

## Jessica Arauz | The Legend of Burrito Man

*Fully monster, and partway human*

“It’s a boy!” the doctor exclaimed while the nurse looked on in amazement. “He’s huge! I’ve never seen anything like this. One more push!” he encouraged the woman who had been in labor for hours. “Look at that, he’s here. It’s a big, healthy boy. What would you like to name him, señora?” the doctor asked as he held up the newborn.

“Name him...Burrito Man.”

So that *may* have been a fabrication, but I’d like to believe that when I nicknamed him, serendipity made me do it. The truth is, after several keen observations, I noticed he always carried around that same 89-cent burrito sold by our school. The joke got laughs from others, so I kept it running from then on. I hadn’t learned his real name, and to this day it’s a mystery, but that fact has never stopped me from telling the legend of Burrito Man.

He was the head honcho at my high school. I knew him when he was fifteen, but he didn’t look like a teenager: He was struck with a curse that caused his face to age quicker than the rest of his body, making him look like a trespasser on the schoolyard. He was a giant. He didn’t *only* have the height of a Goliath, he was a planet with his own gravitational pull. The clothes he wore were meant to be baggy, but instead they encased his perfectly spherical figure. If his nickname wasn’t Burrito Man, it would have been DAY-UM!

He wore dark clothing over his deeply tanned skin that never flattered his ebony eyes. The only part of him that wasn’t somber was the cascade of gold bling that hung around his neck. He was a cholo, a gangster, and one of the worst ones at our school. We didn’t need to

know what made him notorious, he just was. Everyone feared him and his train of Yes-Men. Whenever he would show up, necks would stiffen, voices would dissolve, and no one ever dared make eye contact with him. Through word of mouth, he had become a villain.

My own interest in Burrito Man was purely scientific. I liked to make bold commentary about him to my friends. This got them to laugh and eased their worry (as well as my own) whenever he and his gang would peacock across campus with that iconic limp. However, my insolence would be rectified that year. No one stains the good name of Burrito Man.

During what I took to be an average morning, my geography teacher asked me to take a note up to the office. But on my way back to class, I spotted them: BM and his pack of pit bulls. They were strutting down an empty hall, making themselves late to class because that's what gangsters do. I made sure to slow my pace so I'd remain behind them and stalk without fear of being caught. His crew moved as he did, following the actions of their pack leader down to the tilt of his shoulders. It was fascinating: Even when no one was around, they paraded. I felt fortunate to record this rare observation, that is, until *it* happened. Burrito Man fell.

Flat. On. His. Face.

The Earth felt this wound. The sky rumbled. The concrete below him was reduced, almost, to rubble. His gang remained immobile, stunned by the event. You could tell they were completely unsure how to react, especially when Burrito Man began to moan there in place, like a whale. Their minds finally triggering, the four of them snatched their leader up and dusted him off, then they continued on to class as if nothing had happened. But I had been on the edge of panic the entire time. You don't laugh at Burrito Man—but my feeling at the moment of impact was like wanting to lose it during a sermon. The sensation drills at your stomach, your lungs fill with air, and your lips fight to remain pinched together. You don't laugh at Burrito Man, even if

you hear the funny home-video sound effect, “Whoop, whoop, whoop” in your head as he falls. You *don't* laugh at Burrito Man.

I stumbled to my classroom and made sure to shut the door quietly in case he had hearing that could reach great distances. When I sat down, a friend asked me what took so long. “You’ll never believe me,” I said bewilderedly.

Later that year, I had another encounter with Burrito Man, but this time, my life was on the line. He stood two feet away from me for three sunless minutes as he blocked out all natural light. The smell of beans and tortillas from his mouth was much more potent than I theorized. I’ll never forget that cryptic tone, his hollow voice, and his words that remain engraved into my memory to this day. “Hey. Whatchu sellin’?”

An hour earlier, I had been issued chocolates to sell for a club, so I was dragging a heavy box of assorted goods until I could get home and divide them into smaller bags. The sweets left me as prey and it was clear by the glint on Burrito Man’s fangs that he was on the hunt. I opened the box and squeaked “Candy,” or at least, that’s what I think I said. The horror of facing him and his pack at such a close range left me at a loss for words. “Estos!” he bellowed, and grabbed three Kit-Kats and two Snickers bars. One of his friends threw a five dollar bill in the box and they walked away with only the sound of him gnawing on the wrapper. It was the last thing I remember before their image became fuzzy.

“How did it go today, *mija*?” my mother asked when I arrived home from school that afternoon.

“I was almost killed!” I shrieked. “Oh, and I have candy.”

My last encounter with Burrito Man was near the end of the school year. My friends Ya-Ya, Pot, and John were anxious to get home, but we were also excited to learn that our

teacher was absent. The subject was elementary drafting, located at the farthest corner of school. The class was designed to keep low achievers busy for an hour. I was put there by mistake, but Burrito Man wasn't. He sat in the back of the room behind the computers along with two of his friends. This section was for second-year drafters, so, fortunately for me, I sat with the majority in the front of the room.

The hermit being paid to watch over us was Substitute of the Year material: The entire period, he hid in our teacher's supply office while listening to A.M. talk radio. The small room had no windows and he kept the door completely shut. This lack of adult supervision was the catalyst for the events to come.

My friend Ya-Ya had a terrible impulse that day. She had brought water balloons from home and snuck out of class to run to the fountain and fill them up. Her large black sweater concealed six balloons which she used to shake at us and make crude jokes. A fellow freshman nicknamed Mr. Burns became curious at our laughter. He was a thin kid, with an unstable, twitchy demeanor. He asked Ya-Ya if he could have a few of the empty water balloons and though I shook my head repeatedly, she obliged because she knew he was friends with Burrito Man, and one should always be kind to his minions.

"Excellent," Mr. Burns smirked and went to the back of the room with a handful of water balloons. "That was so weak," Pot grunted at Ya-Ya, all of us eyeing Burrito Man's gang. John and I agreed, because even though we feared that behemoth, we had no problem puffing out our chests behind his back. Ya-Ya was offended by our accusation, though, and was hell-bent to show us she'd had a plan. However, I feel it's important to mention that this plan was the single dumbest idea since Eve bit into an apple.

She threw a water balloon at them.

The entire classroom gasped in unison. My hands covered my mouth, John's eyes almost fell out of his head from shock, and Pot edged off his stool while he laughed. Ya-Ya's aim had been for Mr. Burns, but part of the splash splattered on the two gang members. Most importantly, I remember seeing Burrito Man take out one finger to wipe away what appeared to be a single drop of water from his nose.

*That* was enough to guarantee our doom.

By some telepathic message from Burrito Man, his posse stood up, first to stare at us, and then to grab the unused water balloons from the gangly Mr. Burns. They rushed out the door to do the same as Ya-Ya had done at the fountain. When they returned, the substitute teacher had at last come out of the office and looked wearily at the clock. "First ones to clean up can leave a few minutes early," he yawned. We sped through organizing our table and supplies in record time. "Oh my God, they're gonna kill us," I said while I fumbled with the rulers. "Done! Done!" John waved his hand in the air to get the teacher's attention. We didn't need to waste time discussing what happened and whose obvious fault it was. The plan was simple: get out of the classroom before Burrito Man and run like Hell.

The substitute looked at our table and dismissed us first. As we practically jumped for the door, Burrito Man stood up to show us his crazy eyes. We walked quickly away from the building but Ya-Ya stopped at the fountain to fill up more balloons; unlike us, she was ready for a war.

"There's no time for that, stupid," Pot scowled and continued to march.

"Why'd ya give them balloons?" John yelled at Ya-Ya as he power-walked beside me. The door of our classroom swung open and there, staring us down with watery grenades in their

hands, Burrito Man and his crew locked their eyes on their targets. “Oh my God! They’re gonna kill us!” I yelled with no concern for being subtle.

“Ruuun!” Ya-Ya commanded and dropped several balloons as she sprinted for us.

Classes were still in session at the time, so there was everywhere and *nowhere* to run. Pot yelled obscenities as he betrayed us for a different route. A blue balloon struck his back, and he cursed as he tripped over his own feet. John yelled too, but mostly to inform me that his pants were falling off. A green balloon hit the wall we were passing, soaking us both. “Go to Hell!” Ya-Ya provoked them as she twisted her upper body and threw three consecutive red balloons at our pursuers, all of which missed their target. About here, John and I realized then that if we lost her, we might manage to save ourselves. After nodding at each other, we split up. I remember Ya-Ya yelling my name, but its context was drowned out by the laughter during this running of the bulls.

Once I reached the front of the school, I was free from the prospect of an early grave. I had lost them, but an assortment of hoofbeats echoed through the still empty campus. Curiosity made me search for the origin of the sound, and after passing through one of the halls, I was able to locate them. They had cornered Ya-Ya by the lockers, where she pleaded for her freedom. Burrito Man knew no mercy. He raised his hand and fired a pink water balloon, point blank, at her forehead to finalize his revenge.

And then he laughed.

This was the thing: He had chased us across school, howling and shrieking the entire time. What I had initially thought to be the laughter of my friends turned out to be his boyish glee and his crew’s. With a liveliness I didn’t think he was capable of, he’d pursued us with the

kind of thrill that a child has playing outdoors. For a second, the youth that was blurred by his intimidating disposition was exposed when I saw him wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes.

That is the end of the tale. I often wondered why the memory ended at that locker. . . if he dropped out of school, say, or got into a different gang. Or if he ever learned to love a different brand of burrito.

After this monumental event, I never saw Burrito Man again.