

Cinco selecciones de *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

I

High school was Don Bosco Tech, and since Don Bosco Tech was an urban all-boys Catholic school packed to the strakes with a couple hundred insecure hyperactive adolescents, it was, for a fat sci-fi-reading nerd like Oscar, a source of endless anguish. For Oscar, high school was the equivalent of a medieval spectacle, like being put in the stocks and forced to endure the peltings and outrages of a mob of deranged half-wits, an experience from which he supposed he should have emerged a better person, but that's not really what happened-and if there were any lessons to be gleaned from the ordeal of those years he never quite figured out what they were. He walked into school every day like the fat lonely nerdy kid he was, and all he could think about was the day of his manumission, when he would at last be set free from its unending horror. Hey, Oscar, are there faggots on Mars? -Hey; Kazoo, catch *this*. The first time he heard the term *moronic inferno* he knew exactly where it was located and who were its inhabitants.

Sophomore year Oscar found himself weighing in at a whopping 245 (260 when he was depressed, which was often) and it had become clear to everybody, especially his family, that he'd become the neighborhood parigüayo⁵. Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. I had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks. He wore his semikink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses-his "anti-pussy devices," Al and Miggs, his only friends, called them-sported an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded. The Eyes of Mingus. (A comparison he made himself one day going through his mother's record collection; she was the only old-school dominicana he knew who had dated a moreno until Oscar's father put an end to that particular chapter of the All-African World Party.) You have the same eyes as your abuelo, his Nena Inca had told him on one of his visits to the DR, which should have been some comfort—who

⁵ The pejorative parigüayo, Watchers agree, is a corruption of the English neologism "party watcher." The word came into common usage during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924. (You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when *you* have lads they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either.) During the First Occupation it was reported that members of the American Occupying Forces would often attend Dominican parties but instead of joining in the fun the Outlanders would simply stand at the edge of dances and watch. Which of course must have seemed like the craziest thing in the world. Who goes to a party to *watch*? Thereafter, the Marines were parigüayos—a word that in contemporary usage describes anybody who stands outside and watches while other people scoop up the girls. The kid who don't dance, who ain't got game, who lets people clown him—he's the parigüayo.

If you looked in the Dictionary of Dominican Things, the entry for *parigüayo* would include a wood carving of Oscar. It is a name that would haunt *him* for the rest of his life and that would lead him to another Watcher, the one who lamps on the Blue Side of the Moon.

doesn't like resembling an ancestor?—except this particular ancestor had ended his days in prison.

Oscar had always been a young nerd—the kind of kid who read Tom Swift, who loved comic books and watched *Ultraman*—but by high school his commitment to the Genres had become absolute. Back when the rest of us were learning to play wallball and pitch quarters and drive our older brothers' cars and sneak dead soldiers from under our parents' eyes, he was gorging himself on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells, Burroughs, Howard, Alexander, Herbert, Asimov, Bova, and Heinlein, and even the Old Ones who were already beginning to fade--E.E. "Doc" Smith, Stapledon, and the guy who wrote all the Doc Savage books--moving hungrily from book to book, author to author, age to age. (It was his good fortune that the libraries of Paterson were so underfunded that they still kept a lot of the previous generation's nerdery in circulation.) You couldn't have torn him away from any movie or TV show or cartoon where there were monsters or spaceships or mutants or doomsday devices or destinies or magic or evil villains. In these pursuits alone Oscar showed the genius his grandmother insisted was part of the family patrimony. Could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsal, and a Lensinan in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic. (If only he'd been good at videogames it would have been a slam dunk but despite owning an Atari and an Intellivision he didn't have the reflexes for it.) Perhaps if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't. Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to.⁶

⁶ Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both). After a transition like that I'm guessing only the most extreme scenarios could have satisfied. Maybe it was that in the DR he had watched too much *Spider-Man*, been taken to too many Run Run Shaw kung fit movies, listened to too many of his abuela's spooky stories about el Cuco and la Ciguapa? Maybe it was his first librarian in the U.S., who hooked him on reading, the electricity lie felt when he touched that first Danny Dunn book? Maybe it was just the zeitgeist (were not the early seventies the dawn of the Nerd Age?) or the fact that for most of his childhood he had absolutely no friends? Or was it something deeper, something ancestrally?

Who can say?

What is clear is that being a reader/fanboy (for lack of a better term) helped him *get* through the rough days of his youth, but it also made him stick out in the mean streets of Paterson even more than he already did. Victimized by the other boys' punches and pushes and wedgies and broken glasses and brand-new honks from Scholastic, at a cost of fifty cents each, torn in half before his very eyes. You like books? Now you got two! I-Jar-liar! No one, alas, more oppressive than the oppressed. Even his own mother found his preoccupation's nutty. Go outside and play! she commanded at least once a day. Portate como un muchacho normal.

(Only his sister, a reader too, supporting him. Bringing him books from her own school, which had a better library.)

You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? *just* he a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest.

Pa' fuera! his mother roared. And out he would go, like a boy condemned, to spend a few hours being tormented by the other boys—Please, I want to stay, he would beg his mother, but she shoved him out—You ain't a woman to be staying in the house—one hour, two, until finally he could slip back inside unnoticed, hiding himself in the upstairs closet, where he'd read by the slat of light that razored in from the cracked door. Eventually, his mother rooting him out again: What in carajo is the matter with you?

(And already on scraps of paper, in his composition books, on the hacks of his hands, lie was beginning to scribble, nothing serious for now, just rough facsimiles of his favorite stories, no sign yet that these half-assed pastiches were to be his Destiny.)

II

Oscar was a social introvert who trembled with fear during gym class and watched nerd British shows like *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7*, and could tell you the difference between a Veritech fighter and a Zentraedi walker, and he used a lot of huge-sounding nerd words like *indefatigable* and *ubiquitous* when talking to kids who would barely graduate from high school. One of those nerds who was always hiding out in the library, who adored Tolkien and later the Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman novels (his favorite character was of course Raistlin), and who, as the eighties marched on, developed a growing obsession with the End of the World. (No apocalyptic movie or book or game existed that he had not seen or read or played—Wyndham and Christopher and Gamma World were his absolute favorites.) You get the picture. His adolescent nerdliness vaporizing any iota of a chance he had for young love. Everybody else going through the terror and joy of their first crushes, their first dates, their first kisses while Oscar sat in the back of the class, behind his DM's screen, and watched his adolescence stream by. Sucks to be left out of adolescence, sort of like getting locked in the closet on Venus when the sun appears for the first time in a hundred years. It would have been one thing if like some of the nerdboys I'd grown up with he hadn't cared about girls, but alas he was still the passionate enamorado who fell in love easily and deeply. He had secret loves all over town, the kind of curly-haired big-bodied girls who wouldn't have said boo to a loser like him but about whom he could not stop dreaming. His affection—that gravitational mass of love, fear, longing, desire, and lust that he directed at any and every girl in the vicinity without regard to looks, age, or availability—broke his heart each and every day. Despite the fact that he considered it this huge sputtering force, it was actually most like a ghost because no girl ever really seemed to notice it. Occasionally they might shudder or cross their arms when he walked near, but that was about it. He cried often for his love of some girl or another. Cried in the bathroom, where nobody could hear him.

III

And right there he learned something about his friends he'd never known (or at least never admitted to himself). Right there he had an epiphany that echoed through his fat self. He realized his fucked-up comic-book-reading, role-playing-game-loving, no-sports-playing friends were embarrassed *by him*.

Knocked the architecture right out of his legs. He closed the game early, the Exterminators found the Destroyers' hideout right away—That was bogus, Al grouched. After he showed them out he locked himself in his room, lay in bed for a couple of stunned hours, then got up, undressed in the bathroom he no longer had to share because his sister was at Rutgers, and examined himself in the mirror. The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions! He looked straight out of a Daniel Clowes comic book. Or like the fat blackish kid in Beto Hernandez's Palomar.

Jesus Christ, he whispered. I'm a Morlock.

The next day at breakfast he asked his mother: Am I ugly?

She sighed. Well, hijo, you certainly don't take after me.

Dominican parents! You got to love them!

Spent a week looking at himself in the mirror, turning every which way, taking stock, not flinching, and decided at last to be like Roberto Durán: No más. That Sunday he went to Chucho's and had the barber shave his Puerto Rican 'fro off (Wait a minute, Chucho's partner said. *You're Dominican?*) Oscar lost the mustache next, and then the glasses, bought contacts with the money he was making at the lumberyard and tried to polish up what remained of his Dominicansness, tried to be more like his cursing swaggering cousins, if only because he had started to suspect that in their Latin hypermaleness there might be an answer. But he was really too far gone for quick fixes. The next time Al and Miggs saw him he'd been starving himself for three days straight. Miggs said, Dude, what's the matter with *you*?

Changes, Oscar said pseudo-cryptically.

What, are you some album cover now?

He shook his head solemnly. I'm embarking on a new cycle of my life.

Listen to the guy. He already sounds like he's in college.

IV

That summer his mother sent him and his sister to Santo Domingo, and this time he didn't fight it like he had in the recent past. It's not like he had much in the States keeping him. He arrived in Baní with a stack of notebooks and a plan to fill them all up. Since he could no longer be a gamemaster he decided to try his hand at being a real writer. The trip turned out to be something of a turning point for him. Instead of discouraging his writing, chasing him out of the house like his mother used to, his abuela, Nena Inca, let him be. Allowed him to sit in the back of the house as long as he wanted, didn't insist that he should be "out in the world." (She had always been overprotective of him and his sister. Too much bad luck in this family, she sniffed.) Kept the music off and brought him his meals at exactly the same time every day. His sister ran around with her hot Island friends, always jumping out of the house in a bikini and going off to different parts of the Island for overnight trips, but he stayed put. When any family members came looking for him his abuela chased them off with a single imperial sweep of her hand. Can't you see the muchacho's working? What's he doing? his cousins asked, confused. He's being a genius is what, La Inca replied haughtily. Now váyanse. (Later when he thought about it he realized that these very cousins could probably have gotten him laid if only he'd bothered to hang out with them. But you can't regret the life you didn't lead.) In the afternoons, when he couldn't write another word, he'd sit out in front of the house with his abuela and watch the street scene, listen to the raucous exchanges between the neighbors. One evening, at the end of his trip, his abuela confided: Your mother could have been a doctor just like your grandfather was.

What happened?

La Inca shook her head. She was looking at her favorite picture of his mother on her first day at private school, one of those typical serious DR shots. What always happens. Un maldito hombre.

He wrote two hooks that summer about a young man fighting mutants at the end of the world (neither of them survive). Took crazy amounts of field notes too, names of things he intended to later adapt for science-fictional and fantastic purposes. (Heard about the family curse for like the thousandth time but strangely enough didn't think it worth incorporating into his fiction—I mean, shit, what Latino family doesn't think it's cursed?) When it was time for him and his sister to return to Paterson he was almost sad. Almost. His abuela placed her hand on his head in blessing. Cuídate mucho, mi hijo. Know that in this world there's somebody who will always love you.

At JFK, almost not being recognized by his uncle. Great, his tío said, looking askance at his complexion, now you look Haitian.

After his return he hung out with Miggs and Al, saw movies with them, talked Los Brothers Hernández, Frank Miller, and Alan Moore with them but overall they never regained the friendship they had before Santo Domingo. Oscar listened to their messages on the machine and resisted the urge to run over to their places. Didn't see them but once, twice a week. Focused on his writing. Those were some fucking lonely weeks when all he had were his games, his

books, and his words. So now I have a hermit for a son, his mother complained bitterly. At night, unable to sleep, he watched a lot of bad TV, became obsessed with two movies in particular: *Zardoz* (which he'd seen with his uncle before they put him away for the second time) and *Virus* (the Japanese end-of-the-world movie with the hot chick from *Romeo and Juliet*). *Virus* especially he could not watch to the end without crying, the Japanese hero arriving at the South Pole base, having walked from Washington, D.C., down the whole spine of the Andes, for the woman of his dreams. I've been working on my fifth novel, he told the boys when they asked about his absences. It's *amazing*.

See? What did I tell you? Mr. Collegeboy.

In the old days when his so-called friends would hurt him or drag his trust through the mud he always crawled voluntarily back into the abuse, out of fear and loneliness, something he'd always hated himself for, but not this time. If there existed in his high school years any one moment he took pride in it was clearly this one. Even told his sister about it during her next visit. She said, Way to go, O! He'd finally showed some backbone, hence some pride, and although it hurt, it also felt motherfucking *good*.

V

In June he graduated from Don Bosco. See them at graduation: his mother starting to look thin (the cancer would grab her soon enough), Rudolfo high as shit, only Lola looking her best, beaming, happy. You did it, Mister. You did it. He heard in passing that of everybody in their section of P-town only he and Olga-poor fucked-up Olga-had not attended even one prom. Dude, Miggs joked, maybe you should have asked *her* out.

In September he headed to Rutgers New Brunswick, his mother gave him a hundred dollars and his first kiss in five years, his tío a box of condoms: Use them all, he said, and then added: On girls. There was the initial euphoria of finding himself alone at college, free of everything, completely on his fucking own, and with it an optimism that here among these thousands of young people he would find someone like him. That, alas, didn't happen. The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy. After a spate of parties that led to nothing but being threatened by some drunk whiteboys, and dozens of classes where not a single girl looked at him, he felt the optimism wane, and before he even realized what had happened he had buried himself in what amounted to the college version of what he'd majored in all throughout highschool: getting no ass. His happiest moments were genre moments, like when *Akira* was released (1988). Pretty sad. Twice a week he and his sister would dine at the Douglass dining hall; she was a Big Woman on Campus and knew just about everybody with any pigment, had her hand on every protest and every march, but that didn't help his situation any. During their get-togethers she would give him advice and he would nod quietly and afterward would sit at the E bus stop and stare at all the pretty Douglass girls and wonder where he'd gone wrong in his life. He wanted to blame the books, the sci-fi, but he couldn't—he loved them too much. Despite swearing early on to change his nerdy ways, he continued to eat, continued not to exercise, continued to use flash words, and after a couple semesters without any friends but his sister, he joined the university's resident geek organization, RU Gamers, which met in the classrooms beneath Frelinghuysen and boasted an entirely male membership. He had thought college would be better, as far as girls were concerned, but those first years it wasn't...