just go down to the beach?

As we walk over to the courtesy golf cart, I say, I feel like you rejected my whole country, Magda.

Don't be ridiculous. She drops one hand in my lap. I just wanted to relax. What's wrong with that?

The sun is blazing and the blue of the ocean is an overload on the brain. Casa de Campo has got beaches the way the rest of the Island has got problems. These, though, have no merengue, no little kids, nobody trying to sell you chicharrones, and there's a massive melanin deficit in evidence. Every fifty feet there's at least one Eurofuck beached out on a towel like some scary pale monster that the sea's vomited up. They look like philosophy professors, like budget Foucaults, and too many of them are in the company of a dark-assed Dominican girl. I mean it, these girls can't be no more than sixteen, look puro ingenio to me. You can tell by their inability to communicate that these two didn't meet back in their Left Bank days.

Magda's rocking a dope Ochun-colored bikini that her girls helped her pick out so she could torture me, and I'm in these old ruined trunks that say "Sandy Hook Forever!" I'll admit it, with Magda half naked in public I'm feeling vulnerable and uneasy. I put my hand on her knee. I just wish you'd say you love me.

Yunior, please.

Can you say you like me a lot?

Can you leave me alone? You're such a pestilence.

I let the sun stake me out to the sand. It's disheartening, me and Magda together. We don't look like a couple. When she smiles niggers ask her for her hand in marriage; when I smile folks check their wallets. Magda's been a star the whole time we've been here. You know how it is when you're on the Island and your girl's an octoroon. Brothers go apeshit. On buses, the machos were like, Tú sí eres bella, muchacha. Every time I dip into the water for a swim, some Mediterranean Messenger of Love starts rapping to her. Of course, I'm not polite. Why don't you beat it, pancho? We're on our honeymoon here. There's this one squid who's mad persistent, even sits down near us so he can impress her with the hair around his nipples, and instead of ignoring him she starts a conversation and it turns out he's Dominican, too, from Quisqueya Heights, an assistant DA who loves his people. Better I'm their prosecutor, he says. At least I understand them. I'm thinking he sounds like the sort of nigger who in the old days used to lead bwana to the rest of us. After three minutes of him, I can't take it no more, and say, Magda, stop talking to that asshole.

The assistant DA startles. I know you ain't talking to me, he says.

Actually, I say, I am.

This is unbelievable. Magda gets to her feet and walks stiff-legged toward the water. She's got a half-moon of sand stuck to her butt. A total fucking heartbreak.

Homeboy's saying something else to me, but I'm not listening. I already know what she'll say when she sits back down. Time for you to do your thing and me to do mine.

THAT NIGHT I LOITER around the pool and the local bar, Club Cacique, Magda nowhere to be found. I meet a dominicana from West New York. Fly, of course. Trigueña, with the most outrageous perm this side of Dyckman. Lucy is her name. She's hanging out with three of her teenage girl cousins. When she removes her robe to dive into the pool, I see a spiderweb of scars across her stomach.

I also meet these two rich older dudes drinking cognac at the bar. Introduce themselves as the Vice-President and Bárbaro, his bodyguard. I must have the footprint of fresh disaster on my face. They listen to my troubles like they're a couple of capos and I'm talking murder. They

commiserate. It's a thousand degrees out and the mosquitoes hum like they're about to inherit the earth, but both these cats are wearing expensive suits, and Bárbaro is even sporting a purple ascot. Once a soldier tried to saw open his neck and now he covers the scar. I'm a modest man, he says.

I go off to phone the room. No Magda. I check with reception. No messages. I return to the bar and smile.

The Vice-President is a young brother, in his late thirties, and pretty cool for a chupabarrío. He advises me to find another woman. Make her bella and negra. I think, Cassandra.

The Vice-President waves his hand and shots of Barceló appear so fast you'd think it's science fiction.

Jealousy is the best way to jump-start a relationship, the Vice-President says. I learned that when I was a student at Syracuse. Dance with another woman, dance merengue with her, and see if your jeva's not roused to action.

You mean roused to violence.

She hit you?

When I first told her. She smacked me right across the chops.

Pero, hermano, why'd you tell her? Bárbaro wants to know. Why didn't you just deny it?

Compadre, she received a letter. It had evidence.

The Vice-President smiles fantastically and I can see why he's a vice-president. Later, when I get home, I'll tell my mother about this whole mess, and she'll tell me what this brother was the vice-president of.

They only hit you, he says, when they care.

Amen, Bárbaro murmurs. Amen.

ALL OF MAGDA'S FRIENDS SAY I cheated because I was Dominican, that all us Dominican men are dogs and can't be trusted. I doubt that I can speak for all Dominican men but I doubt they can either. From my perspective it wasn't genetics; there were reasons. Causalities.

The truth is there ain't no relationship in the world that doesn't hit turbulence. Mine and Magda's certainly did.

I was living in Brooklyn and she was with her folks in Jersey. We talked every day on the phone and on weekends we saw each other. Usually I went

in. We were real Jersey, too: malls, the parents, movies, a lot of TV. After a year of us together, this was where we were at. Our relationship wasn't the sun, the moon, and the stars, but it wasn't bullshit, either. Especially not on Saturday mornings, over at my apartment, when she made us coffee campo-style, straining it through the sock thing. Told her parents the night before she was staying over at Claribel's; they must have known where she was, but they never said shit. I'd sleep late and she'd read, scratching my back in slow arcs, and when I was ready to get up I would start kissing her until she would say, God, Yunion, you're making me wet.

I wasn't unhappy and wasn't actively pursuing ass like some niggers. Sure, I checked out other females, even danced with them when I went out, but I wasn't keeping numbers or nothing.

Still, it's not like seeing somebody once a week doesn't cool shit out, because it does. Nothing you'd really notice until some new chick arrives at your job with a big butt and a smart mouth and she's like on you almost immediately, touching your pectorals, moaning about some moreno she's dating who's always treating her like shit, saying, Black guys don't understand Spanish girls.

Cassandra. She organized the football pool and did crossword puzzles while she talked on the phone, and had a thing for denim skirts. We got into a habit of going to lunch and having the same conversation. I advised her to drop the moreno, she advised me to find a girlfriend who could fuck. First week of knowing her, I made the mistake of telling her that sex with Magda had never been top-notch.

God, I feel sorry for you, Cassandra said. At least Rupert gives me some Grade A dick.

The first night we did it—and it was good, too, she wasn't false advertising—I felt so lousy that I couldn't sleep, even though she was one of those sisters whose body fits next to you perfect. I was like, She knows, so I called Magda right from the bed and asked her if she was OK.

You sound strange, she said.

I remember Cassandra pressing the hot cleft of her pussy against my leg and me saying, I just miss you.

ANOTHER PERFECT SUNNY CARIBBEAN DAY, and the only thing Magda has said is Give me the lotion. Tonight the resort is throwing a party. All guests are invited. Attire's semiformal, but I don't have the clothes or the energy to dress up. Magda, though, has both. She pulls on these super-tight gold lamé pants and a matching halter that shows off her belly ring. Her hair is shiny and as dark as night and I can remember the first time I kissed those curls, asking her, Where are the stars? And she said, They're a little lower, papi.

We both end up in front of the mirror. I'm in slacks and a wrinkled chacabana. She's applying her lipstick; I've always believed that the universe invented the color red solely for Latinas.

We look good, she says.

It's true. My optimism is starting to come back. I'm thinking, This is the night for reconciliation. I put my arms around her, but she drops her bomb without blinking a fucking eye: tonight, she says, she needs space.

My arms drop.

I knew you'd be pissed, she says.

You're a real bitch, you know that.

I didn't want to come here. You made me.

If you didn't want to come, why didn't you have the fucking guts to say so?

And on and on and on, until finally I just say, Fuck this, and head out. I feel unmoored and don't have a clue of what comes next. This is the endgame, and instead of pulling out all the stops, instead of pongándome más chivo que un chivo, I'm feeling sorry for myself, como un parigüayo sin suerte. I'm thinking over and over, I'm not a bad guy, I'm not a bad guy.

Club Cacique is jammed. I'm looking for that girl Lucy. I find the Vice-President and Bárbaro instead. At the quiet end of the bar, they're drinking cognac and arguing about whether there are fifty-six Dominicans in the major leagues or fifty-seven. They clear out a space for me and clap me on the shoulder.

This place is killing me, I say.

How dramatic. The Vice-President reaches into his suit for his keys. He's wearing those Italian leather shoes that look like braided slippers. Are you inclined to ride with us?

Sure, I say. Why the fuck not?

I wish to show you the birthplace of our nation.