

**O'ER THE
RIVER YONDER
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“Our nation is the enduring dream of every immigrant who ever set foot on these shores, and the millions still struggling to be free. This nation, this idea called America, was and always will be a new world—our new world.”

—George H.W. Bush

UNO

The porkchop was tough and tasteless, yet he persevered; thus is the nature of the patriarch. He watched the desert slowly brighten with a cocked head and a working jaw, gulping down fatty pieces with swigs of his coffee, his cracked lips screaming at the gritty heat. He wiped his maw and switched his fork out for his crushed cigarette, hardly a buzz coming to him. Red was the sun, red was the clay. Red was his bare plate, marked by bits of char and smears of grease. He cleared his throat, plugged his mouth with the butt, and rinsed the dish, making sure to leave the plate in the left basin and the utensils in the right, following those ancient rules nearly entwined in his DNA. He took a final gulp and grimaced and rinsed the mug out and set it back by the percolator.

He went out the dining room and through the living room and had nearly opened the door before he realized his head was nude. He turned on one heel and returned to the dining room with its blue-checkered tablecloth and tulip-ridden wallpaper. Nope, not here. He turned and made a silent, slow march to the end of the hall and pushed the door open, the hinges giving out a whine like a strangled fart. Deep in the darkness came a heavy feminine breathing, each rotation marked by the buzzing of her lips. His eyes were not that of a cat's, yet he felt he could see her frame clearly defined by the two sheets. Long dark hair with a long light body. He reached to his left and fumbled around the top of the dresser before finding the cap.

He turned and held the knob but listened to the breathing for a moment longer, contemplating whether or not he should stay home for the day and give her a break from her housekeeping. But then he remembered the boy and shook his head with a smile, the hinges yowling as he shut the door like a bitch pup. His longlegged sneak took him six steps to come to Richie's door, cracked slightly open. A slight rasping from inside; he peeked in and by the small glow of the nightlight he saw the child, sprawled and drooling. He smiled and stepped forth, brushing back the hair from the temple and planting a soft kiss. A quick smell—after five years his odor had not gone. He silently prayed over the boy that it never would. Large backsteps and he closed the door silently.

He slid his boots on at the entryway like sex: slight and slow at the start, with a final satisfying push to solidify the joining. He crept out the door and took one last look over his shoulder at the little rambler while chucking the keys up and down in his right hand, his left clasped around the handle of his lunchcrate. The Dodge's door creaked open and shut with something that seemed more like a crash than the secure latching it had once been. The engine came drowsily awake after five turnover attempts and growled over Buck Owens's warbling howls. Clunk clunk clunk into gear. Screeching takeoff, need an oil change don't it? South Texas scenery: brush gasping for air in a formidable sea of dust, shadowed by billboard legends—some in English, the rest in Spanish—of the glory of the crucifixion or of Chevrolet. The nation and land he was guardian of: endless spans

of desert broken here and there by the occasional forlorn domicile. Millions of stars over one. All of this for so long and wide a man could see the curve of the earth if he had an eye to.

Within ten minutes the lights of the post came into view and he coasted to the gate, where a giant black man named Smith produced his keys and slid it back. Up and to the left he parked, yawning and stretching across the dust lot to the white brick building. The only sounds within were the shuffling of feet and the bored coughing of his colleagues. He hooked a right into the locker room and opened his drab green locker. He set his pail at the bottom and grabbed his utility belt, retrieving the Colt from his waistband. He clicked it on and shoved his pistol in its holster, making a mental note of everything as he felt it: handgun, handcuffs, nightstick, flashlight, mace—everything in its place. From the locker's top shelf he clipped his keyring to his belt, stuffed two magazines in his breast pockets, and grabbed a pair of cracked yellow rancher's gloves that served as an heirloom.

As he prepared to leave, not forgetting to make sure his sunglasses were present, Hamill walked in, large coffee-streaked mug in hand. "Hey, hey, Rich," he cheered.

"How goes it, Mark."

"Well, it's been a busy damn night on the border. And *you* missed all of it."

Rich gave him a stare. "What, was you just spoutin ten-fifteen like there was no tomorrow?"

Mark grunted and grinned, detaching his belt and smoothing his thin layer of hair back from his canvas of a forehead. "Oh, no, not us. Over near Big Bend. Or *at* the big bend. Big firefight, buncha cocaine mulies with AKs. None of em lived. Five o our boys got kilt."

"Goddamn."

"Mm-hm. Been some reports of aliens spotted near the airport just westward, too."

"Anyone in the canyon?"

"We got them deputies on it."

"Too hot for you?"

Mark returned a stare as he picked up his cup and passed to the door. "Got my orders to stay here, see."

Rich nodded and closed his locker. "Don't we all."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Less doin your job gets you killed."

"Ah, if there were mulies left, their product got warshed down the Grande three hours ago. You'll be fine."

"I'll trust what my eyes tell me, not the radio."

"Then you go ahead. Go on out and patrol and leave the paperwork to everyone else, eh?"

This was not dignified with any other comments, partly a result of Mark's quick, snakey exit into the break room. He marched up through the hall past a series of gray doors and found the last one on the left slightly ajar, the hammering of a typewriter heard within. He knocked although he had locked eyes with the captain and when beckoned forth he saluted, "Howdy, Norman."

The typing persisted, interrupted and recommenced every five seconds. "Mor'n. Shoulda heard them boys out near Big Bend."

"Heard bout em."

“Yeah, Chatterbox Hamill.” Metal hammering slowed, faded blue eyes casting upward. “If you don’t mind, take one of them Jeeps out and scour that ragin bitch some. Look for gallon jugs.”

“Gallon jugs.”

“Hamill didn’t tell you?”

“Nothin important.”

“Them spics was transportin the snow in milkjugs. A bunch got sent downriver, got tol’ they flipped right over in the current and it all just spilled right out. Need you to retrieve any you see warshed up. Or get in there.” His fingers began to dance and he let up once more, as if he’d forgotten his manners. “Need the date or somethin?”

“No, sir.”

“Then dismissed.”

The vigorous creation resumed; Rich exited with a similar determination, passing Fritz and Peterson with single, curt nods. He crossed the lot and seated himself in the metal frame of the cruiser. Something bit him in the ass and rising he half-expected to find a crushed scorpion in the pilot’s seat, but he only found a stray handcuff key abandoned by the last driver. He thought of rushing in to return it but decided he’d had enough of Norman for the next couple hours and slid it into his left backpocket. He climbed back in and shut the door with a hard slam, ruffling the canvas overhead. He turned it over at once and imagined Norman’s especially large frame rolling around in one of these units. Driver’s side now vacant of suspension; six cylinders working doubletime to make it up that rough terrain. *It’s July sixth, in this year nineteen-seventy-four, you cocky bastard. What action report are you writing, how you walked from your car to your desk?*

He pulled up to the rear gate and found himself committing a humorous series of back-and-forth in and out of the cruiser before truly setting out upon the trail: out of the car to open the gate to the car and out to shut the gate behind him to finally driving off. He kept the radio off; he would dictate what his further assignments were. He went south until he had reached the crest of a ridge that cascaded to the shallow murk. He followed it for west half a mile and spotted a coyote scurrying northwest with what looked to be a great horned owl in its clutch. Hardly more than an owlet; his heart ached at the possibilities lost forever. Great hunts against starlight now squandered away. As it darted out of view, he climbed out of the Jeep, leaving it to run in the middle of the trail while he donned the heavy cowleather gloves and set down a smoother embankment that led to a muddy sandbar. Each pace noted as the flashlight’s beam scanned the ripples. The whitest thing he saw was half of the skeleton of a catfish, anticipating its return to the waters. He gave it a rushed burial with the side of his boot. Onward.

He had been prepared to turn heel and scan the rest of the shoreline with the cruiser’s spotlight when not thirty seconds after this initial thought he found an oblong piece of silver jutting from the sediment and lapping waters a handful of yards away. When he got closer, his hypothesis was confirmed when he saw the muzzle pointed directly east, as if waiting in ambush of the coming sun. He tugged once and nearly flung his arm in the air with the ease of it. It was a silver thirty-eight Smith & Wesson with a six-inch barrel. He forced the cylinder open and found the four empty shells were clogged with muck. A weed clung limply to the triggerwell. The right side of the grip was torn off, good woodgrain lost forever. The hammer was permanently cocked back. He emptied it and

bent down to wash it in the river, but when the barrel was fully submerged he felt something not quite sand and not quite rock stop his progress. He reached with a free hand and found a handle, shaking it quickly and giving hard tugs until it jostled loose and revealed itself, dripping. The cap had been sealed with several layers of duct tape. He shook it once and heard a sandy reply from inside. He laughed. "You smart fucks. Ain't even wet."

He shook his head on the way back to the Jeep, the results of relatively groundbreaking ingenuity in either hand. He set the jug down and opened the rear door, retrieving evidence bags and a Sharpie. As he wrote on the gun's tag, he thought he could hear a low growling over that of his engine. He stopped writing the time and it stood as 4:1 a.m. He lifted his head and barked, "Hey! Coyote! Git! *You git!*"

And yet the growling kept building, proceeding forth in that bleak hour. He stepped around the front of the vehicle and shook his extended arms, shouting, "*Git, git!*" before drawing his pistol. "You n your pals ain't welcome! Git your asses in bed!"

What a goddamn fool I am, he thought, listening to the metallic bang of a loose tailgate as an old burgundy Ford flew across the trail, hardly illuminated the headlights. In this moment all was forgotten except for his own stupidity, repeating in his head time and again: *How could you not tell? Who are you?* He dropped the revolver and hastily holstered his own iron and threw himself into the Jeep and it bumped up and down as it crushed the revolver; the jug disappeared in a cloud of dust. The slamming and rocking of his own vehicle gave him a royal pain in his ass as they rushed toward the river, giving his voice a wavy quality as he shouted in Spanish for them to pull over or be shot. They pulled quickly to the left and showed him their side as they rode the sandbar out to a thin length of the stream, correcting and running straight once they were down in it. He mimicked this technique perfectly, and once they reached the other side, he was able to connect his front bumper with their rear and give them a boost into the dirt wall that spanned this mile of northern Mexico. They slid to the right, the driver's side slamming into the earth. He heard glass shatter as he lunged out and drew his 1911, ducking behind the door and commanding, "*Sal del camion!*" in such a flurry he didn't even know he could throw out, sounding like a native. The rolling R of a submachinegun ended this, clapping over his head. His heart sank in his throat. He retreated to the rear and leaned to the right, pulling two shots that ended up in the passenger door and wherever the fuck else.

He pinned himself back to the Jeep and heard the door swing open. Two blindfire shots and no report but dirt refining. The automatic ripped through the night and the unit shivered with them, groaning at its death. He looked up to the stars and held the pistol between his legs, his mind beginning to ponder but his body already moving him forth and forcing him to lean once more against his whole will and

He tried pulling the trigger three times to retort what had come from the driver—still stuck in the cab—before he realized that the weapon had disappeared from his hands. He scrambled back into cover, a low moan escaping him before he shot his left hand out to search for it, a five-legged spider prancing about the dust, tip-tip-tiptoeing from thumb to index to middle to

"Uh," he said when he looked down, blood spilling and pooling about the forty-five, three sets of nails dripping crimson. His full hand clasped his wrist and he observed a leveled pinkie and a

ring finger that still bore the ring but nothing above the second knuckle. He wanted to scream *bastards* but begged for help instead.

DOS

Who was the man that led to your creation. Produced you forth so you could be produced forth. A god who started your meandering path through the will of lust alone. Ancient recollections of words far too complex and grand to be understood. Murmurs at hypersonic speed; see the child crane his neck to investigate. A voice never heard again after that apocalyptic abandonment. Stormed out the door with the same hat that his brains would be blown out of within the week. The slamming of rusted doors on rusted frames housing wheezing engines, crunching of dirt beneath feet, whining of ropes, blessed water sprinkling on oakwood. Please God do not allow my boy to witness such horror. As terrible and true thirty years later as it was at eight years old.

Tides moved him in this aether, a craftless vagrant. A Saxonesque determination lifted him above these unseen waters, leaving him dry all except his hands. Coated in blood and discharge and tears as they had been half a decade ago. The greatest cleansing he'd ever received; o squalling messiah, damn me in your place. The doc's cigarette tasting like vinegar, bloody marks like stigmata from holding asscheek and shoulderblade. He held his palm up to his face and through a large hole there was piercing light. Drawn away and oblivion encapsulated him. Once again with the same hand and in firetruck pajamas was a blonde boy hunched over a Fiestaware bowl; the mirage evaporated in an instant. My life for you. My life for you.

Over these hardly intelligible prayers the waters began to swell and lift him. Bumps from beneath and nausea from inside. The hand yearned for its former position but his arm had been sucked beneath him, and when the right tried it too was pulled further into this surge, lapping up and around him but never *on* him.

The voice of his mother echoed in these waters, fluid and strong yet the words she told him were unfamiliar except for a handful. Had this been her speech from the funeral he could see why he could not recollect but there was hope in her voice. Perhaps he was remembering her last. The words came scant and scarce, her voice bouncing hither and yon in his skull. *You're the last Richard in a long line of them. A great many of them. The blood of the Lionheart runs through thee. Anglos, Jutes, Normans. Men who once watched the walls of Londinium now watch as you stand guardian of the new Great Empire.* A loving homage to her homeland before her last breath was spent in Loma Alta, Texas. Fifty miles north of the Rio Grande and five-thousand west of the River Thames. It was all he remembered of her last decade.

He was near tears at the loneliness of it when the light came back and strained them out; white and blinding and hot. His body rocked violently and this all-encompassing sun roared at him, swallowing him whole in its maw, wherever and whatever that be. It said, in a voice not too dissimilar from his father's, "Cuanto falta?"

"Que?"

"La frontera. Cuanto falta para llegar a la frontera."

"Oh. Hm. Quince minutos. Sobre eso."

"Estupido como un perro, lo juro."

Blobs became blurs and these blurs became smears. Dots conjuring and evaporating all over. An evil shaking and roaring that came to be understood as a truck. Dried liquids upon the mouth, nose, eyes; a hand pulls to wipe them away but is caught behind him. The world fading in so gradually he has no idea what he's regaining. Red roof, blue sky. Gray figures to his right.

He removed his knees from his stomach and stiffened out, trying to stretch sore muscles. He felt around his waist without much hope for the utility belt. Even his regular belt had been removed. The seat of his pants was cold and damp and he wondered if he had soiled himself. He reached down and his fingers came away sticky and tacky—that familiar feeling of blood on his hands. He let his hands down to rest there, trying to remember if something had cut him as he fell but drawing an uncomfortable blank. He went again to feel for the wound, silently praying it wasn't the hole that was *supposed* to be there, and he felt a tiny bump on the cascade of his left cheek. He went to dip his hand in but when three fingers registered and the pins and needles in the rest remained, he remembered his newfound disability and what he'd found on the seat of the Jeep. He thought back on it and the last thing he recalled was the tang of vomit as it swam up and out, porkchop bits everywhere.

The bit of steel crept out the pocket and his fingers fumbled around until he felt certain his fingers wouldn't slip. He held the loophole in a sweaty deathgrip between his index, middle, and thumb. He hooked his wrist and found the hole like sex: gliding around blindly and impatiently hoping for finality. The conversation before him went on, "Has oído hablar del juego de estrellas?"

"De que?" said the passenger, scratching his scruff.

"Beisbol professional. Em-El-Beh! No has oído?"

"Pense que la temporada habia terminado. Quien gano la Serie? Los Dodgers?"

"Si, si, pero lo hacen durante el verano. El veintitres."

"Espero que salga el puto Ro-lee Feen—"

Rich had crept up slowly to a hardly slumped position before pouncing forth at the passenger and bringing the handcuffs down and back. The cholo's breath was constricted between the cloth seat and the steel chain, His hands scratching and prying at it. All eight of the knuckles which held the cuffs tinted white. Rich brought his foot up to the back of the seat and leaned back, growling, "Alto! Alto! Pare!" while the man thrashed around his quarter of the cabin, cracking the underside of the dash with his knee and banging his elbows on the windows. The truck skidded and skirted to a stop while dust spurted about the scene, in through the driver's open window. Rich's knee bucked into his stomach and he groaned as he was pushed forward, the pressure on the passenger's neck loosening enough for a sickening half-gasp while the driver shouted meaningless orders and turned over the center console, wrenching his arm back and forth into the white's jaw and cheek. The world blinked in and out with each landing, yawing as his head bobbed. His ear smashed against the window and spurted a hot stream of blood. His left hand lost its grip and the doors were thrown open before he could catch relief.

The driver dragged him out into the blinding scape by his boots. Rich shrieked for him to stop and was cut off when his head bumped the frame and settled in the sand, yet not for long; he was grabbed by his collar, ripping as he was dragged, and flung against the front tire. The

shadows provided by these savage figures loomed as the stock of the AK was brought down on his temple and a kick landed not an inch above his kidney and a knee jarred a tooth loose that he had no choice but to swallow. He closed his eyes and tried to curl up, each blow sending bursts of memory or something not too dissimilar through that barren waste and somewhere in it, a million miles across the plain, an unknown voice begged for nothing he could know for sure but knew pertained to him.

His head was wrenched from the hole it'd made and a hot stinking wind prevailed; he opened his eyes and a cleanfaced, blacktoothed lobo grinned, muttering something that was littered with gringo and cabron and puto. The shouting from the bed not only persisted but got louder through the crusting lifeblood that had poured down his cheek and neck and collarbone in a profoundly straightforward trail. He turned halfway left and saw the man with the auto walk slowly up to the bed and stare down a hysterical man inside, who made endless motions with his arms. A large arm shot out and seized this man's literal rag shirt, spilling him over onto the earth's floor as well. The beating commenced with the prodding of not the wire stock but the barrel; wood grain deforming the face and bruising flailing arms. Muzzle prodding the neck so the man let out gross, weak, high screams with each landing. Rich's head was whipped around to face frontward and he could all but cough on the maroon guayabera before his shoulders were seized and the Mexican proceeded to ram his knee into his face, collar, and chest.

Now the dogs were really at their prey: humping hunched and howling in the low arid plain in motions so quick and fierce those who observed were repelled to near corners in desperate bids. Mangling the figures of your victims. Crunches fill their heads and their screams deflect against the hills to the south and back out towards the sky of the north; nocturnal creatures burrow deeper in their dens, the chameleons change their shades. All others depart.

The blows kept landing two inches above his heart, keeping the breath out of him. His head hung forward and he could see his dirtied pants, wondering what she would think of them. His hands were folded in his lap in a sign of surrender, but what was surrender when it was rejected yet still offered? His mind lingered on quit but came to no formal decision when they broke and clutched the sand on either side of his thighs, before the toes of the vaquero's boots. One accumulating less than the other. He found a miracle had been performed and he could move them after all, raising them on either side of them and keeping them out as he threw himself against the man and smeared blood on his garb and reached around, locking them as the bully pushed back and shouted, "*Terminaste! Ya terminaste!*" as he hammered on Rich's shoulderblades and the back of his head as he pressed it into his stomach, constricting the words and thinning them to a child's squabble. The hands fumbled around the waistline until they found the spot which registered as a pistolgrip and wrenched it up and around to the right. The white threw his head back and stared up as the horrified partisan pulled a clump of brown hair away with one hand and with the other attempted to reach down.

The barrel placed just below the bottom left rib jumped away in a white cloud. Something amazing occurred where the exact moment the tables turned was told through their motions: the man in green rose from his ass in newfound spryness and the one in red tipped back on his raised heels and sat his Lee denim in a tan plume and now they stood on opposite sides as compared to just a

second ago with the muzzle of the Mauser placed betwixt the kidnapper's upturned eyes. The mouth opened as if to bite the barrel off but he only screamed down it in a long pitching arch, which would have captivated him til death had it not been for the shout of the beaten peasant to his left and he swung his torso and as the heavy gunner of this duo tried to fumble into position two shots rang out, ancient iron crashing as the brass did, producing pinkish clouds and spurring the gunman to jerk and dance backwards and drop his gun from one hand and not the other so his finger caught on the trigger, the man who was once sitting up behind him was floored within an instant and was tripped over like nothing more than a part of the desert itself.

And the tripping did not end there for as the feminine shrieks and toddler's wails rose from the truck bed Rich felt his feet forced together and encompassed by something fleshy and when he looked down the world was turning on its side and the Mexican bleeding like a stuck pig was wrestling with his calves. He put his hands behind himself to catch his fall, the gun forced from his right hand as nearly all his weight came boring down on it, skittering in a cloud of dust to his right. He tugged the hand out from under himself and made to shoot his arm out for it, half his face buried in the sand, when the Mexican clambered atop him and made a similar motion for the white's throat, seizing it. His head snapped to face this aggressor and, still clawing with his fingers at the wooden hilt, brought his left hand up and tried to stick his remaining fingers in any available orophus: eyes, ears, nostrils; smushing the skin and features against themselves as the sicario's hands tightened on his throat. His whole body felt heavy; the Mexican's legs were pinned on his legs, his knees on his pelvis, his hand on his throat, now the other hand forcing his head into the ground while bending his nose and covering his eyes. Sharp, overtly aggressive attempts at a retrieval of air with no payout. His right hand moved across the sand, searching for a piece of earth that could fit just into his palm, finding nothing before reaching his side. He hooked it up slightly—a gross, buzzy, retching sound coming from his mouth as he did so—and jabbed upward, the Mexican grunting slightly. Again he did so and there was no real movement but the tightening of the hand. Despite the sweaty palm that smeared it, his whole face had become cold.

He made a quick succession of these small uppercuts until he found that his knuckles were coming away warm, damp, and slightly sticky. He punched again and the Mexican screamed as blood spurted out, trailing down the officer's hand and his wrist. The pointer and middle fingers came up shakily and in an action not too dissimilar from he and his wife's Friday night activities he jammed the limbs into the hole, and there was a high, rattley shrieking that made his eardrums buzz. The hand loosened once then tightened again and now the other hand came back and began punching at the American's Germanic nose and in all this confusion and agony and with the fingers twisting within the wound the green-panted leg came out from under the one wrapped in denim. The knee found itself at the crotch one, two, three, four times with the hand loosening each time, like hammering and wrenching at an old board. The left hand stole away from the brown face and pushed him off, the wound making an odd farting sound as it separated from the fingers. The cholo fell on his side in the dust and scrambled away and to his friend, trying to raise himself to his hands and knees but continuously planting back in spurts of sand.

Rich flipped himself over and rushed on his stomach himself towards the pistol, eating that coarse earth, digging his nails and tearing back his cuticles. Two marred fingers stuck in the trigger

well and bucked the Mauser back to him, and switching hands he turned upon his back where he watched the Mexican make a stumbling run to the north, against a light wind, his hair and blood flowing behind him. Rich rose and as he leaned against the hood of the Dodge he dealt out mercy as he saw fit but even then it was terrible with the malevolent's tumbling and squirming about and final hacks of death and the clutching at his shoulderblade where the bullet had molested he.

As the body stiffened and the right arm slowly extended towards his murderer, Rich nearly collapsed against the headlight, burying his forehead in the crook of his arm, soaking up sweat and blood and mud. He raised his eyes and slowly opened them, rubbing the stinging tears away. "I'm sorry," he breathed. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I feel sick. Oh fuck." He looked up at the perpendicular spread of bodies and hoped for a sign from the innocent—a rise of the chest, a shift of the boot, anything. Nothing came but the mother's head from behind the cab, peeking quickly at him before darting back behind cover. He began to stumble over, supporting himself the whole way against the scorching body. The boy had been weeping for so long he hadn't noticed until he saw him clutched against his mother's body, shaking and whimpering like a beat dog.

The woman's face was marred with dust, a clean trail on either cheek towards the corners of her mouth. Out from deep, black crevices her exhausted eyes met his and she tore skin away from her lip with her teeth. She licked them and said, "Por favor, no with them. Eran perros. Por favor no kill us, no somos como ellos, no with them, no somos . . ." she broke down and sputtered and began to weep as he stared at her, trying to come down and think clearly. He stared down from her as she wailed, rocking her boy, turning away from the man in green. Stacked in the corner was a plethora of luggage: four suitcases, three bookbags, a tote. As he toyed with the straps of one she went on, "I promesa to God, ellos nos hicieron! Ellos dijeron que era only way! I so sorry, por favor . . ." her body shot forward and she clasped his forearm with her small but hard hand and he gently removed it, pulling the book bag towards him and telling her, "You're okay, no hay nada que temer. Estas seguro. I'm with the US Border Patrol, I'm—"

His cordiality was cut short as he stared down at the inside of the pack, lined with plastic wrap and filled to the brim with white bricks, each wrapped in the same plastic. He shot his head up to see her but she'd hidden herself away, shaking violently and facing the opposite corner of the bed. He pulled the pack over the side and dropped it at his feet, reaching for one of the suitcases. She turned and pleaded as he did so, "Nosotras no teníamos suficiente dinero, pero el pregundo de todos modos. And they say, 'work para nosotros' y we go free, free, al otro lado de la frontera. He says esta inseguro. I say do it. Ahora esta muerto. Que es mi culpa. No hagas daño hurt my boy. El es inocente." She smeared snot over both sides of both hands and hid her eyes once more as he opened the suitcase and shuffled the powder around. He hardly understood her, but had taken away what he considered the chief points: a desperate family did desperate things to get from a desperate place. He said, "Por que? Why run? Por que trabajar con ellos?"

She snorted snot and moaned, scratching through the boy's hair. She darted her eyes between him and the corpse beyond him. "Free," she said finally. "We is want free. America. You see?" She shook her head and pursed her lips. "Las cosas son horribles alla atras. No one care for us. No one look out for each other. A mi, mi, mi. So focused on little single problems that we cannot fix the big ones. Hurts the whole nation, sin progreso. So we work with cartel en lugar de rebelarse por

que they say they fix them. But they only care about theyself also. But America no have that. America love. Americans work together. We is Americans in our heart. He was.” She nodded down to the corpse and hid her eyes once more, while Rich could only stare. All of that and he had even less of an idea of what to do.

He looked back down at the only face-up body in the arroyo, the eyes glazed-over and patiently watching the sun’s grandiose arc. And in those stagnant eyes he knew there had been a vision of a future not too dissimilar from the one he’d sought to forge himself. The whole world pitched and yawed and images swam and in the back of the truck he saw for hardly a moment Sarah and Richie’s faces and vomit filled his mouth at the thought of them in this position. His leaned towards the cab and a thin gruel of stomach acid slopped on the ground, splashing on his cowboy boots, not quite mixing with the drying blood. His sleeve became coated in the mess on his chin and he slowly, almost absent-mindedly unbuttoned the shirt and cast it carelessly unto the soil. His head down, he took the parcels from out the bed and threw them towards his shirt, coke bursting out—snow in July. Thick thuds on top of others.

He walked between the corpses and the truck, his white beater completely sweated through. He took the handle of the bed and it dropped down with a violent crash, startling even him. He looked back up at the Mestizos and reached his mangled hand forward. Four giant, wet eyes carefully considering it. “Freedom,” he said. “I can take you. You can come.”

The mother’s lips worked as she tried to compose herself, and with hitching sobs she crawled forward, producing the child so that Rich could set him down. The boys eyes went back-and-forth from his face to his chest, nervously trying to not be noticed. A large strand of green snot made an arc above his top lip and drooped down at the corner. The woman came forward, scooting herself on her butt, touching at her eyes and hiccuping on the tears. With the boy in the crook of his arm—*Oh Richie, I’ll hold you soon, I promise you*—he took her wet hand and she stepped down, her cracked leather sandals touching down with a delicacy only the fairer sex seemed to compose; attractive even in this horrid moment. She turned her back to the carnage and held herself as her dress billowed against the southern wind.

Rich sighed and set the boy down on the tailgate, who clutched onto the shoulderstraps of his top with such ferocity the white had to finagle the tiny fingers away and place them in the boy’s lap, holding a momentary finger up. He put a hand on the widow’s shoulder and she hardly turned to acknowledge him, but he said, “You can drive. I am too weak. Muy debil. A traves del rio, I know a route. A way. If you trust me. Verdad de Dios.”

She registered a faint surprise and settled, nodding her dirty head. “Si. Si. No trickings? Parces honesto, pero . . . ‘cannot trust nothing’, as he,” a slow, tight-faced swallow, “say. Mi Antonio.”

“You are correct. Can’t trust no one, my daddy said. But . . . I don’t know. If I were you and you were me, I’d find it in my heart to trust you.”

Now she looked at him completely, assessing. She made a motion between them that inferred the trading of places. A million questions showed on her face but she asked none. She nodded once again finally, sniffing and groaning low. The arms loosened from around her and she held them up for a brief moment before slapping them at her sides. “Why?” she asked, finally giving

a deep inspection into his soul, character, and person. The trials that had led him here and gotten him sidetracked along the way. He thought she understood what she saw—such things were lost on most.

“Because why not. Because I don’t want innocents hurt. Because I have a child. Because it’s my duty. I don’t know. I can’t explain it to you. But I know it. It’ll take a long time before I can put it into words, but I know it. Here and here.” Pointing at the brain and heart. “Please. I want to go home. To *my* hijo n esposa.”

“Okay.” She motioned to her son, staring at her husband. “Ponlo en el camion. Un momento.” And with that she stepped over and began to tear the fat man from off the martyr. Rich picked the boy up and, bouncing him like a babe, moved into the passenger’s seat with the kid in his lap. The boy remained with his face buried in Rich’s stinking chest. Rich ran his good hand through the thick growth of black hair and watched over his shoulder as the woman waved a rosary over the one she’d called her Antonio. Kisses between each stage of—by the sound of it—the Hail Mary covering his face. Rich mumbled the Beatitudes in his own tongue, thrice over. She attempted to rest his eyes but they remained propped open, vigilant; calculating that great star and its descent. She dug in his wool pants and found two different-sized pesos and delicately set them where she felt they belonged. A kiss upon each and on the forehead and finally on the lips, long and wanting. Her head raised slowly but she stood quick and turned without hardly a thought, swiftly tossing the door open and moving in on the bench beside the boys. “You know the way?”

“Si.”

A long, heaving sigh. “Bien. Gracias.”

And the carnage was left behind them, as all men hope for whomever they love.

TRES

The jagged motions of the truck upon the unturned landscape and the piercing angles of the sun made his head pound with the colossal anxiety. She spoke quietly to them and answered his questions of where they’d been going. She told him that they would have thrown him into the river and used him as a distraction so they could cross. She told him time and time again that she hated the idea and had tried to get her husband to convince them otherwise. Rich nodded at this each time in a moment of confused appreciation, wanting to ask, *But why?* but staring out mildly silent at the scape. The boy had fallen asleep against him and was clutching his bare, marred forearm with both of his tiny hands.

A mile from the river she pointed out a coyote trotting along with his head held high—a bunny in the process of rigor mortis jiggling stiffly in his jaws. He angled away from them and towards a tall band of cacti.

“The only thing Mom liked about America was the animals,” he mumbled to no one, remembering a line he’d delivered to his wife several times before. The river was not in sight yet. The kid readjusted.

“You are not from here?” the woman who’d named herself as Claudia asked, motioning ahead. “Extranjero?”

“No, I am.” He turned to her and shook his head. “My madre. From Britain.”

“Inglaterra,” she stated, nodding back.

“Yes, yes, Inglaterra. Came here in the early thirties, before the war. Agricultores muy pobres. Worked in factories all her life. Married my father, divorced, worked some more, died. Muy triste, I suppose. I don’t know. Always wanted home; Londinium.”

She eyed him and he turned away, confused, and asked, “Londres? Lon-don? What you mean?”

“Yes, yes, Londres. Well, Guildford, but . . .” he shook his head again.

The truck whined on, the landscape arching and sloping before them. “Mi madre,” Claudia began, clearing her throat, “my mother, she was from Mexico City. Abuelo is rich bank man. He die of the cancer. He leave them with nothing; he too selfish, gamble it all away. They move to Tepehuanes, her mom try and work hard, she die in accident. So is just my mother y her brother. She meets a man. He is cruel to her—he hits her, spits on her. He takes her money and gambles it away, culo de caballo. She leaves for border, this is cuarentainueve. She meet big strong American, was Marine, fought Japs. He takes her in as girlfriend, like ama de casa, housewife, he fuck her, he buy her flowers, but never show her off.” She raised a finger at this. “Never show her off y never let her get jobs. When she say this he start cheating. When she asks no more of this, when she threaten to leave, for herself, to make her own American dream, go get work, he take her to the border and deport her. One man rape her before they do it. Kick her on her ass and sent her back to Durango. She had to catch trucks all along dirt road to get back home.

“Then when she home, the man, that cruel man, promise to put a roof over her head and children in her womb and she take the offer and marry him because it is all she can do as un chica de pueblo. He hit her. Curses her. When I was born he hit me. He drank. He never showed love. He did el mínimo and gave us a small resemblance of a life, when we could have had so much more if the American, old John Matthews of Lubbock, had not been so cruel. Bastard. I spit on his grave when I find it. At least my father never stuck his cock in anyone else and betrayed her so. Loyal. Cruel but . . . joder a los dos.”

“Vida triste,” Rich said, nodding, unaware of what would be the right thing to say. He reckoned there was none, but silence wasn’t proper, either.

“Si. Like most Mexicanas.”

“You’ll have better.”

“I hope. But all that matters is that he is okay.” She reached out and stroked the child’s greasy scalp. “That he prospers. He is man, he has a better chance than me or my mother. But he will still have to struggle. But even then it will be luxury compared to what his father had to endure.”

The river came into view as the horizon sloped and glints chinked off of the river’s bubbling surface into their eyes like mean-spirited beams. The headache peaked and throbbed and he held his mangled hand to his eyebrow, applying force as compared to pressure. He took brief glances around and knew this stretch but also didn’t. Far out and hardly patrolled. Perhaps a couple miles from where he’d been taken.

The truck slowed slightly but never stopped. “Rick,” the woman said, shaking him. “What do I do. There is no bridge. Rick, que debo hacer.”

“Well, don’t slow down, for the love of God, keep goin,” he motioned to the scape with his good hand. She kept staring and tried to say something when he blurted, “Ford the fuckin river, go,

go, go! Acelera! Poco profundo! Go, dammit!” He seized the wheel, leaning past the boy who clung tightly to his wife beater, ripping the cotton with little tendrils. “Stomp on er! Gas it! C’mon!”

Her breath hitched and she turned her head away as her huarache sank to the rattling and torn floor of the cab, grasping at her child like a madwoman. The truck roared towards the bank and within a moment the entire hood was submerged in the white foam that spurted every which way and the windshield was soaked and water flowed in the slightly open door windows and like a phoenix from his pile of ash the spotted maroon hood burst forth from the waters and persisted. Water consumed all but the tops of the tires. The engine made choking noises and grunted and spat and cleared its throat and the wheels screeched as they attempted to find a grip, throwing clots of earth back into the river, sending them eastward. Huge jumps and lurches as they cascaded upward, ninety-something teeth clenched together, grinding themselves to nubs. Groaning and clunking as they pushed onto dry land and water pouring out the underside like some great floodgate opened. A great dark trail following their procession.

A strange vision crossed Rich’s mind of him kissing handfuls of American soil; shoveling bunches from out the road ahead and praising them like idols upon the altar. Kneeling at the fork, his eyes to the Texan sky. He grabbed Claudia’s arm and thought about pointing her ahead and to the left towards the station, rid himself of the evidence of his eventful morning; have the boys at the station sort it out from here while he drove home to sweet Julia and little Richard and they lived happily ever after and there was no suffering and no tribulation and

What will happen to them? his mind forced, replacing these warm images with ideas of cold steel and hot blood. Shallow graves and deep wounds. Stiff bodies while his life flowed onward. That boy so full of life clinging to him, seemingly hoping to share that exuberance. A lean face with pronounced eyes and a beak like his mother’s; what remains of his father is displayed in his appearance. Rich brought his arm from out of the child’s grasp and pointed up and to the right, Claudia giving him brief looks as her own dinnerplate eyes darted around the cab—mirror to scape to the man to the scape and back to the mirror again. He had no capacity other than to parrot “Main road, main road, main road,” over and over until instead of her understanding, she pointed up to the rearview mirror, and before she could take in a breath to speak, the sirens went on behind them, a secondary engine coming closer. In his own rearview he saw the headlights of a green-and-white Jeep, throwing a ten-foot tall plume of dust behind it.

Rich realized dimly that if this was not over soon he probably wouldn’t be home for dinner. He reached out and placed a hand on Claudia’s lower thigh, gripping tightly and moving her foot from the pedal. She whipped her head at him and began to weep once more, breaths hitching on clogged snot as tears cleaned her cheeks from the day. “Alto!” Rich shouted in her face, trying to guide the leg to the brake. “Fuckin *alto!* *Alto!* *Stop!*”

“Bu-bu-bu—”

“Goddammit trust me and stop this motherfucker!”

She stomped on the brake pedal, the tires beneath screeching upon the sand and billowing it up and out around them, settling just as fast as it spurted. “Listen to me now,” he told her, taking her by the back of the neck and placing his marred hand upon the boy’s head, “when I get out and close this door, you go. Don’t stop for nothin or no one. Main road’s out that-a-way, where we was goin.

Get yourself a motel somewhere as far north of here as you can get, n ditch this fuckin thing. Get up in the mornin and your life'll be started, get me? You'll be Mericans. But you gotta get there first. Hear me?"

The matriarch, still weeping. Immeasurable loss for an uncertain gain; to escape a life marred by the decisions of others. Victim of the context you were born into, no fault of your own. Baptize yourself and wash yourself anew in this bountiful domain. He took her hand as it ascended to her nose to pinch away the bubbles. He clenched it, not unconscious of the large calluses protruding at the base of each finger. She'd broken her knuckles once before and they'd never been right again. "Get me?"

She took her boy by the collar and pulled him close, cradling his temple against her breast. "Si. I do. Thank you." She shook her head and squeezed his hand back with both of hers. "I do not know what to say."

"Just get the hell outta here when I tell you."

A nod and Rich pried his good gauntlet free, swinging the door open with the other. He turned himself and set both feet on the Earth's floor at the same time, slowly rising out and holding up a good hand. "Hey!" he shouted, waving high. "It's Richard! Planter! Don't shoot! Let me get out!" He moved just out of the doorway and held it as he watched the large man exit the Jeep, his hand gripped firmly around his gun. "Henderson! Jimmy!" Rich shouted, waving.

"Fuckin-ay, *Rich! Holy shit!* We thought you were fuckin *dead*, I mean—"

A great pain ripped through Rich's shoulder as he swung the door shut and he thought in a distant fashion that his head would explode when the truck roared away and he began hacking at the dust and Jimmy's screams of "*What the fuck? What are you doing?*"

Rich waved him away as he spat into the dirt and composed his nauseous belly before turning back. "Jimmy—"

"What the fuck *happened?* We found your vehicle sat on the opposite side of the river, Knutson found bits o your fuckin *fingers* sittin there! Who the hell *was* that? *What is going on?*"

"Jimmy," Rich shook his head, holding up his bad hand as he went to lean against the hood of the Jeep. "This. I went out to look for that coke, the stuff they lost out in Big Bend?"

"Jesus, that?"

"Then I don't know if these boys was a part of that or what, but they come screamin through and towards the river and I went after em but it all got so outta hand so quick. I was in a gunfight with a machine gun before I knew what the hell was goin on."

"The guys in that truck?"

"Listen. I passed out n woke up n they started beatin on me. There was a family of Mexicans in the back n the man was yellin at em to cut it out or somethin, I heard him say somethin about 'not in front of the boy' or other. Then they took him and started beatin on him. So I killed the fuckers, but they wound up killin the guy. N so there was his wife n kid n—"

"This fuckin guy was havin *cartel* drive his family? Here?"

"Yes. Cartel was gonna use em as mules. As payment."

"Those sick bastards!"

"Yes."

"Then who the fuck was that in the truck?"

"The wife n boy."

"Goddammit, Richard."

Rich looked up from the river and was met with a face wrought with disdain. "What."

"What do you mean *what*. Fuckin spics just got across the border, *that's* what is fuckin *what!* Where is your sense of *duty*?"

"Are you fuckin kiddin me? I was almost just fuckin killed, for fuck's sake!"

"And you're tellin me you couldn't be a good officer because of that?"

"A good officer? Fuck you! Those people . . . they woulda fuckin been killed if we sent em home. They're good people."

"Oh, you think they were gonna take you back with em when they waded o'er the river yonder?"

"Those cartel fucks would've used me as a distraction. Doesn't mean they were for it, you fucker."

"Oh, but they woulda let it happen."

"Just let em fuckin go so I can go fuckin home, you old prick."

Jimmy lurched forward and seized a strap of the tanktop, ripping it in half. "Where is your *duty* as a fuckin officer, boy. I'm glad as hell you're alive but til you give me a good reason why you did that shit you won't be livin free, and I'll make sure of it."

"Because I did my job as an officer of the *people*, not of the law, goddammit!" He wrenched the fist away from him and pointed his finger between Henderson's eyes. "I gave those folks a future they woulda never had otherwise, livin under the thumb of the fuckin cartel. Good people, people who wanna be Americans; American *material*. They woulda stayed, they'd have ended up fuckin gettin killed. We woulda sent em back, they woulda gotten gutted and tossed away like fuckin trash. I gave em somethin better; *that* was the duty that crossed my path and I fuckin *did it*."

"Boy, you sound like a man that's forgotten what he is and lost himself in what he should be. *This* is your duty. Your job, your family, your fuckin country. To make sure no one who ain't supposed to gets in here. Those are the things that should fuckin matter to you, cause a man's greatest duty is to mind his fuckin *own*. To make his own little piece of Earth good no matter what the fuck anyone else is doin. *That's* what you need to fuckin understand. You ain't Christ; you're not the great savior of humanity."

"But you can decide who is and who isn't saved? Like you're fucking God? Like you can judge me and who I am as a man? Listen to me bastard, *just* like you my family is the most important thing in my mind at all times and *just* like you other personal duty comes second, only barely. *You* seem to have misunderstood you're born with a worldly duty as a man, you don't grasp that you're born to serve those who can't serve themselves. If my family was in a burning building you know I'd get them first without a thought but you can bet your ass that I'm goin back in for everyone else. The moment a man picks and chooses his duties is when they become mere pastimes for him to feel good about himself. Meaningless accolades. True duty is burdening yourself with misery and tribulation as it comes. Since the dawn of fuckin time that's been what us men are for but there are cowards in power who've tricked you into thinking selfishness is strength."

“You can have all this moral posturing and your fuckin ideals but let me fuckin ask you, boy: how does this do any good to your *son*? Your *wife*? Real Americans? When they have to share with more and more spics by the day. What if one day your boy walks in to get a job and the boss tells him ‘sorry we’re all filled up with Mexicans.’ What good does this do your boy?”

“By setting a goddamn example for him.”

“His daddy in jail for letting mules into the country is a example now?”

“Sure. An example of staying firm in what you know is right, no matter what some stupid old fuckers believe. To be a true American even when his government don’t want him to be.”

“Oh, so now it’s all about bein an American?” A burst of barking laughs. “What the fuck did they do to you?”

“Being an American is all about making America *better* while still keeping those same old morals intact: life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. Justice for all. What Johnson did ten years ago with the nigger bill, wasn’t *that* an example of a real American? A real Texan? Someone who knows he belongs to the greatest nation to yet exist and he still wants to improve on it? It’s like doing work on the house—it’s already beautiful and perfect, but goddammit, why not try and make it better? Leave it to our kids, like our parents did for us. Because that’s what we want, right? Not only to give our kids better lives but a better *world*. And that’s what I did—I just made the world better in a damn little way, but, hell, even if that boy grows to do nothin more than hold open the door for folks, it’ll be worlds better than layin in a grave. And that’s how far this goes: even if a man only believes the world is capable of good, he’ll work to bring it about himself if he really wants it. And a man who don’t strive to make the world good everyday and with every action ain’t no man at all. And my boy will be a man like this in a world of men like him, God willing.”

“Then if that boy believes in good so much, why don’t he go back home and make good there? Why not band together and fight off those fucking *leeches* that put them in fabricated debt? Why’s he need to be fuckin *here*? These fuckin bastards, more and more come year after year. Why run away from your fuckin problems and hide and burden me and my family when you can do something about it. It’s nothing but cowardice and selfishness of the highest fuckin caliber. I seen it my whole life n it still fills me with woe. There are clear-cut differences between us and them and so there should be a clear-cut difference between our problems. *Let them figure it out so I don’t have to.*”

“That’s the attitude that creates this goddamn situation; I see it everyday, in and out. Fuck you and yours, cause I got mine, we say, then wonder why these folks vie and die for a piece. Men in DC don’t realize that this is *their* responsibility. That they need to help the neighbor they’ve trodden on or reap what they sowed. But they don’t. And men like you and me have to stop minding our own to lend a hand so our own lives aren’t upended by problems that were created a hundred-thirty years ago.

“What, it’s James Polk’s fault that they can’t keep themselves together now?”

“It’s the fault of years of instability, you stupid bastard. The fault of no generation being able to get completely up off their knees because they always started out being kicked on the floor.”

“Of course it’s always the big man’s fault, what a fuckin scapegoat. All you Vietnam boys just want to hate The Man, ain’t that it? Still pissed you went to the jungle?”

“In Nam I did what I had to to live; terrible things I was made to do by men so far removed they’d never even seen the jungle. So I fuckin understand what it’s like to be under the boot of evil fucks who not only don’t care if you live or die, they almost benefit if you do. Within my first two months there I became a staff sergeant and I had men lookin to me to make sure they got out alive. And most of em did. Where other companies were wiped in a second we stood and did our job for four long years. Not once did I see a man whose daddy was a lawyer or a doctor. Never once did any one of us wish Westmoreland good health.

“N I see the same attitudes here, in the ways people talk in town. N I’ll tell you somethin: between a poor Texan and a poor Mexican, there ain’t no difference you can tell but the language. They got the same morals and motivations. But a rich Texan n a poor one in the same room . . . even then it’s like night n day. It’s the oil man and the oil worker. The senator and his constituent; at odds. The general and the fuckin soldier. Look at the kingpins and the government officials and suited men that come through here on one-day business passes and compare them to the men that use *work* visas or swim the river. It’s fuckin jarring.”

“And how is this *your problem*. Or your boy’s. Or your wife’s.”

“Because I want to mind my own, but that’s just *not possible*. As a man, as an American man, I was born with the duty to help those that can’t help themselves, because those are the values that brought us into existence.”

“And so was *self-reliance*, Rich. My ancestors were Scots; settled in Missouri originally. For as much as they needed it, they never got any help from the government, or their neighbors, or anybody when the Indians came. So they held their fuckin ground n many of my uncles were kilt because of it. But goddammit, they held their own, because that’s what they came to do: be free, not be indebted. To live full, grand lives, not have them be dulled by what *others* may need to get by.”

“And we wouldn’t have to worry about that if these suits got it and learned how to treat people that ain’t them. But they fuckin don’t and I’m afraid they won’t. And so it fell into my lap and became *my* duty, where it was someone else’s in the first place. And that’s all the more reason to stop minding just your own, even for a little at a time: so you can work to get to a place where you can. Do you see? That your philosophy only breeds grief for both ends of the pole? That the only people who win are the ones that are far removed, like that fucker Ford? Don’t you get it?”

A great long silence stretched out over that boundless chaparral, the wrinkled old veteran staring down a man thirty years his junior. He opened his mouth several times, but only found the words after two minutes: “I would be lyin if I said I didn’t respect your position. Like I said, like Christ in a way. But even as a Catholic I have to admit that the ways of life in Heaven and on Earth are different. Man was created with the burden of injustice and suffering. It’s what life is. And we all can’t go around helpin every sufferer and sinner because then no one would have time to help themselves, to save themselves. N your boy may grow up to be a great man who helps those in need but he could very well become another manipulative bastard that uses goodwill to his advantage. Them folks that you let go, there’s no guarantee they’ll be caught n sent home, n for that you’ve succeeded. But you shoulda thought about your boy n wife before you went n did this. Cause now you’re a federal criminal.”

“If you saw what I saw, Jim, you’d know that my family was all I was thinking about.” He felt his eyes grow hot and his mouth begin to tingle. The jaw got tighter and speaking became something he needed to push through. “I saw their faces, and I wondered, ‘what if that was Rich and Julie?’ What would I want done with my family if I had been like that poor bastard, whatever his name was. What if there came a day where they needed to escape their deaths and I wasn’t around? Would I want them saved? And you know what the answer came back to. And so I had to, not even for this man, but for myself, to earn some points so that in case they were ever faced with their deaths there would be a guardian to meet them.”

And Jim’s head only shook once more, great loose jowls flopping. “What a childish notion of the world. That things are rewarded by the universe or God directly instead of through yourself. Counting on others to come to your aid; you expect your shortcomings to the point it seems like you want them to manifest. So much store put in mystic forces. God help us all but you have to help yourself first. Get in the fucking car, Richard.”

“A man died trying to get his family a life better than what they’d known. If that ain’t helping yourself I don’t know what is. It’s duty. It’s what you’d do or I do if we’d been born into that; don’t act like Little Jim and Doris would get anythin different than the most.”

“We can’t play the what-if game here. Especially when you have their names in *your fuckin mouth now goddammit get in the fuckin car before I shoot you you treasonous bastard.*” He bared his teeth like the bulldog he was. Undisguised was his fear driven by love and his love driven by fear. The hypothetical had latched on somewhere in there and Rich could see it clear as day in those faded Levi’s eyes. The crow’s feet concaved and pronounced themselves as he sneered and finally opened his door. Rich’s heart fluttered and he nearly turned heel when Jim looked back up and said, “I’m gettin backup out here. Get you some fuckin food and water; you’re goddamn mad from the desert. You’ll stick your neck out for you got no damn way of knowin if they’s good or bad or neither or both and will choose em over your own country; what’s your major malfunction, boy? Those bastards down there created this situation for themselves and they cultivated it, *themselves*. No fuckin fault of mine, no fault of yours, no fault of our sons.”

“You’re right, it ain’t no fault of us or our boys or our wives or no one. But that ain’t no way to be towards nobody.”

Jim’s lips wavered but before they could produce any intelligible noise he ducked back in the cruiser. Rich heard the click of the radio and stepped towards him.

“What if it was Jimmy and Doris?” Rich pleaded, lurching forth, a meter closer to the Jeep, and he opened his arms as his comrade untangled the CB. “Think of Jimmy and Doris.” Another lurch and Jim’s head shot back out, knocking it on the top of the frame, hand on his revolver.

“Richard,” he began, holding his palm out. Fear damned his tough features; he was nigh childlike now.

“Think of Jimmy and Dor—” Rich choked on the last syllable as he threw himself into the man, trying to grab hold of both arms, to shake the bastard as he shook his son when he wouldn’t listen. And a great pain tore itself through his lungs as Jim unloaded a slug into his side, shouting “Get *back, dammit!*”

Rich felt everything give away at once—his legs, his bladder, his not-quite-empty bowels. Tears spurted from his eyes like the gout of blood from his mouth. Sand stuck to his lips and cheek as he planted in the sand, wheezing for no relief at all. The sand was coarse and tough and tasteless, yet he persevered. Thus is the role of the patriarch. Short, choking grunts blocked out Jim's shouts at the radio for a medic. Mud formed underneath him and he rolled in it like a swine. He did not have to question if this was worth his life because some outside voice told him his duty was filled, and that rest was soon. And yet even then that did not satisfy him; he did not want his duties to be over. And he thought this at the voice and there was no direct reply but he felt a great warmth come over him as his mortal coil shook and shivered. Duties far beyond his understanding awaited him as the world grew into blobs and blurs and the iron taste faded into nothing at all and he would not shy away because all the world depended on him, as it always had. As it depended on every man like him. *Thus is the role of the patriarch*, he did not quite think. *The role of the Lionheart*.

The curtain had closed over his vision and muffled shouts cascaded over the waves he rode in that total black, a great white pinhead of a sun way in the distance. His last thought was of hope that Richie had remembered to brush his teeth and give his mama a kiss this morning. But he knew the boy had; he had fulfilled that duty in instilling the habit in him. And the boy knew what his duty was.

As do most men, deep in their hearts.

CUATRO

That twilight hour prevailed over the dry land and out in the yard sat two Sheriff's cruisers. A woman wept with her head in her hands and a boy of about five felt disdain at the men that stood and provided nothing but the grim news. He ambled towards the mother and took her hand and kissed it and he had no idea why other than that's what his father would have wanted him to do. A great star appeared in the quickly dimming sky and winked its approval. As the boy stared up at this great canopy some miles west two coyotes set out upon a hunt, mother and pup at each other's sides, watching this same sky with their own doglike wonder as fowl darted to and fro. Many hours north a boy who could not even count the years he'd claimed upon this earth lay in a motel room with his snoring mother and stared out the window and named each star to her as his own father had once done with the stars and the trees and the mountains in their old life. All this and more lives moving ever-onward while that star provided vigil to the great plains lightyears below, as it had once in that antique age upon the walls of Londinium.

THE END