

The First Two Pages of “La Chingona” by Hector Acosta

From *The Eviction of Hope*, edited by Colin Conway

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An Essay by Hector Acosta

I hate beginnings.

Let me rephrase that—I hate coming up with beginnings. I have this very annoying habit of obsessing over opening lines, to the point I usually find myself writing and rewriting the first sentence a couple of times before I feel like I can move on. True to form, I’ve written this particular paragraph out at least three times, removing or adding a couple of words.

So it’s kinda nice when I get to cheat a little bit.

The church stood across the street and flipped God off.

This is the opening line to “La Chingona,” my story that is featured in Colin Conway’s anthology *The Eviction of Hope*. It’s also an opening line I’ve had in my back pocket for over a decade, having first come up with it for a vampire novel I trunked a few chapters in. Turns out I was not the writer to reinvent the fang genre, but the line always stuck with me, and every so often I would return to it, trying to find the story that went along with it. Even with “La Chingona,” I didn’t immediately think of using the line.

It's rare when I have a fully plotted story in my head when I start to write. Most of the time, I have a beat or two in mind, along with a character I find interesting enough to want to explore further. With "La Chingona," I had Veronica in mind from the start, or more to the point, her profession as a webcam videogame streamer. Webcam streaming is something that has been used since the early 2000s, and has recently gained popularity, especially with the younger generation, who will log into sites like YouTube and Twitch to watch people stream themselves playing videogames, talking, or doing all sorts of different activities, all in hopes of earning subscribers who will either bring advertisers or donations. As someone who breaks out in hives any time he must be on camera or do any sort of public speaking, I was fascinated by the idea of people who turn on their camera and stream themselves for eight-plus hours a day, banking they are entertaining or charismatic enough to draw in fans and (most importantly) keep them watching.

From the start I knew Veronica would struggle as a streamer, she would be someone who despite her best efforts, would find her viewer count stagnating. *Eviction of Hope* featured the inhabitants of The Hope, a decrepit apartment building scheduled to be torn down. Everyone would have received their eviction notice, and most, if not all, would be facing an unknown future. I decided I would start the story with Veronica streaming out of her one-bedroom apartment trying

her best to entertain her viewers and doing her best to keep her fears and worries of what she would do once she was evicted from rising to the surface.

This dichotomy became one of the things I knew would drive the story forward, and the way Veronica dealt with it is probably one of my favorite parts of the story:

Waves of panic crashed against her, threatening to pull her under to the place filled with empty bottles, fast food wrappers and slipping time. Gripping the mask lying on her lap, the world went dark as she slipped it over her head, the familiar smell of the sweat stained cloth becoming a pier to stand on. Split vertically into green, white, and red sections, the colors of the mask invoked the Mexican flag...

Anyone who's read any of my previous work, follows me on Twitter, or has spent more than five minutes with me likely knows how big of a wrestling fan I am. I've been a fan of the sport (yes, I called it a sport, let's move on) since I was a child, and my father took me to see Las Luchas in Mexico City. All it took was catching sight of the lithe, masked wrestlers diving off the squared ring and pulling dazzling athletic feats to hook me. While it might have been the theatrics and colorful, superhero-like characters which originally drew me in, as I got older, I became just as interested in the behind-the-scenes stories and people as what was presented for the audience.

I made the connection between the similarities of wrestlers who amp up their own real-life personas for the sake of entertainment and a streamer like the one Veronica was attempting to be early on, and this fluidity, the back and forth

between what is the ‘real’ Veronica and what was just a show, became the spine of the story.

It also allowed me to feature code switching into the story. Linguistics describe code switching as the process of alternating between languages and variations of languages, but in broader, social context, it is best defined as when a person alternates not only language but mannerisms and even persona depending on class, ethnicity, and social positions. In this case, we see it when Veronica slips on the mask and becomes La Chingona.

“*¡Que tal cabrones!* How you all doin’ over *en el cyber-spacio?*” she asked, looking directly at the camera. Her words were drenched in a loud, over stylized accent, and she was thankful for the mask as her cheeks reddened, the heat spreading all over her face. “La Chingona sees we got Goku Did It 35 Minutes Ago on here already. How you doing, *esé?*”

This is the first time we see Veronica/La Chingona speak, and my intention was to make it clear that she was putting on a persona especially for the audience. This is also why I chose to use italics for the Spanish words. I’m generally against italicizing non-English words, as I side with those who believe that italicizing creates a sense of otherness and (even if unintentionally) propagates a largely Western viewpoint. But here, I wanted to play with the reader’s viewpoint, and I purposely chose to use italics to signal how she is slipping into a fake, and accented way of speaking. I say as much a bit later in the introduction, including Veronica’s doubts about the character she has created:

The character of La Chingona would have never worked without the mask. It shielded her from her fears and worries, allowing her to be someone else.

Though she did wish she hadn't gone so broad with the accent.

It was right around this time, with Veronica and her situation having become fully fleshed in my mind, that I started to think of how I would start the story. I wanted a line which immediately grabbed the reader—as all good opening lines do—but more importantly, said something about Veronica and her current outlook. And that's what led me to the line I ended up using. I like to think it's an eye-catching line, which will make the reader at the very least move on to the next paragraph to find out exactly how a building gives a finger to God.

Peering out of her bedroom window, Veronica noticed the old building, its crumbling brick spire poking through the fog like a middle finger directed at the deity throwing down the barrage of rain they had been experiencing in Spokane all week. Inspired by the sight, Veronica joined in flipping God, or at least her upstairs neighbors, off.

Everything put together gives us my desire point of entry into the story.

Veronica knows her situation sucks and doesn't even get to have a moment of peace in her own apartment, thanks to her upstairs bedrooms. Even so, she perseveres on, logging into her streaming account. Lastly, I wanted to try to show all this from a perspective you don't necessarily often see in crime fiction (though that seems to be largely changing). Veronica is a person of color and, as such, often has daily reminders how this alters every part of her life. Like with her streaming career:

Disappointment stabbed her gut when she logged into her online account and saw only a dozen viewers waiting for her. Not for the first time, Veronica wondered how much easier all of this would be if rather than the brown skinned, slightly chubby, masked woman her webcam captured, she could display a thinner, whiter, and blonder version of herself, features all the top female streamers, the ones with hundreds of thousands of followers and millions of views, had in common.

Without giving too much away, this feeds into the rest of the story and becomes a driving crux for the third act, where the personas of Veronica and La Chingona clash, largely thanks to the gentrification she can longer ignore and a promise made by a would-be benefactor that is renegeed on.

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Hector Acosta is an Edgar- and Anthony-nominated writer, as well as the author of the wrestling-inspired novella *Hardway*. He's contributed to several anthologies and is an editor of *Shotgun Honey*. He lives in Houston with his wife, pets, and ever growing Funko Pop collection.