

5-2012

## Fort Brown

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FORT BROWN

A Thesis

by

JEANNIE MARIE FLOYD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2012

Major Subject: Creative Writing



FORT BROWN

A Thesis  
by  
JEANNIE MARIE FLOYD

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May 2012



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## ABSTRACT

Floyd, Jeannie Marie, Fort Brown. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2012, 86 pp., references, 9 titles.

This is a collection of four short stories and three essays with a critical introduction. The people in these stories, both fiction and non-fiction, are all on the fringes of society. They are experiencing financial ruin, emotional turmoil, sickness, mental instability and other struggles. This material is an examination of their lives and the alternately humorous and tragic attempts of coping with their circumstances. Some of the pieces are related to the shrimping industry in the Port of Brownsville, one is about prostitution in Mexico, still others are about social misfits in California and other parts of the country. But the one thing that unites the collection is these persons' struggle to survive and hold on to what is theirs. The critical introduction explores the background of Jeannie Marie Floyd and her growth as a wife, sister, writer, daughter and academic.





## DEDICATION

I dedicate this collection of stories to my father, James Milton Floyd, in keeping with a promise I made twenty-four years ago.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. José Skinner, chair of my thesis committee for his dedication, patience, and kindness while helping me shape my stories and for his mentorship over the last few years. Dr. Skinner's support and honesty has helped me become a better writer.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee members Dr. Jean Braithwaite and Dr. Elvia Ardalani, whose advice and commitment have helped ensure the integrity of my thesis.

Finally, I'd like to thank the people of the Brownsville shrimping and fishing community, who work tirelessly to feed their families every day and whose presence provides a wealth of character and beauty for the Lower Rio Grande Valley.



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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I started writing when I was seven. Ms. Ortiz, my second grade teacher at Cromack Elementary, played different sounds for us (maybe a horse trotting or a rusty swing creaking). Then she'd ask us to write. We had no other directives, other than the sound effects on her tapes. I was an auditory learner, so I had no problem writing with these prompts. I remember some of the other children struggling for ideas, but for me (at age seven, anyway) it seemed like such an organic thing to do. I felt something and expressed it. That was it. Of course, when you're seven anything you put to paper feels like a hit.

Since I struggled with distractibility (and still do) it was nice to engage in something on which I could focus, something I could do and claim as my own. Since then, I've been writing. Sometimes my work was solid, at other times it was terribly subpar, but I kept at it. I knew that's what I needed to do.

When I wrote, it felt like a selfless act. I could think about other people and write about them, become invested in them, care. It was a cure for childhood narcissism. I wanted that.

When you're separated from your siblings by more than five years, you learn to pay attention. You're not necessarily a part of the action, not an integral part anyway. You're an observer. You watch and when they leave with their grown up friends, you stay in your head most of the time and learn to entertain yourself with your own thoughts and ideas. But when you write, you're with them, talking to them, engaged.



When I got older, and my family started going through changes – some good, others that were painful – I realized I wanted to write for their sake, probably more than my own. People's lives were moving so quickly, heading in different directions, ending. I decided to tell their stories because I wanted to record our past. It was the only way I knew to honor them, and the best way was to be honest about who we were and how we dealt, even if we didn't always deal well.

But I think many people deal with life in ugly, often violent ways. They resort to heavy drinking or experience outbursts of anger where others get hurt. They'll also harbor insecurities and weave a personality around them. That's why my characters are usually damaged people. They build up defenses or engage in dirty deeds. Then smile and brush it off. There really isn't another choice for them. So they invest their time and energy and sometimes money in erecting walls and setting up fences around themselves.

The people in both my fiction and non-fiction universes also fight for territory in one form or another because someone or something threatens their lives, always encroaching. It's a nameless entity over which they have no control that "slouch(es) toward Bethlehem" as Yeats puts it or a demon they have entertained like the Moloch of Ginsberg's "Howl." So the people in these stories and essays dig their heels because that's all they can do.

I think this sense of territory has always been present in me. Even the town of Brownsville, Texas, where I grew up, was created as a result of territorial conflict. During the Mexican American War, Fort Brown was set up on the Northern border of the Rio Grande to assert U.S control over all land between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers. The Mexican army, which saw the U.S. army as a threat (and understandably so), fired cannon shots from their post south of the Rio Grande. The U.S. troops, under heavy bombardment, continued working on

their unfinished fort. They packed dirt tightly, shaping it into a hexagram that reached ten feet high and formed an earthen star. They dug a trench around that star that was eight feet deep and about twenty feet wide. In the end, the small fort withstood the six-day bombardment, but not before losing two soldiers, including the fort commander, Jacob Brown, who later became the namesake for the fort and the city that grew around it.

The fort continued to play a pivotal role during the civil war and was used as a post for the 12<sup>th</sup> cavalry during both world wars. Later, it was deeded to the University of Texas at Brownsville.

When I attended college there in the late 1990's and early aughts, students talked about ghost encounters at the university – the sounds of horses trotting, and soldier boots echoing against the wooden planks on the old fort grounds when no one was around. I never experienced anything like that, but both students and staff seemed genuinely excited about these stories. Books have also been written on the phenomenon. I guess I appreciate these stories too, but more for the character they add to Brownsville than their veracity. They're a testament to the harshness and volatility that comes from living on a border town, especially one with a port. Brownsville's Port is fifteen minutes away from the city's downtown district and it's an entryway for some of the best seafood, and occasionally illegal drugs. To be on the edge of two borders, one between nations, the other between land and sea, can be daunting. But it's also exciting and invigorating in a way peculiar to frontiers.

Brownsville prides itself on its blend of Mexican and U.S. cultures and on having the ocean close by; a twenty to thirty minute drive will get you to the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, the town has found a way to capitalize on this. The logo on the city's official website proudly says "On the border, by the sea..."

My own family unit was a border town. We were perfectly split between the worlds of Mexico and the United States. We were Mexican on my mother's side, who is from San Luis Potosi, and Welsh-Native American on my father's side who was from South Carolina. Ethnically, we belonged to both sides. We also grew up speaking English and Spanish. There wasn't a great deal of code switching in my household, though. The tertiary language that develops along the border didn't stick. I think this is because my mother spoke Spanish almost exclusively and my father only spoke English. So we were either speaking one language or the other, not really a mix as in many other border households. On Sundays, we watched Mexican shows with my mother. We saw programs like *Burbujas*, a kids show that featured a Mexican Mouse named Mimoso Ratón and a frog named Patas Verdes or *Siempre en Domingo* which was a musical show, comparable to American Idol today, but without the voting, and during the week we'd watch *The Price is Right* or *Three's Company* with my father.

Our livelihood was also uniquely tied to the geography of the area. My father was a shrimper, so we were bound to gulf agriculture and it sustained our family for many years. We also spent a great deal of time at the Port of Brownsville, helping my father store his cans of potted beef and Vienna sausages, then watched him leave on his boat with his crew. Even after he retired, we'd spend time on South Padre Island, near the sea. I didn't always go to swim and sunbathe, although I did plenty of that, but sometimes my parents and I drove out to the ocean in the off-season. We wore our jeans and sweatshirts and stood by the water in the briny air, the surf chilling our toes, then receding. It felt like we were always on the edge of something. Then my parents would take me to the Jetties Restaurant by the rocky outshoots on the leeward side of South Padre Island. The back wall of the restaurant was lined with large windows. We always picked a table in the same spot and watched the pelicans swoop down over the Laguna Madre,

seaweed and sheep heads sloshing inside their fleshy beaks. Sometimes a dolphin poked its bottled nose out of the water. My parents smiled. They always looked great when they were smiling. Those were happy times.

Our house also sat on a street that felt like a crossroads between two worlds. To the left was Southmost Road, a street notorious for gang violence, low-rent drug houses, and the occasional black sports utility vehicle with even darker window tint. To the right was Owens Blvd, a street with the homes of two cardiologists and a general practitioner. Our house, though in the Southmost neighborhood, was only a block down the street from some of the most expensive homes in Brownsville, not to mention some of the most ostentatious. One doctor's home was modeled after an 18<sup>th</sup> century castle complete with conical spires. I never cared for the architecture of that house. I think I got this from my father, who was a minimalist himself. He had an economy with words and most things really. He also liked reading Westerns about lone cowboys in barren towns with too much time on their hands. I grew to appreciate these when I got older.

The inspiration behind "Coloma" came from the stories of Walter Van Tilburg Clark, specifically "The Indian Well." His haunted landscapes and quiet, desperate characters made me think about nature as a person and how she could have the power to drive someone insane if you give her enough time.

In this dead land, like a vast relief model,

the only allegiance was to sun.

Even night was not strong enough to resist.

Earth stretched gratefully under it

But had no hope that day would not return.

Such living things as hoarded  
a little juice at their cores  
were secret about it, and only the most  
ephemeral existences, the air at dawn and sunset,  
the amethyst shadows in the mountains,  
had any freedom.

In Clark's story, Jim Suttler encounters the Indian Well on a desert road while traveling with Jenny, his thinning burro. After some days drinking from the well, resting beneath the willows, and observing wildlife scuttle away coyly, then strike and devour, he discovers his predecessors' epitaphs carved on a cave wall:

My brother came out in '49  
I came in '51  
At first we thought we liked it fine  
But now, my God, we're done.

Suttler responds with his own inscription:

Jim and Jenny Suttler, damned dried out –  
March – 1940.

Cormac McCarthy, Breece D'J Pancake, and Carson McCullers have also influenced my writing. There's a strong masculine element to my stories and a large part of it comes from writers like these. But I know if I think back, I know the origins of that sensibility come from both my father and mother. They were both strong and determined people, and when they said something, they meant it, and that was that. When I write in this vein, that's when I resemble

them the most, and I begin to feel a sense of worthwhileness, like things make sense, and maybe the forts we put up don't have to be there for long.

Though I am pleased with the development of this collection of essays and stories; they are not complete yet. I plan on fleshing them out further, specifically the non-fiction pieces like "La Zona Roja" and "Netting." For "La Zona Roja," my goal is to interview more people from this background in Matamoros and also try to find out what happened to some of the women with which my grandmother worked. For "Netting," I plan on rounding out my essay by interviewing the environmentalists who stand on the other side of the controversial trawling issue. I'd also like to go on a shrimp trawl myself and experience this world first-hand.

Ultimately, my greatest desire is for these stories to impart strength. I hope they will do this for my readers as they have for me.

## NETTING

He works the plastic needle through the nylon strings—tugging, weaving, tightening. He runs his hand across his forehead intermittently, sighs, then starts all over again. My father pulls out his Bowie and tears through a stubborn knot. He grimaces. By noon a mound half his size looms in our backyard. He stares at it and smiles. It is a good mound. Today it is good. He runs his hands over it again. No knobby ends. No frayed edges. Just taut green nylon and crisscrossed sections. The needle has gone through smoothly this time.

These were the essentials of shrimping and they lay on my father's lap. Summer was always the good season for all of us. We needed strong nets to haul all the gulf coast pinks. Our livelihood depended on this. It did for all of the shrimpers' families. Most of us didn't have a backup plan. We knew this, but no one really ever did anything differently. It wasn't the way things worked. We just kept going. Living.

Trawling is an art form, though you'll never hear a shrimper say that. A shrimper has to learn to navigate the sea the way he would the road, remembering what's underwater to re-visit good shrimping spots and avoid large wrecks or else he might trawl engines and boat parts instead of shrimp—a costly and embarrassing mistake. He also has to learn to read the weather. A large halo around the moon means that rain is near, if the moon has a double halo and the inner one is red, then a storm is imminent. This

knowledge will save a shrimper from coming face to face with a waterspout or worse. When you're out at sea you can't always rely on the weatherman.

My father rarely discussed the details about life on the boat. I usually got this information from other people. I think shrimping was just a natural part of life for him. It wasn't anything remarkable; it was just what he did, that's all. It was a part of his life because it had been a part of *his* father's life. At sixteen, he started helping his father and older brothers build boats; then they started trawling together as a family.

I recently spoke with the owner of a seafood distributing company in Brownsville named Les Hodgson. He recognized the name of my father's boat and said he'd purchased catches from it many times.

"I remember the *Kentucky Gentleman*," he said. "It was a good boat. Brought in good catches." Although he didn't remember my father, he said he knew my father's employer quite well.

"Buster Harris ... yes, I remember Buster. I saw him at a bank once and do you know what he said? He told the banker 'I don't have the money, if you want for me to pull a gun out and blow my brains out, then I will!' The banks put so much pressure on those shrimp boat owners ... I don't know what happened to him."

I am driving to the Port of Brownsville with my parents and my older sisters. The air is salty and filled with factory smoke. My mom tells us we can get out for a bit and I



smile because it makes me feel like I'm where I belong. The port is my palace, and the ropes and algae are my subjects. We climb on my father's boat and jump on his bunk. We look out on the world from the small circular windows. We are fishermen! Then, we rummage through his canned goods and pull out Vienna sausages. We eat half the can (forgetting this belongs to the crew) and tie strings on the rest of them. We lower them into the bay and try to catch crabs. I don't know what we would have done had we caught one—probably act tough for a minute or two, then screamed.

Shrimping families are a tight-knit community. So I remember my father's crew pretty well. Most of them seemed to have some sort of tic. These individual quirks made them unique characters in my mind. There was Beto, who got too close to your face when he spoke; Buster, who was always chewing on something—usually sunflower seeds; and Chifles, who wouldn't stop smiling (or couldn't—I was never sure which). I found Chifles's smile frightening at times. It seemed impossible for someone to be that happy all the time. I suspected he wasn't. He couldn't have been, with everything the hurricanes had done.

When Beulah tore through the Gulf coast in '67 it destroyed just about every boat docked in the Laguna Madre, including my father's. He and a dozen other shrimp boat owners were forced to work for larger companies. They were never able to pick up the pieces after that. For the fledgling entrepreneurs in the shrimping industry, Beulah marked the downturn of their business. It was subsistence living after that. None of the shrimpers ever recovered. Not the ones that I knew anyway.

My father was the captain of his boat, *The Kentucky Gentleman*, which meant that weather problems hit him the hardest. Mostly, he just kept quiet on the vessel, from what I heard. His hands did the talking for him, and since they were usually sanding down a piece of wood or attached to some other project, most of the time they said leave me alone.

In 1976, Mexican waters were banned to U.S shrimpers. According to Robert Lee Maril in *Texas Shrimpers in Port Brownsville and Port Isabel* “forty two percent of the landing came from Mexican waters.” The result for shrimpers, especially those from South Texas, was a growing reliance on social security and welfare.

I study his hand movements as they sew, weaving in and out of the nylon, coming around in large loops. They are large and cracked around the knuckles. Sometimes they bleed into the nylon. He never seems to notice this. The slightest friction tears the brittle tissue on his hands. He is much older than he should be. I look at my hands. They look just like his, except mine are many sizes smaller. They don't have his hard calluses or the scarring, but they have the bulky digits that seem too large for the rest of the hand and wide nails, which I use to defend myself in fights with my older sisters. I keep staring at my hands and wonder if I'll ever do anything important with them.

I remember the sense of perfection I felt when I saw a finished net. Diamond shaped holes lying almost exactly one on top of the other. At times I felt I could stick my index finger all the way through these openings without touching a single string. For some reason this always gave me a sense of immense satisfaction. Sometimes I'd shove

toy soldiers and naked dolls through the openings. These would disappear into the great round mesh. Later they'd show up on the floorboards of shrimping boats and a month after that my father would bring them back inside his coat pockets.

My father is lying on the surgery table. The doctor sews the incision on his back. It is a clean job. Stitches, sewn perfectly. Beautiful. This is my impression of it for years to come. Small, black thread, disappearing into the skin. Almost invisible. The doctor leaves the surgery room to talk to us. My father will awaken in one hour and in one hour they will tell us again how they caught it on time. At least for now.

I stare at my father from behind a half dead wisteria. He seems so much like a stranger just then. His beard always gets thicker after a long fishing trip. It is gray with patches of red that burn against the sunset. His neck, full of diamond shaped crisscrossed sections. They look like scar tissue that stretches across the back of his neck. This is one of two side effects from having a pacemaker surgically implanted before any of us are born, before his courtship of my mother too, I think. I can never understand how the two are connected, but my father insists they are. The other is that he is not able to perspire from the waist up. During summers, like this one, he soaks his shirts in water then slaps them back on again. Sometimes he leaves a thin trail of water behind him as he walks through different rooms in our house. It usually leads to the sofa, where we find him asleep with his cap pulled down tightly over his eyes, his don't bother me gesture. I kick stones around, announcing my presence.

“Is that you Mrs. Spook?” He says. Mrs. Spook is a recurring character in my father’s ghost stories and the apparent guardian of our house when we leave. I kick the stones around some more before answering. I’m six and incredibly self-important.

“No, but I can call her if you’d like.” I know sassy. Part of me does believe Mrs. Spook is real. “Don’t forget to watch the place now, Mrs. Spook!” My father calls out when we leave our driveway. I don’t worry about the prospect of having a phantom lurking around our home as much as I am relieved that she’s doing her job.

I’m not sure if my father’s lore was giving me a proper perspective on ghosts and how I should feel about them. To me, they were friendly watchdogs. But I guess it didn’t matter. Later, I’d tell the kids at school about our pet ghost. Somehow, I wasn’t ostracized for these stories.

I squat, the ends of my shirt touching the ground. My eyes dart back and forth. I leap through the air and land on his newly sewn net.

“Now you know how I feel about that,” he says.

“Feel about what?” I respond as I crawl sideways, forming mandibles with my hands. I press them against my lips and make chewing noises. In my world, crabs make chewing sounds. I grab and pinch at the air with them, then reach for the nylon strings and tug. My father clears his throat. I cock my head to one side like our neighbor’s collie and don’t move. I stand up and step off his mound. I wipe the dirt off my shirt and suddenly I think I’m an adult though I’m only in the first grade.

“Sorry, father. I didn’t mean to be a nuisance.”

My father's back is toward me, still sewing. But I know he's smiling. He pats the ground next to him and I run to sit. He hands me a ball of partially sewn string with a plastic needle and I model a half-stitch. I try imitating him, licking my lips as I focus. I can't get the knots tight enough. I can't work them to where they disappear into the string the way he does. His are nearly invisible. Mine seem to bubble up from the surrounding nylon—little defiant cysts. He hands me some more string and I keep practicing. We do this until dusk. Then he takes me by the hand and leads me inside.

In a recent study published in Forbes magazine, fishermen and related fishing industry jobs were ranked number one on the list of most dangerous professions. The combination of variables like hazardous weather, heavy machinery, and unpredictable seas kill 116 full-time workers in every 100,000. The fatality rate is nine times higher than that of police officers or miners. Shrimpers have to work with several 350-pound weights to keep the net submerged deep in the ocean. They also work with enormous winches that unspool nets behind the boat while the captain drives. The winches then reel the nets back in after a typical 20-minute trawl and the deckhands help unload the catch. At times, even experienced shrimpers will get caught in these devices resulting in ground fingers or amputated arms.

When he was young, my father had climbed up a tall beam on a shrimp boat to adjust the rigging and accidentally slipped. He fell several feet onto another pole, which caught him by the underarm, slicing through muscle and tendon. He hung there for several minutes until his shipmates found him and rushed him to the hospital. Luckily,

doctors were able to save his arm, but he had a large scar that reached from under his arm to the center of his back above the right lung, and much of his pectoral muscles were damaged. To shock us, sometimes he'd move the loose muscles on the right side of his chest, jerking them back and forth under his sunburned skin. The sight was simultaneously impressive and grotesque. He'd laugh and take a bite out of a sandwich he had made by wrapping a slice of bread around an entire stick of butter. His toothless gums, tapering the edges.

In 1981, Texas Wildlife Parks and Commission and The Fisheries Conservation Zone enacted two ordinances that forbade shrimpers from catching between the months of June 1 and July 15. The first ordinance closed off the first ten miles off the coast. The second closed off the next 190 miles, says Maril. Only shrimpers who weren't attached to a family or who were too desperate to measure the risks ventured farther. In more recent years, local shrimpers and aldermen built a statue of Jesus on a rocky outshoot that overlooks the bay on South Padre Island. At the base of the statue are the names of fisherman who have been lost at sea. Once, during a sea storm, my father and his crew almost lost their lives. They had taken their trawler vessel into the Southern Gulf when a Northerly blew in and hit them head on. As the men were setting up their trawling nets the wind shifted and the sea swelled. Before long, they had zero visibility. As the men tied their equipment down, a rope snapped back and hit my father's nose breaking it in two places, but that was the least of his worries. The radio on the boat was down and their small vessel was taking on water quickly. Then a large wave pummeled the boat, sinking it. My father and his crew floated on driftwood for hours. They finally reached the coast

of Campeche, where a family took them in. I've often imagined what it would be like to see his name on the base of that statue. But he survived that day.

It's summer again and I'm eight. My three older sisters are applying make up. Lip-gloss, blue eye shadow. Lots of blue. They stick pins atop frosted strands and smile into the mirror. A hair band blasts from their Caseo. Poison, I think. They want girls to "talk dirty" to them. I feel gross. We don't have a phone at this time, so my sisters run out to the front porch and sit on the concrete steps. They wait. It's summer, so at times their makeup melts. Small drops of Cover Girl hit the pavement and soak through. Then my sisters run inside for a second application and run back out again. If they're lucky, someone they know will drive by and take them for a spin. Maybe they'll grab a burger. Sometimes a red-faced boy will pull up in his repainted Thunderbird and the foursome will trail off down Southmost Road into the evening hours. Most nights no one shows, and my sisters head back in and wash their faces. They stuff their permed hair into nets and fall asleep. I look over at them and feel scared. I don't want the big hair or the breasts. I wrap my arms tightly across my chest and squeeze hard. I don't know why, but this makes me feel safe, stable. Years later, I'll grow up to be the girl with small boobs, and I'll realize this isn't as reassuring as I had hoped. My mother and father are watching television in their bedroom.

*"Ya va a comenzar mi programa,"* my mother says.

After a few seconds Lawrence Welk's punchy accordion fills our two-bedroom house.

"Oh Lord, that music's just awful, hon." My father says this as he walks out of the bedroom, his pajama bottoms sagging loosely from behind. He scratches his head and

falls on the couch. “It’s for old people.” I smile because my father is in his late fifties. High heels click back and forth on our front porch. A sign of growing impatience. I lean up against the front window and pull the curtain aside.

“I guess no one’ll be going out tonight,” my father says.

The screen door swings open and my sisters click their way back to their bedroom. The door shuts and their music resumes. At this point the dissonant sounds of Lawrence Welk and Poison are dueling it out in our home. The living room is the crossroads. It is too much so my father walks out on the front porch and lights a cigarette. I take one from his pack on the kitchen counter and follow him out to the porch. He looks out at the surrounding neighborhood and I hang back, blowing imaginary puffs into the air, just behind him, just out of sight. I drop the cigarette and crush it with my foot. I feel cool. Strong. At this age I think pretend smoking makes me look tough, though I don’t remember having the guts to actually try real smoking. I try to follow my father’s gaze. I want to see what he’s staring at, but I can’t tell. He looks worried. I’m pretty sure I know what he’s thinking about. Bills. Then a car zooms past our house. He smiles.

“That’s a ‘76 Cadillac,” he says.

I jump up and down. Suddenly, I’m excited too although I don’t know why.

“Dad, did you ever want to be famous?” I don’t remember his answer in detail, but I do remember him talking about being happy with what you have and how grass isn’t necessarily “greener on the other side.”

“Dad, when I grow up I’m gonna write a book for you,” I told him, not realizing at the time the weight that promise would carry.



“Well then, the closest I’ll get to being famous is when my little girl grows up and writes books.” He looks at me. His smile is so big.

My father was never able to finish high school. He had to start working to help support his family when he was sixteen. As an adult, he was finally able to get his GED. He was sixty. It was one of the proudest days of his life. None of us really knew why he chose to finish his degree so late in life, but I do remember when his diploma came in the mail. He held it in his hand, and thought about his mother. He stared out wistfully into our back yard, gently tapping his temple with it and talked about how his mother cried the day he quit school. She had hoped he would be the one to graduate. He stared out into the yard for a long time. It’s possible he had promises to keep too.

In June 1987 The National Marine Fisheries Service published a notice requiring all shrimpers to begin using Turtle Excluder Devices or TEDs by May 1988. TEDs are special nets designed to help turtles and other large marine animals escape from a net. The shrimp are supposed to get pushed back to the end of the net while other larger animals escape through a large opening at the top. According to an article on Mandala Projects web site, conservationists say that if these nets are used properly, only a “negligible” amount of shrimp will be lost. Fishermen, who believe that the device causes their nets to dump twenty percent or more of the shrimp as well, call them "trawler eliminator devices."

I remember my father watching the news closely in the late '80s. I have a specific memory of one shrimper's interview. He wore a dingy checkered flannel shirt and held up a sign that read *No Teds!* He yelled at the camera. His face was wind blown and chapped and long lines of crows feet stretched from the sides of his eyes. He yelled at the camera. "We've got families to feed!"

At 2:43 p.m. he is back at Valley Baptist. It's metastasized, Mom says. I'm eighteen years old and I know the word "metastasized." I cross my arms and throw myself on a bench. I don't understand how that could have happened. It is 1997 and he has stopped smoking for years. Then my father comes out. A nurse wheels him from the surgery room. The ends of his gown touch the floor. They say we can take him home this time. We place him in the front seat of our car. My mother is driving. My sisters are grown women now. They have careers and children and have stopped chasing after boys, unless you count the toddlers in their living rooms. They are married and living in different parts of the country, but they have come back this summer. They follow us in their cars. I stare at my father from behind the driver's seat. He looks so different. After a week, his beard has grown thick again, but there are no fiery patches. This time, there is just gray. I look at his hands that haven't sewn a net in years. The car accelerates and I know the feeling is mutual with everyone. We have to make the most of precious time.

My mother is making dinner. She fries eggs with onion, tomato and chile serrano. I'm standing next to her, flattening out tortillas with a rolling pin. The smell wafts through the house and out to the front porch, I am sure, because everyone walks

into the kitchen. We walk into the new dining room my father has built with the help of a level and a passion for well-built structures. A gene, I suppose, that was passed down from his father who built boats himself. My older sister, Petey, inherited this trait. She is always taking things apart and putting them back together again. My mother examines the walls by hitting them with a closed fist.

“*Sí quedó macizo,*” she says.

“Of course *es muhsiso,*” my father responds.

We say a prayer and eat. I remember dinners feeling good this way. Safe. It will last for a few more years.

My father brings home an application for welfare. He sits reading it for a while. I’m a senior and am hanging out in my room, finishing homework for a long while and when I come back, he is still at it. He hasn’t gotten past the first sentence. I see the pen in his hand. His large, cracked hand wrapped around it. He looks confused. A paralyzing anxiety starts pressing in on me. And there is that hand that helped build a large room and sew nets and held out yardsticks as he measured and figured.

“I can’t do a damn thing anymore!” he says and throws the pen across the table. He walks into the dining room that he built several years before, and looks at the horizontal beams that help support the edges. He sits in the dining room and stays there. Later we find it has traveled to his brain—Of everything he went through, and everything that happened, that’s the memory that stuck with me the most—There is nothing I can say to him. I feel useless. My mother lays his dinner on the dining table. He has a few bites and leaves the rest.

I don't go away to college the following year even though my best friend does. I don't want to. I stay and make Ovaltine for him, which I take to his bedroom and watch him sip through a straw. He smiles and stares at figures on the ceiling. My oldest sister who has been through a divorce earlier that year, has come to live with us to help out. She listens to him, keeping up with conversations that occurred years before any of us were born. It is a rainy winter that year in '97. We sing "When the roll gets called up Yonder," one of my father's favorites. We sing, but he seems more preoccupied with figures in the room that none of us can see.

One afternoon after setting his Ovaltine on the nightstand, he screws his eyes on me and leans over the bed rail.

"Tell Junior he's gotta swim out and fix that hole in the boat." It is the first time he has spoken to me in weeks. To any of us. I wait to see if he'll say anything else, but he doesn't. His blue eyes blink a couple times, then go dead. They retract and he goes back to staring at the ceiling again.

"Okay, dad. I'll tell him," I say. I collect an old glass from his bedside and leave the room. The roads are slick as we drive back and forth talking to health care providers and church friends, but we drive slowly everywhere we go. At least it feels that way.

One of the things my father said while he was still lucid was how he wished he could get in a car and just keep driving. "Just go, go, go, man," he said. He felt that if he drove fast enough, maybe it wouldn't catch up with him. I held out hope till the last minute. I just believed somehow he would get better. I believed this till the last second. Maybe I thought he needed me to. Besides Mrs. Spook, my father made up other crazy

mythologies to entertain us when we were children. One of them was that if we closed our eyes on the South Padre Island causeway our car would take flight.

“Get ready girls, we’re gonna fly!”

I have no idea how he could craft such fantastic stories, and I believed them too, all of them. To this day, I’ll still close my eyes when my husband’s driving me over that bridge. I’ll peek out over the water and look at the fishermen in their boats on either side of the Laguna Madre. They’re really making a go of it, I’ll think, and then I wonder if my hands will ever do anything that’s really worth a damn.

## FLORECIENDO DE NOCHE

### I. THE SANDS MOTEL

The Sands Motel in Brownsville, Texas has been closed down for some time now. There isn't much there, excepting a blue marquee that shines fluorescent light—a beacon for the down and out. On dark nights, the entire parking lot glows, as does a good portion of the cross street where the motel sits. Sometimes flannelled tweens will sit on the curb, smoking Marlboros they swiped from the Circle K, or a homeless person will rattle past it with a grocery cart in tow and count her cans in the neon light. Cartoon palm trees wave back and forth on the marquee. I think it's been there for 40 years, maybe more. There's a part windswept, part noir quality about it. Maybe a filmmaker will pick up on that someday and make Central Blvd famous. But for now, people tend to ignore it. Unless they're like me and there's a reason to remember.

It's hard to pinpoint the exact series of events that led our family there. But my dad would probably chalk it up to the president at the time—Reagonomics was in full swing and we were “on the wrong end of it,” he'd say. My mom, on the other hand, would say it was an act of God. I'm not sure what happened, but during the spring of '81 we were packing our belongings into suitcases and when they got full, into Hefty bags. I remember the excitement of change. I was three, and already felt that momentum was a

good thing (I still feel this way). Our house was in disarray, more so than usual. Different people were walking in and out. Some were relatives, others were people I had never seen. Dad's shrimping friends dropped by with bags of groceries—lots of produce. Mom grabbed a cantaloupe and cut it up for us to eat. The smell of melon still reminds me of this time in our life. My four older sisters stuffed frilly underwear and pink pom pom socks into suitcases.

*“Calcetines!”* I'd yell excitedly. My mother slipped them on my feet. I'd run around our living room and watch the pink pom poms bounce up and down. It was delightful. This fascination would die a few months later when I realized my sisters had traded pom-pom socks for leg warmers. Ankles were the focus of mainstream fashion at the time. I'm pretty sure Olivia Newton-John had something to do with it. My sister Lilly always sang along to “Physical” when it came on the radio. She'd dance around the house wearing blue spandex shorts. She'd stare at her apple bottom in the mirror for a few minutes, and then continue with her one-woman show around the house. Diana was the oldest; she helped mom keep the rest of us in line. At twelve, she was the go-to second mom. She had to take up the helm when my father went on his month-long fishing trips. I remember being terrified of crossing her, even more than my own mother.

On that day, she corralled us into our black and white Scout's Traveler and shut the door. I don't remember any of us strapping on seatbelts, but there we were—smiling gleefully just the same. Dad turned the ignition and we drove away from the small blue house where my family had lived for nearly ten years, the concrete porch looking strong and stately as usual.

My father had been the first to purchase a lot in that neighborhood. He prided himself in that. I think it made him feel like a pioneer.

Subdivision *Villa Tranquilla*, Lot 6 is what the deed says. My mother still has this document in a file folder that sits in her closet along with letters the IRS sent my parents when they owed back taxes. This folder also holds her marriage license, receipts of payments to the IRS, and my father's death certificate.

Three thousand dollars was the original debt. In a few years, the interest would bring that up to fifteen thousand, and eventually thirty.

"We could never catch up," my mom said. "It's like having an old man try to catch up with a young athlete who's already had a head start. It can never be done."

My mother showed me the documents when I visited her recently. She reached inside the folder with the apprehension of a toddler who's touching a strange dog for the first time. She pulled out copies of checks for two hundred, five hundred, and fifteen hundred dollars, all made out to the Internal Revenue Service. Before our visit, she hadn't looked through those documents in nearly 14 years. What was more surprising to me, was finding out that my parents had a checking account at all. After a few years of my father's initial debt, his accounts and streams of revenue were either frozen or heavily garnished. I grew up thinking that bank accounts and tax refunds were for the extremely wealthy.

I'm not sure what my thoughts were about leaving our house that day in '81, but I think I expected to come back. I believe we all did. Our parents didn't have a sit-down with us. Nothing was explained. We just grabbed our things that day and left.



For weeks before our move, a tall man with an incessant scowl on his face visited my parents. My father talked with him at length—for hours in fact. My mother said that he didn't seem concerned about the five daughters my parents had to feed. He just wanted them to pay. Although I don't remember all the details, I do remember my parents fretting and arguing a great deal during this time. Mom frowned and started spotting abnormalities on our bodies and faces.

*“Que tienes allí, Petey?”* she'd ask, pointing to a birthmark my sister had on her face for years. Then she'd put on her glasses and probe it, suspiciously. This was my mother's brand of stress. It was odd and invasive, and manifested itself on our skin. She'd usually shut one eye and stare at us with the other, like a scientist inspecting a specimen under a microscope. With her glasses on, her eye grew twice its normal size. It was strange having my mother's wary eye bulge at us just an inch or two from our faces.

“I don't have anything. That's what my face looks like,” my sister said. Then, she'd leave and my mother would look around the empty room, wringing a napkin in her hand. She'd bring it up to her eye to dry the bothersome tearing she experienced from facial paralysis she'd had since she was two.

My father would de-stress by performing routine tasks like checking the oil in our truck or plastering cracks in the walls. Once, after a particularly bad argument with my mother, he climbed up to our roof to get away from her. I'm pretty sure he wanted to get away from more than that. He lay down, pulled a cap over his eyes, and fell asleep. For hours, my mom searched for him. She had no idea where he was until the neighbors called and gave away his hiding spot. They thought he had a heart attack. I have no memory of this incident, but my sisters remember it well. When my father came inside

again, he started baking biscuits for everyone and that was the end of that. For some reason, arguments dissipated as quickly as they'd start in my house. Sometimes I wish things were like that in my own household.

This was also around the time I experienced my first night terror. Sometime before we moved, I woke up at night, cold and with the distinctive feeling that something terrible was happening, something over which I had no control. I didn't wake up sleepy-eyed the way most children do to ask their parents for water or a blanket. My eyes opened wide, like a wild cat—"a wampus cat," my father might have said.

"She looked crazy!" One of my sisters would later say when telling the story.

I stood up, walked around our living room in circles over and over, babbling nonsense words. I remember my mother holding me, rocking me back and forth. I didn't cry. I was too scared for that. Tears wouldn't help. My heart beat rapidly. I pushed her away. I didn't want to be held. She wasn't helping me feel safe. Nothing made me feel safe. My father lay back on the sofa, placed me on top of his stomach and sang a song.

*"Bye Oh baby buntin' Daddy's goin' huntin' to catch a little rabbit skin to wrap the baby buntin' in..."* This made me feel worse. The absurdity of him singing a happy tune while I was in terrible distress terrified me more. I remember having the sensation that I was teetering on the edge of an enormous cliff and about to fall over. My parents couldn't make me feel any better. They were falling over too. I just wanted the feeling to stop. The entire time, I kept turning over the same thought in my head. Money. We don't have enough money. We don't have enough Money. I remember getting on my knees and crying for help. I think that was my first prayer.

In the morning things were better. Fragments of the previous night were still rolling around inside my head, but in the light everything looked different. That was the first of many night terrors I would suffer. After a while, the night terrors started spilling over into the daytime. They manifested themselves in strange quirks. I remember feeling terrified when people clapped too loudly or snapped their fingers suddenly. It's surprising how many songs require clapping when you're in kindergarten. I experienced fits of anxiety during song time at school and finally had to ask my teacher to sing "soft songs," (*Quinceñeras*, incidentally, were an absolute horror). She didn't understand my request until my mom came in and had a talk with her. After that, she and the teacher's aide treated me with extreme care and were all smiles whenever they addressed me. I wasn't sure which was worse, feeling anxious or being treated like a glass figurine. The entire situation was humiliating. I wanted to be strong, not breakable. It's crushing to be five and realize you're breakable. The night terrors finally dissipated sometime in my mid-teens. But it would be years—well into my adult hood in fact—before I could sleep without a nightlight.

The room at the motel was modest. There was only one bed and all the walls were bare. The curtains were thick and wooly. The air conditioning unit blasted loudly and it made the tiny room feel like an icebox. I ran up to the vents that reached my nose and inhaled the cool air. It was the best feeling. The entire room smelled like cigarettes and Freon. I felt like we were at home.

*"Mamá, podemos ir a la alberca,"* my sister asked.

My ears perked up. There was no way I was going to miss an opportunity to go to the pool.

*“Está bien.”*

I ran to my suitcase and started jumping up and down. My mom looked through it, but couldn't find a bathing suit for me. She'd forgotten to pack it.

*“Qué tiene. Al cabo está Chiquita. Me la llevo así.”*

So my mother took us to the swimming pool, my sisters with their pastel swimsuits and me with orange floaties—and nothing else. We were swimming in the pool and I was swelling with pride. With my large orange floats, I was invincible. I really thought we were on vacation.

Some people pointed at me and laughed. I couldn't figure out why, but I was having too much fun to care.

Later, my father showed up with burgers from a Whataburger across the street. My mom took us out of the pool and wrapped us up in towels. I remember struggling with my burger because I couldn't hold the buns together. It was too large for my hands.

*“Así, mira.”* Diana had to hold the burger for me so that I could take a bite.

After I was done, she led me to the shower, where she slapped a generous amount of Head & Shoulders on my head and started rubbing it, rather harshly, into my scalp. I was having a good time, first the pool, now fun in the shower. I felt this way until the shampoo started running down my forehead and face. Then I felt something that I had never felt in my three years, at least not that I can remember. It felt like someone had stuck a knife inside my eye socket. I don't remember many of the details after this. But I know I started screaming. My sister lifted me (a bad choice in retrospect) so that I'd be directly underneath the showerhead, and the water would clear away any soap (and

suppress my screams) before mom found out. I don't think her plan worked out. Between my screams and the small dimensions of our motel room, I'm pretty sure Diana got hers.

When I called my sister Diana (now in her forties) to ask her if she remembered the incident, she says the memory wasn't quite clear. However, she did remember having to keep a watchful eye on all of us, especially me, because I kept trying to run out to the pool.

My mother says she remembers that time fondly, despite our dire circumstances.

"People would come and laugh and say, 'My gosh, Aurora. It's like you all are on vacation.' "

My mom laughed and wiped her eye. She had her trademark wrinkled tissue in her hand.

"But it was a blessing," she said. "I don't think we ever felt homeless. We were having too much fun. The only problem was the geckos. They were all over and they'd eat holes in our clothes." She thought about this a bit, and then laughed again. "*Ay, qué cosas,*" she said.

My mom was right for the most part. We were happy. The motel room's accommodations were limited but we were far better off than some of our relatives in Mexico. We made it work, I guess because we had to.

I don't think I quite realized what happened to us until my parents drove down our old street while I was in the back seat of our truck. I turned and saw another family in our yard. Little girls were running around our lawn, playing on a rope swing my dad had tied from an old mesquite tree in front of our porch. I watched them play and felt confused, then angry. Why were those girls in our yard? Our yard! I couldn't understand

why that family was there and why my Dad wasn't doing anything about it. I looked at the girl climbing on the swing that my father had made for us and wanted to push her off. My Dad hadn't made that swing for her; it was for me. I hated them. I hated that family. I couldn't understand much more beyond that. I just knew that they had taken our house away and I was upset. I can still remember how I felt, clearly. It was like we had been invaded.

A month later, my parents received a phone call. It was an IRS agent, a different one from the man who visited our house for months. My dad was on a fishing trip, so he didn't get the call, but my mom spoke with him in broken English.

“OK. *Está bien.*”

It turns out that the man who had bought our house was laid off from his job at the port of Brownsville. Seeing how they weren't going to make any money off of him, they gave us back our house. Our exile at the Sands Motel was over. My mother likened it to the Israelites returning home, and I guess that's as good a comparison as any. We were home.

I've often wondered what happened to that other family. I don't think we exchanged many words with them if any. Thinking back on it, I hope they were able to find a safe harbor.

After my father died, my parents back taxes were pardoned, and a lien that was placed on our house for nineteen years was lifted. I was twenty.

Now, my mom who is well into her sixties is thinking about selling her house and moving into a small condo.

*“Se me hace que me voy a San Antonio,”* she says with the air of a young bachelorette who’s got her whole life in front of her. My sisters and I encourage her move. But I think inwardly, everyone’s a little sad (my mom included.) That house seemed like an anchor for all of us. So many things have changed, but that house was the one constant for many years, just because it was there. But that time is over. It’s slipped through the hourglass like so many other things.

## II. LA ZONA ROJA

My mom never talks about Mamá Carmela anymore, unless we bring her up first. When she does say something about her, my mom sighs. Her words sink the way parents' voices do when they're talking about wayward children that could never get their lives straight.

My grandmother was from San Luis, Potosi. She lived in a small hovel with my great-grandmother and four other siblings. Like my mother, she was the eldest. But unlike my mother, she wasn't the mother figure for the rest of her siblings; my grandmother was the wild card.

*"Era la más grande y la más chica."* That's what my family said about her. They said she remained in stunted adolescence most of her life. Her nurturing skills wouldn't kick in until much later in life, long after my mother and her siblings were grown. But her grandchildren got to enjoy her this way. When we came around, she was ready.

*"Chiquita, Chiquita, Chiquitita!"* On December 26, 1989 my great-grandmother cried these words out and didn't stop for three weeks.

My sisters and I remember our grandmother the way most children remember their grandparents, warm and tender, with soft hands. She'd touch my face and smile.



*“Mi muñeca de porcelana,”* or “My porcelain doll,” she’d call me. It was the most beautiful anyone would ever make me feel.

On weekends she’d buy Mexican sweet bread and come over to our house from Matamoros. She’d get marranitos (gingerbread in the shape of small pigs), conchas or molcajetes as people along the border call the colorful round bread that resembles a turtle’s shell, and campechanas, a flaky pastry covered with glaze. She’d sit at our kitchen counter on a tall swivel chair, eat bread, and rub her feet together. They were always dry and cracked from walking around in sandals all day. They sounded papery and brittle beneath her chair. She did this happily while she ate and chatted with my mother.

They sipped coffee on Saturdays and talked for most of the morning. My sisters and I woke up to the sounds of coffee cups clinking in their porcelain saucers. Sometimes the thin straps of Mamá Carmela’s dress slipped off her shoulder. She’d pull them up again and continue eating.

I remember her in a black summer dress and dusty sandals. She’s standing just outside the front screen door in her yard next to her small orchid tree or “pie de vaca,” as she and my mother call it. She’s watering it in the late afternoon and the next morning, she inspects the cow-hoofed leaves, searching for buds. My mother joins her and they talk about the red ornaments that’ll burst from the plant when it blooms.

*“Todo a su tiempo,”* my grandmother says. *“Todo siempre a su tiempo.”*

They talk about this as if they’ve been waiting for a long overdue gift.

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I think my grandmother was happiest when she was with us. I don't remember her ever being upset at our house. That came later, when she went home.

*"Mis bebitas, como quiero mis bebitas,"* she'd say still rubbing her feet together under her chair.

Once, when I was five. I thought I'd make my grandmother laugh. I grabbed my mother's thick glasses and decided to imitate the way my mother stared at us when she was fretting over something. My sisters used her glasses for comedic fodder all the time. I didn't think anything of it.

*"Mamá Carmela, mire parecen de botella,"* I said.

*"No, hija. Se dice gruesos. No le debes decir cosas así a los lentes de tu mamá."*

It was the only time she'd ever gotten after me for something. Even then it was done with restraint, which made me feel more ashamed. I never made fun of my mother's glasses again. But I thought it was nice the way she defended my mother. Until that moment I didn't expect her to, based on what I had known about their past.

In Matamoros, my mother woke up at five in the morning. She'd light the coal of their potbelly stove and look around for scraps of food.

*"Me tengo que apurar ... me tengo que apurar..."* she'd repeat this mantra over and over in the hopes that it would actually help her move faster. She'd imagine the blows that would follow if she didn't.

Sometimes she'd get lucky and a neighbor would bring over eggs or she'd find canned meat in the cupboards. Then she'd be able to feed her three younger siblings, and her mother's anger would be satiated. Many times, however, the food wasn't prepared before her mother came home or there was no food to be made. That's when her mother grabbed loose wires lying around the house and released her stress on my mom. Once, when my grandmother couldn't find any wires, she struck my mother over the head with a heel, breaking the skin.

*"At first I didn't think anything had happened,"* my mother said remembering the incident. "But then I felt something warm trickling down my forehead, and then I knew. Pretty soon there was blood running down my face and I was trying to find a towel so it wouldn't stain the floor—I was more worried about the floor."

On another occasion, my mother chased down an alley cat that tried to make off with their dinner.

"It was a piece of chicken, but it was the only food we had, so I chased him down to the neighbor's house," she says laughing.

*La Zona Roja* ("The Red Zone") in Matamoros used to be at the corner of Treviño Zapata and Balboa Streets. It was easy to overlook in the daytime, unless you had business there. It was on the outskirts of town, in the direction of Playa Baghdad, the beach in Matamoros. At night, the entire block was lit up in different colors. There were bars and motels along both sides of the strip and people from both sides of the border. My mother remembers it vividly. She would accompany my grandmother to her job sometimes. The street was also known as *La Zona de Tolerancia* because the average

person didn't pay much attention to what happened there. More often than not, they looked the other way. People were entitled to a living after all.

"I actually loved going there as a child," my mother says. "It's so sad when I think about it now, but the different colored lights looked so pretty to me. The women looked so elegant."

Sometimes, one of my grandmother's co-workers would have a party for everyone. She'd use all the money she'd made that week and have an elaborate feast with music, flowers, and long tables lined with food.

On the job, my grandmother sat at her table under a string of multicolored lights—Red, pink, blue. The round bulbs were covered in a soft pearl finish, which gave the establishment a sense of warmth. If circumstances were different, they might have been the decorations at a Christmas party, but here they adorned the women, like plastic dolls in a showroom. The name itself—The Golden Palace—sounded like it could have been the name of a posh hotel.

My grandmother's thick black hair fell to her hips. Her eyes, lined with shadow, were dark and severe. She was beautiful, but angry most of the time in those days, and tired. She sat quietly and waited, then she'd smile for the customers. The men came around, eyeing her along with the other women at each table. If they were interested, they'd sit and my grandmother would be able to pay the bills for that month. If not, she'd worry, and my mother would feel the brunt of that anxiety.

During a particularly difficult month, she came home and instead of going after my mother, she decided to turn on my uncle. She stripped off his clothes and forced him

to sit on a red ant pile outside their house. He stayed there for a long time my mother says, large red ants crawling back and forth along his thin arms and legs. He was six at the time.

*“Pero ninguna le picó,”* my mother says proudly. No one has ever dared ask my uncle about the incident.

Desperate to get away from my grandmother, my mom made several attempts to run away. Once when my grandmother was working, a woman showed up at their house and asked my mother to leave with her. Without asking any questions, my mother got into her car. The two sped off until they reached a house in a different part of town. But after a few hours my grandmother found them. My mother was shocked that her mother knew where she had been. She had no idea how, but she said nothing. At the sight of my grandmother, she obediently left the woman’s house and walked back home with my grandmother. No one called the police. My grandmother just gave the woman an ugly stare and left. When my mother told me this story, she said she never found out if my grandmother knew this woman, but in retrospect, she says that was probably the case.

On another occasion, my mother left to my great-grandmother’s house, but that escape was short-lived as well. My grandmother found out where she was the next day and took her back home again. My mother wouldn't leave her house again until she married my father at twenty-one.

One summer, when my mother was 13, a group of missionaries passed through town. They fed my mother and taught her songs. Before they left, they handed her a

Bible. After that, my mother didn't run away anymore. Instead she immersed herself in a life of prayer and hymns and waited.

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*"Tienes que venir a la iglesia con nosotros,"* my mother told Mamá Carmela repeatedly. My grandmother hadn't worked at *La Zona Roja* in years. The strip had been torn down and replaced by a towering Catholic cathedral. The bars splintered and sprang up in different pockets throughout town. Some of the women took to the streets, under bridges, outside cantinas, and beneath the occasional traffic light, flashing red on a dark intersection. My grandmother didn't follow them. She stayed indoors with her husband, whom she met while she was still working. Roy Cameron was ten years her junior. He rode a Harley Davidson and took acid. He had a vile temper and took to beating on my grandmother from early on in their relationship.

"I'm going to hell and I'm taking your grandmother with me," He'd tell me. His blue eyes were tense; then they'd glaze over with liquor.

*"Déjalo. Es un hombre muy malo,"* my mother would tell her. I think she might have left him once or twice, but she'd always go back.

My older sister and I stayed over at my grandmother's house one night when we were kids. It was late and we were lying next to her while she watched syndicated re-runs of *The Rockford Files* on her 10-inch black and white television. My sister had fallen asleep, but I couldn't. I stayed up and watched James Garner smooth talk his way out of another problem. We watched the show until the credits rolled. Then Roy's motorcycle pulled up. I knew it was him because of the motorcycle's signature sound. It was always

the same. The engine fired once, twice, then a whir ... once, twice again and a whir. It did this a couple of times before he shut it off. My grandmother ran to the kitchen to let him in. I could hear Roy yelling at her.

I got up and walked to the end of the hallway. My grandmother was trying to cook for him. She was nervous I could tell because she was moving fast. I had never seen her so tense. Most of the time, she was collected. She handed him a plate of shrimp and after one bite, he threw it back at her. He slurred something, but it was hard to make out what he had said. My grandmother turned to find something else, when she realized I was there.

*“Vente mi jita,”* she said, grabbing me by the arm and lead me back to the bedroom. *“Quédate aquí,”* she said and went out again, shutting the door behind her.

That’s the only memory I have of staying over at Mamá Carmela’s house. The scenario played out like one of my mother’s childhood memories. After that, I realized that guilt is what kept my grandmother tethered to him. I think she was trying to punish herself. My mother agrees. I don’t know if any one of us could have changed that.

When she was fifty-six Mamá Carmela decided to give church a try. I don’t think she had ever been inside one because when the offering plate came around she started taking dollars out of it. Her finger nails, scratching against the red velvet at the bottom of the tray.

*“Mamá, ¿qué estás haciendo?”* My mother was shocked.

My grandmother put the money back and lowered her head, embarrassed. She reminded me so much of a two-year old just then.

*“Ay, yo pensaba que etaban dando limosnas, hija.”* she said plaintively.

A few people chuckled from nearby pews, which only upset my mother more. She was angry with my grandmother for the entire ride home. My grandmother just clutched her purse and stared out the car window. I didn't understand why it was such a big problem. I thought it was kind of cute, but my mother didn't come around that day.

Mamá Carmela came back to visit eventually. She and my mom bonded once more over coffee and bread after their church visits. They were close for what seemed like years. But when I recently asked my mother about it, her answer differed from what I had remembered.

*“Un año,”* she said. Her response abrupt and immediate.

On December 19, 1989 my grandmother went to her bedroom for a nap. I guess Roy wanted to keep her tethered more than anybody realized. It would be one week before we knew what happened. The entire family had been celebrating my cousin's third birthday in Matamoros. Everyone thought it was odd that Mamá Carmela had not shown up to her grandson's birthday party. She was always there for her grandchildren. I'm not sure why no one went to check on her until after that week. But that's what happened. When my uncles went in and found her, they said she was lying faced down with her Bible at her side. It might have looked like she was sleeping were it not for the soaked mattress and the gunshot wound—a small, tender bud at the center of her back.



Roy got as far as Colorado before guilt caught up with him. He turned himself in at a police station there. Five years is what they gave him at his trial. He disappeared after that. I guess that's as far as justice will go for a retired woman from La Zona Roja.

## CECIL

Cecil lit a Pall Mall and shoved open the screen door. He stepped on the front porch and took a drag. The door slammed behind him. His wife groaned. She would have to force him out of his foul mood later. She stirred flour in her bowl vigorously. The crew hadn't had much of a catch the past six months. It had all but stopped the last three. He would have to ask Buster for another advance. He hated doing that. Buster would just stare at him with his twitchy eyes and mossy teeth. He'd eat peanut butter from a jar and offer a spoonful to Cecil. He'd smack his lips and feel behind his molars for more.

"Now what was it you came for?" He'd ask again. Cecil hadn't had a chance to pay him back the first advance. He removed his cap and scratched his gray head. He took another drag. Inside, a mariachi band played on T.V. Cecil leaned back on a wicker chair and listened, arms folded across his barrel chest. El Trio de Morelia is what the announcer called them. The crowd cheered.

*"Esta canción se llama Cleotilde,"* one of them said. The song was a romantic ballad. First the mandolin, then the bass guitar, or bajo sexto as they called it. Finally, the violin. This song sounded exactly like the one before. The singer's voice dropped to a bellow, then rose again with the music. The mariachis plucked their guitars for the refrain. It sounded just like the first one. Cecil scratched his again. He had never been

able to distinguish one song from the other. He walked to the edge of the porch, tossing the change around in his pocket and looked at the passing cars. A '55 Fairlane traveled across the street. He smiled. Those were always a treat. He looked out at the small brick homes lining the old neighborhood. He could still remember when there was nothing for miles, just dirt and grass. He and Felicitas were the first ones to build a house on the block. He bought it with his army pension as soon as he got out. Once a year, his wife liked for him to pull out the latter from the shed and paint the frame of their small brick home a different color just to keep things fresh. Across the street, the paint on the neighbors' shutters was cracked and starting to peel. Most of the houses were like that, in fact. When people get older, their houses grew old and wrinkled right along with them, he suspected. But his wife didn't care what was happening to the neighbors' houses. She wanted their home to look as crisp and new as possible. So once a year, he'd have to climb up that latter and do a little something nice for the Mrs.

An old truck pulled up, hissing along the driveway. It belched twice, then stopped. Smoke filled the front yard. It was Suzy. He smiled again.

"Hey, Suzy " He said.

"Hey, Dad."

"You're home early, hon."

"Yeah. I got off work right now. Decided to help mom with dinner. Has she started yet?"

"I heard her bangin' around some pots in there, but I don't think she's started yet."

"I'll go in and help her."

She kissed her dad on the cheek and went inside the house, slamming the screen door against the doorframe. Inside, the trio started playing again. This time the host sang with them. They sounded like a bunch of warbling chickens, Cecil thought. He reached inside his right pocket and pulled out a silver harmonica. It was the one his father gave him when he had finished his tour in Korea. His father was in South Carolina building boats near the bay. He was just taking one out into the water when Cecil climbed on board, fully decked in his Army uniform. The Army had let him come home for the Thanksgiving Holiday so he thought he'd surprise his dad. When his father saw Cecil he nearly strangled him for joy.

"My boy!" He said.

Cecil turned the harmonica over in his hand and pressed it against his lips. He hesitated. He hadn't played a note on it for years. Inside, Suzy yelled at her daughters.

"Stop jumping on the furniture!"

The smell of red pepper traveled to the porch. Then pork. Tamales. One of his favorites. He was relieved. He would never forget the day he found a cow's head roasting in the oven.

"What in the hell?" he said.

Cecil never really acquired a taste for *barbacoa* or "barbacoey" as he liked to call it. There was something about that cow's head that didn't sit well with him. He took another drag and waited for supper. Pots banged against each other again. The sun was setting. It sunk behind the neighbors' houses, setting their rooftops ablaze. They glowed pink and violet. It was funny. No matter where he went, sunsets always took him back to sea. Only they were much larger there. He closed his eyes and could feel the unsteady

planks beneath his feet and the up-down-up-again motion. It reminded him of the eager days when he and his brother Jimmy first took jobs on a boat. It must have been in '47 or was it '48? Cecil thought about this for a minute. It was '48. That's the year he dropped out of school to help out his family. Shrimping was good then. You could catch as much as 2,000 pounds on one trip and for a 17-year-old that was pretty good. He and Jimmy were bringing in \$2,000 each month. They spent most of it on fixing up old cars and taking out pretty girls.

"She's got eyes like Annette Funicello. That one's mine," his brother said. He'd douse Vitalis in his hair and comb it into a neat coif. "There." He'd rub his hands together vigorously.

"All right, all right, but the blond one's mine then."

He laughed to himself. Those were good times. He tapped his cigarette and ashes fell on the porch. Some landed on the tip of his shoe. He cleared his throat. It rattled.

"Elotes con mayonesa!"

The man selling corn was making his rounds again. Cecil checked his watch. Half past seven -- like clockwork. He stretched out his arms and yawned. A dog barked. The man selling corn drove by.

"Oh, but these are special corns," the man had said. They're made with mayonnaise, chile, and a little lime. They're very good."

When Cecil first moved to South Texas, he thought it was strange how the border version of the ice-cream man was someone handing out corn on the cob in a motorized cart.

Cecil took a bite and was hooked. Now, he wondered why there weren't elite trucks in every town. He couldn't enjoy them anymore, though. Not since his teeth had gone. But every once in a while, Suzy brought him a Styrofoam cup with only the kernels and then he ate them just fine.

Inside, Daisy, Suzy's oldest daughter reached for a cornhusk. She grabbed dirt from a potted azalea and smeared it on the husk.

"Like grandma," she said. She wiped her hands on her flowered dress and licked her fingers. Suzy grabbed Daisy's arm.

"What are you doing?"

Daisy smiled, exposing a row of black teeth.

"You're too old to be doing this!" She smacked Daisy's bottom and the child let out a screech. She took her arm and dragged her to the bedroom. Daisy screamed and hiccupped and kicked her mother's shins.

"No!" she said.

Cecil took his last puff and flicked the cigarette on the lawn.

"What are you all doin' to that poor child? Sure the neighbors can hear her clear across Lantana."

"Nothing, Dad," yelled Suzy from the bedroom. "She's fine. She was in mom's plants again."

"Oh I don't believe that," he said. He was in a much better mood now. He came up behind his wife and kissed her cheek.

"Whatchya been making, for so long, Mama?"

"Tamales."

"I thought so. You been at it for hours."

"Yes, I know," She wiped her forehead with a damp cloth. "Some of them are going to the church. The women want to make a fundraiser."

"Well, now that's a surprise," he said.

"You can make fun, but if you give to the church the Lord will bless you."

"All right, OK. But tell Him to make her about twenty-five and blond."

She slapped him on the back with a cornhusk. Cecil poured some coffee in a cup and sat at the kitchen table. The chair creaked. He took a sip and set the cup down. It clanked against the glass table. He looked at the glass and took notice of tiny handprints across the table. He smiled. Kids could set fire to the house and he'd probably buy them chocolates afterward. Something about becoming a grandparent turns a person into a fool. He smiled again. He looked at his wife.

"Well, I'm thinking about visiting Buster," he said finally.

She didn't say anything. She knew if she started she wouldn't be able to stop. Buster conversations always turned out badly. Something about the past hour had put him in a good mood and she didn't want it to sour.

"When?"

"Not sure." He removed his cap and scratched his head. "Maybe tomorrow."

"No. He's just gonna get you all mad." Felicitas pulled out an electric can opener from under the kitchen sink and set in on the counter. She shoved the cord in the wall socket. It stuttered a few times, then turned. She grabbed the can and poured beans in the pot. She set it on the stove and lit the burner with a match.

"I'll be fine. I'll drive to the port and be back before noon."

She shook her head.

"Won't let him rile me up. It'll be fine. Besides, Summer's coming. That's the good season. Nets are bustin' then." He got up from the table.

"It'll be July, man," he said fingering an imaginary accordion and swinging his hips from side to side. "Isn't that how they do?"

"Crazy thing. Well you're gonna patch up the walls if he makes you mad again." She pointed toward some cabinets.

"Caulking's in there. And I'm not gonna help you when you bust your hand. You break the dishes, you hurt yourself, then you come to me to help. No. No. I'm not gonna do it." Cecil cleared his throat. She was right. He knew it, but it had to get done.

Suzy came out of the bedroom with Daisy and Amy. The girls ran to their grandfather, and hugged him. Their hair was wet and slicked sideways.

"Oh what's this? Lord, you got a cowlick,, hon. Who went and gave the girls cowlicks? My Lord."

"They did it themselves, Dad. I asked them to wash up. So Daisy wets her hair and dresses it up and then turns and does the same to Amy."

Cecil's wife came in from the kitchen with a steaming hand towel and placed it on the table.

"Food's ready," she said unwrapping the tamales.

Cecil grinned. Few could appreciate a warm meal like him. On the ship, he'd have to forage through cans of Vienna sausage and Spam. They didn't take very many perishables. Freezers were used mostly for the catch. The men gather around a wooden



bench and slap hunks of potted beef on sliced bread. Most days it was stale bread. There weren't any trips to the supermarket. Not when you're out at sea. So you make do with what you have, and usually it isn't much. The men eat, drink and talk about owning their own boats. Cecil didn't talk much on the ship, except when he was giving orders. He'd been captain for the past 35 years. He soon found that when you're the boss you don't have to do much talking; which he never liked anyway. So he just sat back, crossed his arms, and watched the boys make fools of themselves. This part he always enjoyed. Some nights, when they were eating, he'd go out and sew nets. He'd listen to the chatter from the deck. It gave him time to think and relax. He thought a good deal about his wife and his family. He'd pray a little too although he never let his wife know. Sometimes he'd just watch his hands work through the nylon strings. They'd move faster than he could think. He'd finish and spread the net out, then wipe his forehead and nod. Cecil felt useful, and that was good enough he expected. Certainly good enough for most.

Not every night was calm, of course. There were always the storms to consider. Once, a squall landed on them. They were catching brown shrimp in the Gulf. It was just after midnight. Cecil, Jimmy and a small crew were filling crates with the shrimp. They were about done when it fell on them. Breakers were at about 40 feet that time. Cecil remembered the feelings. When you're looking at waves, head on like that, you get the sense that nature's getting hers. And she's got every right. So you just stand there and take it. Pray maybe she'll let you by if you don't make a fuss. Most men don't. They just get this vacant stare while the waves tumble all around them. That's what happened to Jimmy. Then a halyard came loose. Swung back. Broke his nose in two places. But the storm wasn't through with them. Before the night was over, the boat capsized leaving the

five men to float ashore on wooden planks. In the morning they landed on the coast of Campeche. Cecil had no idea how they were able to survive that. He laughed about it now. Sometimes he wished a sea storm were still his only problem.

He grabbed a tamale and unwrapped it. He never expected to hit a dry season only ten years from retirement. But here it was. Hurricane Beulah hit a few years after he and Jimmy bought their boat. They would have been living like kings if they could have kept it longer. Beulah took everything. Didn't leave a single floorboard. They had to work for other people after that.

"Ain't got a pot to piss in!" he'd tell the IRS, and slam the telephone. He'd only grown angrier over the years. Cecil's wife slapped some beans on his plate, her eyes watching him. He was getting frustrated again. She could tell. He was thinking about tomorrow. He would be grumpy in the evening, and almost intolerable for the next two weeks. She had warned him.

"You want rice?" she asked. He didn't respond. She was upset now. Why did he let it get the best of him? He was fine ten minutes ago and now here he was, worked up again. She placed rice next to his beans, hitting the spoon hard against his plate. A groove had formed at the bridge of her nose. He looked up at her. She raised an eyebrow. He knew what he was doing to her. He couldn't help it.

"They told me I might get a promotion at work today, Dad?" Suzy said.

"Oh, that's great, sweetheart."

"Yeah, they said if I do well on sales this month, I could make assistant manager. Well, it's between me and this other girl, but she misses a lot so I'm pretty sure it's gonna be me."

"Well, I'm not surprised. You're a smart girl."

"Thanks, Dad."

"I was looking at some ads for a couple of houses on the other side of town."

"Oh?" Her mom looked up from her plate.

*"Cuánto cuestan?"*

"Well, they're kind of expensive, but maybe if I make manager we could all move there. You and me and mom and the girls."

Cecil cleared his throat.

"Well, hon, we'd love to help you, but at this point I don't know if we could do very much. Might be more of a burden."

"But you would be a big help. You could help me with the girls and summer's coming. They've got a good year predicted. I read it in the paper. Shrimper's will be able to make up for previous years they said." She nodded. "That's what I read."

"No way in hell we could ever do that," Cecil said.

"C'mon, Dad. You shouldn't talk that way. This will be good for all of us. It's not like I'll ever be getting married again." Cecil looked up at his wife.

"We're just too old for another move, hon."

"This is such a crappy neighborhood, dad. Maybe back when you and mom got married it was fine. A bunch of farmland and dirt roads. You guys thought it was gonna be fine, but it isn't."

Cecil and his wife didn't say anything.

Suzy groaned "C'mon, you guys. The neighbor's got an enormous Rottweiler. The girls can't go out because the stupid thing starts barking as soon as you set foot outside. Half the time you think it's gonna bust its chain and leap the fence. I can't buy them bicycles either cuz everything gets stolen around here."

"No one's stolen from us in quite some time," Cecil said.

"That's cuz there's nothing left to steal."

Cecil shuffled his feet around.

"I wouldn't know how to feel anyplace else, Sandy."

"I know, Dad. But think about it. If we went somewhere else the girls could go to better schools, make better friends, and hopefully not make stupid mistakes with their lives."

Felicitas was already clearing the table. She picked up plates and placed them in the sink. She let the water run. Steam filled the kitchen. Suzy decided to drop the conversation. She wasn't upset anymore. Now she was just tired.

"I have to get up early tomorrow. I'm gonna put the girls to bed. C'mon girls." She picked Amy up. The two-year-old wrapped her legs around her mother and rested her head against Suzy's breast. She stuck her thumb in her mouth. The other daughter followed. Suzy shut the door behind them. Cecil helped clear the remaining glasses and placed them on the kitchen counter.

"Been thinking about Jimmy a lot," he said. His wife stuck a sponge sharply inside each glass and turned them over. The hot water scoured them. It ran over her hand too.

"Really?" Her tone was careful.

"Not sure why so much lately."

"Yeah? You should go visit him."

"Maybe. I'll wait till it gets a bit warmer. Take Sandy and the girls out there.

Replace the flowers. Maybe it's my turn," he joked.

"You don't say that. It's cuz you been too worried. Lots of things in your head."

He cleared his throat and sat in the dining room.

"I'm still going tomorrow."

She turned the kitchen light off and took the chair next to him. There was no changing his mind. They sat in the dark for hours and finally went to bed.

In the morning, Cecil woke to the sound of his wife stirring coffee. The spoon clanked against the porcelain cup. He ran his hands over the stubble on his chin and headed for the bathroom. He lathered soap and water over his face and shaved the bristles carelessly. He nicked himself twice. He worked up lather on his washcloth and ran it over his neck and chest. Then his arms and shoulders. He patted himself dry. He'd finish the rest when he came back. He was anxious to get this over with. He put on his work pants and shirt and kissed his wife. No words. Those would come later. He drove off in the small pick-up his daughter gave them when she was still married. Cecil felt badly about Suzy's marriage not working out. She was a decent girl. Deserved better. Didn't have much sense when it came to men, though. Always choosing the wrong ones. Ever since she was a young girl. It really wasn't a surprise when she came home the day after high school graduation announcing she was engaged, to a college dropout no less. The boy came to meet them the following day. Cecil said nothing. He tossed his key chain around inside his pocket. When the boy finally coaxed him into a conversation, Cecil's responses

were short. Never leaving the keys in his pocket. Then without excusing himself, he walked out on the porch to light a cigarette.

“He’s joining the military,” Suzy said reassuring his parents.

“There’s no war going on.” Cecil said. “No use in joining when there’s no war going on.”

Suzy rolled her eyes.

“I joined the week after North Korea headed south.” He stopped. It was useless.

The next week Suzy was off to Charleston, and her mother cried for days.

“There’s no sense in worrying about that now,” he said. “She’ll be well taken care of. You heard her. We only got us to worry about now.” Two years later, Suzy showed up at their house with a baby in her arms and another at her side. She smiled when she saw her parents. Mostly out of shame. She’d been living with them ever since.

Cecil was nearing the port. Petroleum fumes permeated the air, and before the day was over, his clothes and skin too. He walked down the boardwalk to a wooden shack. It was a small hovel, mounted on cinder blocks. This is where Buster conducted his business. The floor was filled with wood chips and the room smelled like saw dust. Two new boats were docked in the harbor. Cecil didn’t recognize them. Inside the hut stood a short, dark man. He leaned his chair up against the side paneling. His eyes darted back and forth as he read from reports. A thick mustache covered most of his upper lip and he bit the lower one. He hadn’t taken notice of Cecil.

“Where’s Buster?” Cecil asked.

The man looked up, surprised.

“Oh he in the keys. He gone to fish there and sell all this.”

Cecil was confused. He hadn't heard anything about switching owners.

"Yeah, you're not gonna see him around. Unless you move to Florida," He chuckled. "He gone and joined his brother's fishing business over there." The man swiveled in his chair. He seemed eager to have a conversation. His eyes were alert. Cecil didn't think he behaved like a shrimper. Certainly not a shrimp boat owner.

"Well, I got something here." Cecil dug in his pants and pulled out an old envelope. He unfolded it and placed it on the man's desk. He cleared his throat.

"What is this?"

"Request." The man opened the envelope. He shook his head vigorously.

"No. No. We don't do those anymore."

"What do you mean? Buster usually helped us a bit here and there. When we needed it. Nothing big. Just something to get by."

"No. Not how we do business anymore."

"But I'm good for it. July's our best month."

He shook his head again. This time his fingers smoothed out the creases in the envelope repeatedly. His voice rose.

"Mexico's put sanctions," he said. "We cannot catch in their waters. No more. Everything's all tight. No help for anybody right now. No. No." He was still shaking his head when Cecil headed for the door.

"Thank you just the same," he said and left.

Cecil never thought he'd actually miss Buster. He wasn't sure what to do. His crew caught most of their shrimp in Mexican waters. How were they ever gonna do without? First, TEDs with holes in the nets so big, they lost half their catch. Now the

government was imposing regulations on the areas where they could shrimp. There was just no way they would make it. No way. A column of smoke rose from one of the factories. Cecil padded his breast pocket and felt around the inside. His eyebrows came together.

"Where in the hell is it?" He felt around his pant pockets.

"There it is." He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit a match. The end was damp. It didn't light. He felt around in his pocket for another. No luck.

"Damn it all to hell!" He grabbed his cap and threw it on the floor. He punched the side of the shack with his fist.

It was quiet when he got home. Suzy and the girls went out shopping and his wife ironed in the living room.

"How was everything?" she asked.

"Ok."

"Did he lend you the money?" Cecil didn't say anything at first. He thought about this for a minute while he set the keys on the table.

"Yes, Yes he did."

"And how do you feel about that?"

"Oh just fine."

She left the clothes and hugged him.

"I'm so glad you didn't let this make you mad."

"No, I guess I didn't." He kissed her forehead.



"Love you, Mama," he said. He walked to his bedroom and reached inside his back pocket, pulling out a form. He sat on a desk and turned on a green table lamp. He laid the form on the desktop.

Ranco Security Company Employment Application.

He reached inside his pocket and pulled out a pen.

## COLOMA

The river wrapped around the town, flowing slowly and quietly. The spring rains hadn't arrived as expected and the water had begun to recede. Jody Welch came out of his hole in the hollow of a giant redwood wearing old suspenders and a tattered undershirt that at one point might have been white. He waded into the river with a pan in his hand, cursing it up and down.

"You sonofabitch! You never brought me nothing. Not a fleck o' shiny dust, not a baby's necklace, or a rich ol' man's tooth—nothing! I otta bring a big hose here and suck you drier than a whore's tit, you piece of shit! You big nothing! He stood in the middle of the river, jumping up and down stopping only to dip his pan for a few moments, swaying it left and right. Then, he'd jump up and down again, furious.

"I'll show you, you worthless dung heap."

Beyond the river, the country stretched for miles in all directions. In the distance, small towns cropped up here and there, with rusted water pumps and sagging farmhouses. They clung to the ground, draining it of its resources. To Jody, they looked like ticks on a mule's backside.

Jody wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, screwed up his eyes in the direction of the towns and snorted. He stooped over the river again. He dipped his pan into the warm waters, and waved it back and forth, gently. River panning consumed him.

It was the only thing he thought about. He focused on this activity, the way another man might perform heart surgery or develop a new mathematical equation.

Jody tilted his head over the water and closed his eyes. He looked as though he were listening for something. After a moment he began to hum. The sound grew louder until a tune curled out from his lips. It sounded like the whine of a cat in heat. He was delighted. His head bounced around with the melody that his mind had configured. The sound of his own voice filled him with glee. He grinned, exposing a single brown tooth.

*Oh, the moonlight's fair tonight along the Wabash,*

*From the fields there comes the breath of newmown hay.*

*Through the sycamores the candlelights are gleaming,*

*On the banks of the Wabash, far away.*

The sun climbed over the hills. The sight of it made Jody sing louder. The dawn's rays set the few red hairs on his beard ablaze. Coloma, his town, looked beautiful just then and everything was still for a while. Then the few town's people headed to the factories for work and the older children ran to the school with their younger siblings in tow. The younger children kicked and screamed until their small faces turned red and blotchy. Everyone passed by the river, but most of them didn't look in Jody's direction, though they knew he was there. He was there every day. Each morning he came up with new swear words for the river. Then he'd look up at the town's people with spite. Whether it was directed toward them, no one could tell. When the swearing became too explicit, some parents covered their children's ears, but nobody said anything. So day after day, Jody was allowed to go about his business.

Although they might deny it, most of the people enjoyed his presence. He was a permanent fixture in their town, like an old defiant stump, and there was something quite remarkable about that. Outside of the occasional teasing by the eight year old boys, who were too young to understand social roles anyway, Jody was allowed to pan the river in peace.

Usually his displeasure was confined to his speech and damning stares, except for the time the town's people found him splayed out on a river boulder stark naked and fast asleep—his belly, pale and grey like the underside of a fish, pointed skyward, his arms and legs dangling on either side of the rock. He would have looked dead were it not for the occasional up, down motion of his rubbery stomach. Two men were selected to place a blanket over him and they did so with great care, walking backwards (as the Old Testament suggests) so as not to shame him further. The town dismissed the incident as a one-time occurrence. They figured Jody was particularly upset because of a tomato blight Coloma experienced earlier that summer. Since the weevil responsible had been exterminated entirely, they concluded that Jody wouldn't take his clothes off any more, and there would be no further reason for concern. The town's people had learned to rationalize Jody's behavior in this manner. They found it easier to do this than try and understand the old man or worse yet, intervene in his life.

Jody kept singing, stopping intermittently to swear at the river, then continued again.

*Many years have passed since I strolled by the river,*

*Arm in arm, with sweetheart Mary by my side,*

*It was there I tried to tell her that I loved her,*

*It was there I begged of her to be my bride.*

A boy looked back at him, and seeing how his mother was no longer in earshot, decided to give the old man a piece of advice—or make fun of him—depending on the level of a person's education.

"You know you're 76 years too late, Jody. The only thing you're gonna find in there are old river crabs!"

"Leave him alone," said an older girl who held a stack of books against her chest, trying with great effort, not to look back at the pitiful old man.

Jody didn't care. He just kept moving his arms back and forth. Sometimes his hips joined in. From behind, he appeared to be dancing. Minnows gathered around his legs, attracted by the sunlight reflecting from his pale feet.

It wasn't often that Jody was in a good mood, but when he was, the feeling seemed to gather around his mouth and hips; the mouth was always singing and his hips were always moving. No one knew what triggered these episodes. They just came on suddenly. Some of the teenagers said that at these times, the river became Jody's mistress, and he could feel her sweetness curling around his thighs, scrawny as they were.

There isn't much to say about Jody's history. Except that he came from somewhere near the everglades, where his father took him fishing on a steamboat and they made a living from shooting and stuffing dangerous wildlife. Visitors from other parts of the country mounted these creatures on their walls and felt better for it. They handed Jody's father large sums of money, which he spent on satisfying his wife and occasionally, hard liquor. The family was reasonably happy by most counts, and that's all that can be said about them. Jody left home when he was sixteen to stake out a place and

make his own fortune. He had all the skills needed to hunt, kill, stuff, and mount, but whether he used them, no one knows for sure. He just kept working his way along the coastline, taking different jobs, mostly as a fisherman, until he reached Coloma around the turn of the century, the first few digits to be exact—1902 or 1903, and decided to stay.

When he arrived, he took a job as a carpenter with a local schoolteacher. Said he would build new cabinets and modest additions to the school, but the most he did was repair the outdoor gutters and fix a few broken drawers. After that, he chopped trees for the paper mill for about eight years. The pay wasn't particularly good, but Jody never seemed to complain. In fact, he chopped twice as much as was necessary to build the larger, fancier homes near the center of town. He built large eaves and gabled roofs—anything to keep Coloma extraordinary, after its luster dissipated when the last Gold rush minors left, heading West for Napa Valley and other areas. People wanted something glorious to look at so they built large homes. They kept building until a good portion of the forest turned bald. It thinned and thinned until finally it was gone, everything except for the gaping hole staring out from the thicket. But there wasn't much anyone could do about that after it was over and done with.

The river was another gem, and since it circled Coloma, it wasn't something the town's people were either forced or willing to share. They kept things closed-knit, venturing no farther than a few meters from town to get an eyeful of everything the river didn't reach, and after their curiosities were satisfied, they retreated to their homes and sat under their ornate buttresses sipping rhubarb water.

The building went on until one seemingly unremarkable day when Jody woke up on the forest ground, his hair matted with dew. He threw his ax on the ground and rooted around the trash in different yards until he found a shallow metal dish—the object that would become his companion for the next 15 years. He was overjoyed when he came across the pan. He ran around the town hooting and hollering for two days until sweat rings formed on his underarms and bristle poked out from his face, and he turned into the Jody that lived in the hollow tree and swore at the river. When people tried to take the pan from him, he screamed and moaned and fell to the ground like a child. So people just figured that his work at the mill was done and generally let him be. Besides, if he ever did find something in that river, it would bring travelers back in droves and then the town would buzz again and commerce would boom, and things would be lively though it was an unlikely event.

Jody kept singing his tune until even the fish grew tired of his legs and swam away. Then Jody himself grew tired and went inside his tree to fetch a paper bag, which he opened with great care. He sat on the riverbank and ate the charred remains of what might have been a tree squirrel. He stared at the river and at his dirty feet dangling over the edge. They were dark with mud, but here and there certain spots were clean. This made him smile as he bit into his lunch. He looked at the different homes in town and remembered his tree chopping days, even his carpentry days. Contrary to what most people believed, Jody could and often did think about the past. He looked back at the clear river water that caught the sunlight and made it shimmer. Then he looked back at the homes. He wondered if they shimmered too.

He took a final bite from his lunch and headed into town. He looked at the different homes he helped build, some more elaborate than others. Besides the two factories and the school, Coloma was just a small collection of sixty houses, all surprisingly ornate for the surrounding wilderness where the town lay. One home in particular caught Jody's eye. It was tall and large with ivory siding. He had never seen it before. Jody looked at it a while and finding comfort in its delicate structure, decided that he liked it. He went up to the door and rubbed the smooth oak with his fingertips. He pressed his face against it. It was soft and cool. He remembered what it was like to build things. He knelt and peered in through the bottom of the door. He didn't see much, but he could feel a draft from inside the house. It excited him, made him feel young. He walked around the back of the house and saw a window on the second floor. He smiled, climbing the trellis to reach it and finding it unlocked, went inside. Everything about the house seemed delicate. He looked around, and walked into a larger bedroom. It was pink with larger windows. Against the wall was a vanity. He looked at his reflection for a second and grimaced. Then, without giving it much thought, reached inside the top drawer, pulling out a white jewelry box. Inside, he found a woman's gold necklace and a pearl broche. He stared at his treasures for a while and his hands began to tremble. He let out a laugh that would have sounded more like a whimper if anyone had been listening. He put the necklace around his neck and clipped the broche on his shirt. He looked at himself in the mirror again, this time only observing the fine jewelry. They brought happiness to his heart. He turned and saw a small woman standing at the doorway. Jody placed his hands over the jewelry protectively. The woman looked at Jody in disbelief. She was much older than she appeared, but her soft features made her look considerably younger. The



woman stared at Jody, horrified. Jody stood there with damp hair that was matted in parts and balding in others. He hissed at her and turned to the window to escape, but it stuck. When he turned around, she was gone. Scared and confused, Jody ran for the other room and climbed out the first window. He ran across town, went inside his tree, and sat there quietly holding his treasures against his chest.

When the town's people found out, they came to his hollowed tree and dragged him out, but when they got a closer look at the shivering, shriveled old thing; they didn't know what to do to with him. They tried taking the woman's jewelry, but he pressed them against his body hard until they cracked the skin of his chest and it bled. The people were disgusted, so they chose five strong men to grab him and escort him by train outside of town. They let him keep his jewelry for the ride and he seemed content with that.

That evening the woman whose jewelry Jody had taken, climbed out of her bath. She sat at her vanity where she combed her long blond hair and upon close inspection in the mirror, found it to be quite thin and balding. Startled and confused, she cried and although her husband held her and rocked her back and forth, he was unable to console his wife.

## KYLE

Kyle ran out of the Seven Eleven with a grey duffle bag. His arms, waving like a madman, jacket flapping violently. It would've come off had he not fastened the last button like I told him. Then we would've been stuck without bus tickets. I'd never seen him look so scared. It's kinda funny, thinking about it in hindsight. But I won't tell him I said that. He'd likely kill me. The store clerk shot at him from behind the counter. Glass sprayed everywhere. Kyle's Ropers slipped on a few pieces and he went down a couple of times. I laughed a little but then stopped. He finally made it to the pickup. Kyle hadn't expected that from a store clerk with thick-framed glasses and a checkered shirt. This was supposed to run smoothly, I'm sure he was thinking. Kyle had pointed his derringer stiffly at the clerk, smiling that same goofy way he does. It usually materializes when he thinks he's got the upper hand. He didn't. The man stuffed the bag and Kyle's grin broadened. He turned toward the door and bam! That was that. The clerk narrowly missed him. Well, not if you count Kyle's left ear. It was trickling blood all the way to Raymondville. Grazed a bit but nothing too bad. Suspected he would live. Kyle's shoulders went down like they dissolved into his back and I thought I heard him screech. I had forgotten store clerks carried guns behind their counters. Usually it's a red button for alerting the police or something like that. I guess that's how they deal here in the Rio Grande Valley. I don't know, but I don't think we'll be making any more stops in this

area. Shame too. Fine country. I missed most of the action because I was out the door while the clerk stuffed the bag. I never stay inside more than three minutes. That's my breaking point. That's what Kyle and I call it. I don't think Kyle has his figured out yet. I guess now it might be as soon as the clerk reaches under the counter. That's gonna make this gig tough though. A clerk'll slip his hand under and pull out a weapon while you're still fumbling with yours. We might have to start doing something else. The Derringer Kyle used will stay in a half cock sometimes and you can't get the hammer to budge. Stupid thing'll misfire all the time. So I suspect, he wasn't in any position to defend himself very well anyway. I had told him to switch out for another piece, but he didn't listen. Said he would fix it. I guess he didn't.

So now we're cutting through the shrub land on this Greyhound bus and Kyle's gazing out the window like some lost puppy. I take a peek too and stay there a while because Kyle is onto something. It's just about dusk and the skyline is the softest shade of pink you could see and just above that an outline of violet and then two stars twinkling kinda melancholy like they know what we've done, and then an entire sea of electric blue. The knotted silhouettes of mesquite limbs reach upward. They look like old men ready for a fight. You can see every bump and knob on them, defined against the fiery skyline. Shame we won't be coming back here. I look over at Kyle. He's not looking at the skyline anymore. Now he's just staring at the glass window directly in front of him. Someone pressed an enormous set of pink lips right against it. There's still some spit on them. Kinda flaked at the sides. He stares at 'em a while. Then his finger comes up, traces their outline. He looks every bit a fool with his swollen ear and sappy looking face. Was he that upset over the mishap that he'd gone sentimental? I thought I was gonna

have to whip him back into shape. Just the way he did for me that one time I caught the clap from that waitress in Memphis. That was a bad day. I look over at his hand. The bastard's still holding the gun. At this point I'm relieved bus terminals always have such shoddy security. I'm certain we would have landed in jail already. My eyes dart back and forth, scanning the room like they do on T.V. No one seemed to notice. There's an old man in the seat across from us, but he's out. He cursed a couple times in his sleep and then fell silent. A red-haired girl with a push-pop is lying on the two seats behind the old man. Her feet dangle just over the plastic cushion. She's beating hard against the bottom metal rim with the back of her sandals. She smacks her lips every time she sticks the pop in her mouth and I'm about to smack her. I refrain. She stares at the ceiling, thinking about whatever it is that occupies the mind of seven-year-olds. The asphalt changes in some parts. The bus jerks and bounces up and down a couple of times. It knocks me and Kyle against each other. He bangs his head against the window. It sounds harsh. He doesn't flinch. This is altogether surprising since the impact reopened the wound in his ear. He turns 'round with the frayed edges facing me and stays real quiet like he expects me to do something about it. Kinda like a dumb infant. I inspect the injury. Sure enough, every last suture has come undone. He'll have to spend another hour biting his t-shirt in the restroom while I do my work.

“Don't got a needle,” I tell him coldly. No response. He just stares at the floor like he's processing the message. He places his head against the window again and shuts his eyes. I stare at the stubble poking out from his face. It's blond and barely visible. He looks younger than he actually is. Could pass for 16 though he's nearly 30. Maybe that's why no one ever suspects him. Looks too wet behind the ears. And now it's literal. Even

that time they caught him on surveillance. No one ever pointed him out. It was a hoot sitting there at that diner when the footage came on the news. Everyone watching, but no one ever came up to him. They looked at me crossed eyed a couple of times, but that was it. We paid the check and left. That's the way it always went. Me, on the other hand, I'm a big target. Since then, I've been breaking after three minutes. Figure my face looks more menacing than his. Makes me recognizable. Might as well protect it. "Yeah. That sounds like a good idea," I say in response to him going to sleep. I do this mostly to reassure myself that he hasn't quit on me yet and that I'm not alone in this. So I rest my head against the seat and shut my eyes too.

"Goodnight now," I say.

He groans, and that makes me feel better.

At 6:15 the bus stops. I look out the window and see that we're in front of an old hovel. It's covered in dust. Vines claimed most of the right side. Two fuel pumps stand dimwitted under the blazing sun. They're the only sign that this was ever a filling station. Parts of the handles are brittle. They flake. Can't imagine how this place still functions. Beside the old shack stands a coke machine. I deposit three dimes. It undergoes a series of convulsions that end with a belch before it spits out a Dr. Pepper. I grab it and offer some to Kyle who has propped himself neatly under one of the gas pumps. His legs crossed Indian style. I look at him and he reminds me of a girl just then. He holds a wet cloth up against his ear. Two cursive letters are stitched on it and they look ornate like they were somebody's wedding gift. Only Kyle's got to them now, and he's just sitting there soaking them with his blood. I shake my head and spit on the ground. How he

managed to go through someone's luggage without them noticing is beyond me. I take another swig and look at him.

"You better grab some because we might not find anything down the road, pal." Kyle looks at me, his eyes squinting in the sun. He holds out his hand.

"Here you go," I say. "Look I know you've been real sorry about screwing up back there, but that sort of thing can happen to anyone. So you got mutilated," I shrugged. "So what? No girl gives a damn about an ear." He screws his eyes on me for a second like there's intelligent thought behind them, but it doesn't last. They retract and his stare is empty again. He pushes the drink against his lips and slurps. Sounds like a horse drinking out of a trough. He tosses the can out in the sand and belches.

"C'mon boys, we gotta get a move on." The driver waves at us from the bus and I wonder why he makes such an elaborate attempt at getting our attention. We're only a few yards away. I'll never understand regular people. As insane as Kyle and I can be, I think we're a good sight more normal than everyone else. The world's crazy. I guess that's why we do what we do. Don't wanna be a part of that mess. I look at my half brother as he careens toward the bus and nearly falls. He places his hand against the tram, doubles over and pukes. Then I get to thinking maybe I'm wrong. Maybe we should get regular jobs and settle down somewhere. The driver gives him this look like he's mildly disgusted, but it really isn't anything he hasn't seen before. Then, we mount the thing and I can hardly stand sitting next to Kyle because he smells like the insides of a dead mule. And we continue on through the mesquites and low-lying shrubs that look less interesting during the day. And now the air conditioning has broken down too. I look through the front windshield and watch steam rising from the cracks in the concrete. I look at the

passengers and I guess the heat is already getting the best of everybody because they all look like they're about to die. Even the red-haired girl is quiet. She's just lying on her seat with another push-pop in her mouth. She isn't sucking on it though. It's just in her mouth and she's staring at the ceiling, like a little pale zombie. The strap of her tank top is hanging off her shoulder, but she doesn't bother fixing it. Meanwhile, Kyle grabs a bag from under the seat of the woman sitting in front of us. He unzips it and stuffs the bloody cloth inside. He opens another pouch inside the bag and feels around for a minute. He pulls out some lip balm and smooths the stick over his lips in circular motions. I hold my hands together real tight because I think I'm about to pop him. He rolls the stick over his lips repeatedly until he's got a thick coat over his mouth. It looks disgusting. He smacks his lips and puts the cap back on. He shoves the balm in the bag again and pushes it under the seat. The woman snores loudly. Now I know the whole world's gone mad.

We arrive in New Mexico at 3 on Sunday. We get off and Kyle is still as gloomy as hell. I carry the duffle bag, because I'm not about to trust him with anything. More bristles poke out from his face now, so he looks like a man at least. We walk toward a hotel and Kyle's boots are clicking because he's decided to tape small pieces of aluminum to the bottoms of his shoes. Said he wanted to feel like Clint Eastwood in *The Outlaw Josie Wales*. His idea of a real cowboy with the obligatory click, click. I told him all he needed was a cow named Bessie and a Winchester. I laughed thinking he would join me, but he didn't. That's when I realized he was actually taking himself seriously with this cowboy outfit, so I let him be. We check in the hotel and he's reading the paper while I unpack our things. I figured we might stay here for a while. We have the money for it. I pull the classifieds away from Kyle and scan for jobs. Maybe we can play the

shmos for a while till we plan another gig. So we do. I get a job repairing cars at a junkyard and Kyle gets a job as a bartender. So we do this for a while and I become the cook and the housekeeper and Kyle just comes in and out of the house at odd hours. Figure this is only a temporary set up. He'll get out of it soon. And I can stop taking care of him all the time and start taking care of my own needs. I start to hope that encounters with inebriated women at the bar'll do the trick. Make a man out of him again.

Maybe his ear will draw one of 'em, because some women like things like that. Makes them think a man's got stamina. Maybe she'll invite him to her place and he'll get distracted. He sure as hell needs to get his mind off what happened.

Tonight, Kyle did come home with a woman. A brunette. They were in the room for a few minutes and I turned up *Benny Hill* because it's none of my business. They weren't there long though. Kyle came out in his boxers and fell on the couch supine. He opened the paper and started looking at the comics. The girl walked out half-naked.

"Kyle?" she asked.

"Get out of here!" he yelled at her. "I told you I won't have anything to do with your kind."

"Well can I at least have my five dollars back," she asked meekly.

"Here," he put a crumpled bill in her hand and propped himself back on the sofa.

"Bye," she said.

Kyle didn't respond. He kept his eyes on his comics and the door closed. It was silent for a while. Then he cleared his throat.

"Ain't queer if that's what you're thinking," he said.



“I didn’t say nothing.”

“She had something. Could smell it on her.”

And that’s all he said about that.

Now, Kyle’s not going to work. He just sits there spit shining his gun, pointing at imaginary objects, making shooting sounds. Then one day he goes missing. He waltzes in sometime in the early morning grabs a beer from the fridge and sits on the table. He takes a swig and says to me he was up all night trying to come up with a wish and I have no idea what the hell that means. Then he says he feels like a walk so I say all right and we head for the industrial park.

Kyle drinks his beer and we don’t say much. I stare at him suddenly this anger starts swellin’ up inside me because I don’t want to partner up with anybody else so I say a curse word under my breath. But I don’t think Kyle’s really paying attention anyway so I get to thinking the hell with it all. We’ll be out of money in the next month or so and I’ve got an idiot to look after now. Then I start feeling choked up and out come the swear words. That’s when Kyle grabs my head, points it upward.

“What the hell has gotten in to you,” I say.

“No, look.” He says, pointing over a building.

And there before us is a stream of colors arched across the entire sky. We pause for a minute, because the damn thing is just so beautiful. I look at Kyle and he’s smiling wider than I’d seen in a long time so I get to smiling too. Suddenly he’s animated and he turns to me and says he’s up for ice cream. So we cross Baltimore and head towards the creamery there, and I’m not one for sweets normally, but I start to get a craving too.

## OCTAVIO AND THE STEEL MILL

The old Mexican rounded his lips and spat hard. It ricocheted off a metal pole and landed on the Cardinal's bald spot. The Cardinal forced a forgiving smile and wiped his head with a handkerchief that had an image of a lesser-known saint stitched on it. Was it the one responsible for making sure babies were born with all digits or the one who ensures cheating spouses are caught? He couldn't remember. Today it was the one alleviating his humiliation and that was good enough for him. It was early in the morning and the steel mill began to emit its first exhaust fumes of the day. Factory workers had turned on the furnace, which gave a loud whiny bellow followed by an ominous hiss. When the mill first arrived, the villagers mistook the sound for rattlesnakes and sent out a posse of young men to round them up before they made burrows in their crop fields or laid eggs in women's baskets. After a day's search, the men finally came home and decided that if snakes had been out there, they were probably too small to find and therefore not a significant threat to the villagers. It wasn't until two weeks later, when the first villagers were hired at the mill that everyone realized the hiss came from a combination of the mill's contracting furnace, and the boiling zinc in the steel bath. After that, most people's fears about snakes were laid to rest. Although some villagers refused to let their children play outside in the morning when, the noise was most prominent.

The Cardinal cleared his throat and approached the Mexican.

“Octavio, Octavio,” the Cardinal cried out. The old man could not be bothered. He had taken no notice of his misdeed and was now preoccupied with a new task. Having noticed a spider web suspended between one of the church walls and a tall bush, Octavio decided to have some fun. He picked up a moth from the ground and placed it on the web. He licked the corners of his mouth.

“Octavio,” yelled the Cardinal. Octavio turned around and for the first time took notice of the Cardinal.

“Yes?” He stood upright so that his stomach shone larger than usual. There were two yellow stains just above his belly button. The Cardinal gave him a stern look.

“That thing would not let me hear you,” Octavio said, pointing to the mill.

“You have missed mass for three months now. How do you expect to be rid of your bad habits: your laziness and overeating?” Octavio’s shoulders slumped once more.

“I only expect to be rid of that thing, he said pointing in the direction of the mill again. The cardinal glanced at the mill quickly and looked back at Octavio.

“Your habits are getting worse,” said the Cardinal. “Another clergyman would not be as forgiving as I have been. You need to take better care of yourself and try to be more clean.”

Octavio wasn’t listening to the Cardinal. His attention drifted back to the web and the struggling moth. The Cardinal took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“I will pray for you, Octavio,” he said and walked away. Octavio waited until the Cardinal left and took out a stale potato chip from the pockets of his overalls. He licked both sides and stuffed it in his mouth. He preferred the taste of moist food. He stared at the web for a while and watched a dime-sized spider creep out from a crevice in the

church wall. It scurried down the web. The spider covered the moth with its body. The two struggled for a while, but within seconds the spider spun the moth into a small white cocoon. Octavio sighed, dissatisfied with the spider's size. He sat on the ground, leaning back against a tire and stared at the steel mill under construction. It towered over the west side of the village. The smoke from its beams billowed up in small puffs. It resettled in a thin black veil over flowerbeds, outdoor furniture, and pets unfortunate enough to have been tied outdoors. Every once in a while after a heavy rain, a hot dreg would fall on the wet ground and explode. The blast rattled the villagers' houses and made many small children cry.

“Stupid factory,” whispered Octavio. He made obscene gestures at it and was about to drop his pants, aiming his rear towards it, when a group of school children passed by. Octavio picked up his overalls and re-fastened the straps in their buckles. He frowned at the children and left. The children were on their way home from The Sacred Primary School for Children with Special Callings. The Cardinal set up the school as an extension of the church. It was made for children he deemed as having special skills or talents that could be used in ecclesiastical settings as the Cardinal once said. It was also for children who seemed to attract divine phenomenon such as visitations by angels or an abnormal amount of answered prayers per week. Those who were found not to possess celestial attributes by the time they were adolescents could always provide routine maintenance work for the church such as reupholstering of church pews or washing linens used for communion. Still others could grow up to be assistants to those who became clergymen. No child would be left without a spiritual duty. The Cardinal insisted on it. Octavio had been among those selected to attend school there as a child. He was

picked out one day at a random inspection of boys at a church picnic. His napkin was found to have three red dots on it. Since none of the other boys had such markings on their napkins, the cardinal concluded that there was a special spiritual calling on his life. The boy was enrolled at the school the next day. Although the Cardinal admitted he wasn't certain what the significance of the three dots were, he said he was sure it was something very important and would study every holy book until he found out. Satisfied with this response, Octavio's parents allowed him to remain at the school. But Octavio quickly grew tired of the liturgy and frequently fell asleep during mass. As time passed, his habits only grew worse. By the time he was fifteen, his parents were asked to withdraw him from the school and so they did.

Another dreg from the factory fell and exploded. The blast rattled the homes and shattered a few windows. The children tried running back inside the school, but it had been locked. Octavio didn't move. He looked back. The children were huddled in a corner outside the church entrance. Most of them had their eyes shut and were plugging their ears. One of the girls had pulled her dress over her face. They did not appear to have special spiritual callings as far as he could tell. Knowing this made him feel slightly vindicated, if not all together good. After a while, the parents came for the children and they walked home together. The sun began to set. It always set hours earlier during the winter months. The factory discharged its last puffs of smoke and shut down.

The following morning, Octavio woke up in a ditch with a headache. He vaguely remembered talking to three men at the bar the night before.

“That thing is going to put us out of a job!” he told them. When one of them suggested they should get jobs at the factory, Octavio pounded his fist on the bar.

“Are you crazy?” That’s what the factory wants us to do. It wants us to cave in and let it take over. We can’t let it win.” He took a large swig of his pint, looked over both shoulders, and leaned closer to them.

“That thing is evil,” he hissed.

“What do you mean, Octavio?” asked one of them. “Is there a demon spirit inside of it?”

Octavio took another swig of his beer. “Perhaps, my brother, perhaps. We cannot be sure, but I’ll tell you one thing, ever since that thing showed up, my crops have refused to grow and the number of gophers in my field has doubled.”

“You’re crops haven’t grown in years, Octavio” said a man on the other side of the bar,” and those gophers have been there for three generations.” People at the bar laughed.

‘Who’s talking to you, José? Stay out of this,’ yelled Octavio. “Just be on guard my brothers. We need to fight this beast, but it won’t go down gently. We’ve got to get ourselves organized so that thing won’t eat us alive.” It will change the way we live and destroy us. We are all farmers here. We are used to living the lives of farmers. We are used to seeing the green grass and beautiful landscape. With that thing here, we can forget about all that.” He slammed his glass on the table.

“Watch it, Octavio,” said the bartender who was wiping the inside of a whiskey glass.

“Yes, sorry,” he replied. Octavio turned back to his crew, whispering.

“Slowly, this will take over. Our grass will turn into oil wells, our trees into smoking beams of steel. We will all be displaced. Soon machines will take over and there

will be no use for the farmer. Your children won't have any food to eat and your wives will leave you for moneymaking factory workers. Do you want this to happen?"

They each shook their heads.

"Good. Now why don't we meet at my house tomorrow in the evening? There we can make plans on what we can do." They all agreed.

The next day Octavio woke up in a ditch. He did not remember leaving the bar. He figured he must have started for home but passed out on the road. He picked himself up and headed to his house. He needed to wash up and prepare for the events of that evening. It was the first thing he had been excited about in ten years. He would organize with his crew to get rid of the mill and ensure the village would remain in the hands of farmers, and if his plans failed, then he would just have to become an outlaw, he thought. Yes an outlaw. He thought about the kind of respect he would get as a vigilante and about the beautiful women that would surround him.

At his home, he had placed a large picture of Napoleon Bonaparte on his living room wall. He felt the men would draw inspiration from such a fine leader. He filled glasses with hard liquor to boost morale and had even written a speech he thought was good enough to go down in the history books along with the Gettysburg address or any of Father Benito Juarez's speeches. As the men walked in, the first thing he pointed to was the painting of Napoleon.

"Draw inspiration from it my friends. We will need it tonight."

The men looked at each other puzzled.

"Isn't that the man who used to sell pork at the market?"

“No, you fools!” yelled Octavio. “That is Napoleon Bonaparte, a great military leader, just as I was when I served with the one-hundredth thirty-sixth precinct in Olvera.

“You were in the army?” asked one of the men.

“Yes, once upon a time, my friend.”

“Really, because I always heard that you were a vagabond most of your life and that’s it.”

“Silence!” yelled Octavio. We don’t have much time. It is true I have lost sight of the man I used to be, but now it’s time to re-ignite my former glory and fight this battle till it is done. With my friends standing beside me, there is no foe that will go undefeated. I just want to thank you all for rallying around me as I take up this cause. Do not worry; you will not go unrewarded. Those of you who share in my struggles will also reap in my rewards.”

“What do you mean your reward?” asked another man.

“Do not be contentious my dear friends. There will be enough recognition to go around just as soon as we strike that demon down,” he said pointing at the mill from his window.

There was an abrupt, tense knock on the door.

“Octavio, open the door!”

It was the Cardinal. An undisclosed informant told him that Octavio was having a secret meeting with other men from the bar. He walked in, looking at Octavio and the others sternly.

“What is the meaning of this? Are you boys plotting things without the church’s consent? That is an unholy practice and I must insist that you all disband. Plotting can be



a dangerous thing and it is especially dangerous when the man at the helm is a drunkard and a fool!”

At first Octavio said nothing. Then he looked up at the cardinal intently.

“We will not disband.” He said.

The Cardinal was shocked and stayed silent for a long time.

Finally, another man spoke up. “Since everyone is here, including the Father over there, why don’t you just tell us what you’re up to, Octavio.”

Octavio looked at them wild-eyed.

“Ok, I’ll tell you. We’re going to tell the owner of that monster to go and if he doesn’t, we’re going to blow the mill up with this.”

He pulled out a bag of dynamite from behind a sofa. The Cardinal gasped.

“Where did you get that?” he asked, shaking.

“It’s an old souvenir from the war.”

“Oh c’mon. We should have known this was going to be some crazy idea,” said the third man. “I didn’t say anything before because I wanted to see what ridiculous concoction you would come up with, but now I see —It’s stupid. I’m going home now.”

The other two men walked out after him. It was just the Cardinal and Octavio now. For a full five minutes they said nothing. Octavio rubbed his stomach and the Cardinal frowned. Then the Cardinal cleared his throat.

“We will discuss your penance in the morning, Octavio, but before that I want you to get rid of that ghastly thing. Throw it in the river and then come see me. It will take at least two years of purging before I will see fit to pray for your forgiveness.” The Cardinal blessed himself quickly and walked out.

Octavio sat in a chair, with his head in his hands. He felt so angry and defeated. He then looked up at the painting of Napoleon. He looked at his dark, focused eyes and it hit him. He would not be brought down. Nothing brought down the great emperor. He was charged with a second wind. He knew what he had to do. Great deeds required great sacrifices. If he was going to be remembered, he was going to be remembered loud and gloriously. He would recharge himself with memories of his former triumphs and then he could re-live those days, the days before the dust storms and the droughts. He grabbed the dynamite, a rope and a lighter and headed for the mill. He ran through the village yelling out battle cries and the names of great military leaders. When he ran out of historical figures, he went on to fictional ones. When he ran out of those, he just started yelling out random names he thought sounded authoritative. The villagers came out of their homes to see him running about like a mad man. The people followed him to the steel mill. There he climbed a ladder to the highest tower, tied himself to one of the beams, and tied the dynamite to his chest.

“This is for you my comandante,” he said and lit the fuse.

The crowd stood by. Some were horrified, others were still confused, wondering whether this was not some antic the factory owners put on to attract villagers to the mill. Children from the school were in the crowd. They looked on at Octavio. Some of them jumped up and down excitedly thinking the circus was in town.

The fuse hissed and sprayed sparks on the crowd. Everyone watched and waited, listening, wondering if they should back away from the scene or stay where they were to get a better look.

The fuse hissed more loudly and the crowd held its breath. Octavio looked toward the sky at the shining stars waiting to become one of them. Bright sparks flew everywhere. Some burned Octavio's face, others landed on the crowd. Then it stopped. The hissing, the sparks, everything. The dynamite sticks were duds. Octavio hung there, looking at the stars, wondering since his plan had failed how he was going to get down. Through the course of his inspiration, he had not planned for this event. He just hung there and thought about his life and realized that maybe he should take the Cardinal's advice and take regular baths. Maybe attend mass. It took four hours for the villagers and factory workers to bring him down using ropes and ladders. They promised not to throw him in jail if he promised not to pull another stunt like that again. He agreed. Octavio looked at the crowd and noticed a boy that reminded him of himself as a child. It made him feel hopeful. He walked up to the boy and smiled, placing his hand on his shoulder.

“I think you will have a good future, my boy.”

The child's mother grabbed her son quickly and walked away.

Octavio smiled and waved goodbye.

Behind him the Mill stood tall and silent. It belched twice and went to sleep.

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