

A Lone-Starred State

Rudy Ruiz

On a weed-infested corner in what's left of downtown not two blocks from the bridge, by a broke-down tire shop and a mangled chain-link fence, you can find Estrella.

He slumps sideways a bit in his rusty wheelchair because he finds his failing left kidney aches less that way. The atrophied remnants of his legs lay crossed in dusty rumpled paint-splattered jeans, his feet stuffed into scuffed combat boots, somewhat resembling the lower half of a rag doll from another era that a kid played with, posed and then forgot about for the rest of eternity.

He's got just a stump for a left arm and his right one is disfigured, that telltale look of melted plastic scarring his skin, and just enough Vienna sausage fingers clinging to usefulness in order to clasp a tin cup in his hand where the occasional stranger might drop a few coins.

You wouldn't expect to see someone like this here. It's more the kind of fare you encounter on the other side of the river. There he'd be dime-a-dozen and he knows it. He used to gawk at those who would become his competitors for the scarce charity of this impoverished region way before he had any inkling he'd end up among their ranks. The man missing his entire bottom half who would roll his upper torso around on a makeshift skateboard, his hands calloused, his fingers worn down to nubs as he rolled himself around between the cars and tractor-trailers in line to cross the Rio Grande into Texas. The Indian women swathed in multihued rags, dangling babies like Christmas ornaments. The dirt-streaked boys wielding boxes of Chiclets like hunters bearing spears aimed at the heart.

He'd thought more than once of wheeling himself over the bridge and joining them in solidarity, but then he'd dismissed the notion because he didn't trust they weren't all part of some conspiratorial ruse orchestrated by a sinister gang, circus performers who at day's end skulked into the shadows, removed their macabre costumes, rose from their varied states of distress, and drove off in luxury vehicles after paying their masters their share.

"Estrella," waves an old man shuffling towards the bus stop across the street. It is Elias. He used to collect the tolls at the bridge until he hit his magic number, 65. He was as scrawny as he'd been as a child, running these same streets and alleyways, collecting change one way or another just like him, at first by cheating at marbles and later charging people for what otherwise seemed like their natural right to traverse a river that had been there for over a thousand years.

"Señor Elias," Estrella coughs back in acknowledgement, raising his empty tin cup in a half-hearted toast out of respect.

It hadn't always been like this. Estrella knows it. Elias knows it. Just like the old-timers who huddle over steaming cups of coffee and tacos de chorizo con huevo down at Reyna's Café in Market Square know it.

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There had been a time about twenty years earlier when the bordertown had bustled with promise. Trade with Mexico boomed. Eighteen-wheelers choked the border crossings, spawning new bridges like babies. Cotton, citrus and onions burst from the

ground like bubbles from boiling water. In the fetid humid air, from the black moist soil, beneath the lustful overheated sky ablaze in voracious sunlight. Estrella – like his environs – had flourished.

Back then he'd been known by his birthname, Guadalupe Jimenez. From his early days, he'd shown a penchant for coloring, drawing and painting. In high school, his teachers had marveled at his abilities to recreate the works of masters. Rembrandt. Van Gogh. Picasso. They were all Crayola paint-by-numbers to him. And then he'd stunned them by doing his own research, hunched over expansive tomes at the college library, to reach for the reiteration of figures which had risen from similar cultural roots: Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco and their iconic socialist murals celebrating the proletariat; Frida Kahlo and her uniquely tropical brand of feminism blended with sadomasochistic malinchismo; Tamayo, Lam and Matta with their tribally infused modernism.

“Guadalupe is a genius!” Mr. Medrano, the art teacher, himself barely a graduate of community college had declared. And thus the national art contests, college scholarships and local newspaper articles had showered down on Guadalupe like jasmine blossoms shaken from distended vines during a long-awaited storm.

Guadalupe's family had witnessed the unexpected commotion like rubberneckers at the scene of a bizarre highway accident still unfolding. This had not been their plan. Greatness had never interfered with the humble destiny of their kin.

Guadalupe's father labored fourteen-hour days as a welder at the port. He came home covered in soot and spoke to the children only on Sundays. His mother tended incessantly to their six offspring. Guadalupe, being the second eldest, was only expected to live in the shadow of his elder brother. So perhaps the one who was most impacted by

Guadalupe's sudden rise to notoriety was Ramon, who was only one year older. They'd grown up together, broken windows in the school cafeteria together, peeked at girls in the locker room together, sneaked into movies together. Their path had been the same, destined for vocational school and jobs in the salvage yards at the port under the tutelage of their father, until the brand of artistry had unexpectedly sizzled onto Guadalupe's innocent, virgin skin.

When the accolades came, Ramon watched quietly from the shadows, dragging on a Lucky Strike. Guadalupe displayed his work at art openings, was constantly surrounded by admirers ranging from beautiful private school girls to the local elite, and took the fattest art scholarship offered to him. When he returned from art school in New York, he brought new ideas with him. It was wrong to work for The Man. Texas didn't belong to the Anglos; they had stolen it. And the rich Mexican elite from south of the border didn't deserve their riches either. He had become a communist, a hippie, a radical. He donned a beret and grew a Che Guevara moustache and wore faded green fatigues embroidered with red stars.

Instead of chastising or discouraging him, his parents simply nodded when he spoke of his grandiose dreams, of art as political statement, chewing their tortillas like cows chewing cud, big dumb eyes haunted mournfully by vacant looks. The neighbors, the town newspaper, the young women of the still burgeoning city, they all hung on every word Guadalupe uttered. His fame was spreading. Past mimicking the greats, he seemed on the cusp of joining them. As his graduation neared, his paintings were hailed as "breathtakingly original" and "hyperrealistic." He was to be part of a Chicano exhibition curated by the MOMA in New York. And his new works would travel the world.

When the local paper reported this impending glory, the reporter decreed Guadalupe Jimenez, “the lone star of the town, the embodiment of its collective artistic and cultural promise.” Guadalupe had read the article out loud to his parents, who had nodded solemnly, sipping their cinnamon coffee pretending to understand what it all meant. The younger siblings had all fawned over Guadalupe like he was the fucking Messiah. Jesucristo Himself.

Ramon seethed. He simmered like a forgotten fire in the corner of the kitchen. And he waited, toiling in the salvage yards, feeling as abandoned as the hulls of the ships that rusted slowly in the salty Gulf winds while he and his coworkers cut off scraps to be melted down in the furnaces for new purposes. He was the eldest. He should have been the star, if there was to be one.

Guadalupe graduated but nobody from the family could afford to make the trip to New York for the ceremony. Afterwards, he had two months before the big art show that would launch his international career. He came home to work on his portfolio. The night of his arrival, Guadalupe, Ramon and a group of childhood friends went out drinking across the border. Several bottles of tequila and mezcal later, at the behest of their friends, who kept echoing the newspaper’s recently coined nickname for him – “Lone Star” – he ended up at a tattoo parlor downtown. The following morning, Guadalupe discovered that a single five-pointed star had materialized on his outer right bicep, swollen and sore.

After that night, Guadalupe swore off the partying. Not because he was hung over or repentant, but because he had to focus on his craft. Or so he condescendingly told Ramon as he dismissed his invitations.

Guadalupe had rented an abandoned warehouse by the railroad tracks, down the street from the shack their family inhabited in the old part of town across from the ancient, overgrown cemetery. In the mornings, he would walk there from the house in about ten minutes. And he'd spend the entire day there by himself. Painting. Working. Waiting.

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“Cuidado con los cangrejos,” Estrella admonishes any walkers-by with enough room in their hearts and weight in their pockets to grace his tin cup with a pittance.

This has led some interlopers to mistakenly call him Cangrejo. Cangrejo means “crab.” Outsiders, particularly gringos, don't have any idea of the significance of this name, but anyone who knows the culture understands the reference. No one better than Estrella himself.

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A few nights before Guadalupe was scheduled to depart for New York and his luminary opening, he invited Ramon to his studio. Ramon didn't particularly wish to go. He did not need to be reminded of his brother's talents or his own lack thereof. But he knitted his thick eyebrows together, furrowed his forehead in consternation, and after uttering a few feeble excuses caved in to whatever Guadalupe requested, just like he

always had even though he was older and bigger and stronger and should have been the one to lead the family to the American Dream.

That night, when Ramon sheepishly entered the cavernous hall which had lain silent by the tracks for nearly a decade, he felt as intimidated as if he were entering the Louvre itself in his soiled bordertown rags.

The light was low, lit meagerly as it was by bare dangling bulbs hanging from the rafters. To augment the light as he painted into the wee hours of the morning, Guadalupe had purchased a slew of kerosene lanterns he had placed on the creaky wooden floors of the structure at the foot of his massive canvases. The flickering flames cast an eerie magical glow across their vibrant colors.

Ramon did not know a thing about art in any official sense. But he was a human being, of course. He could be moved. And he was touched in a visceral way. It was as if he'd walked into a photo album of his own life, blown up to a majestic and explosive scale. His mouth hung ajar as he paced in slow motion through the long warehouse, staring in awe at the vast canvases which brought to life photorealistic scenes from a world he knew all too well. Abuela and Abuelo on their 50th wedding anniversary, at the barbeque in their backyard. The children, all six of them at their Abuelo's funeral. The only instance they had all worn black dress clothes at the same time. Their father welding at the port, the rivets of a ship's hull catching the light of his torch as sparks illuminated the outlines of his face, his mask raised over his head like the helmet of an Aztec eagle warrior, the lean musculature of his perspiring grime-encrusted arms wielding their sacred weapon. Their mother soaking pinto beans for dinner, the ovaled pellets teeming like larvae beneath a sheer glossy coat of water.

He reached out and touched the bowl of beans gingerly, expecting droplets to lift off the canvas and wet his fingers.

But they didn't. They were an illusion.

"It's not real." Ramon heard himself say.

Guadalupe chuckled knowingly. "It's the real deal, mano. This is it."

Ramon's eyes widened with a maniacal mixture of apprehension and delight. "It's not yours."

Guadalupe laughed again. "Of course it is. I painted them. All of them." He brandished his arm proudly, as if he were presenting his newborn children to their uncle, sweeping his graceful fingers in a grand gesture across the expanse of the hall. There were dozens of paintings.

"It's our life. You've stolen it." Ramon cried, noticing for the first time the large worktables behind Guadalupe, littered with containers of paint and open photo albums. "Look, mira. You've just copied photos from the albums Mamá and Abuelita put together all these years."

"That's why it's so beautiful, mano. Don't you get it?"

"You think I'm stupid, don't you? You think you're better than me? Right?"

Ramon spat, his face growing dark with rage.

"No. No. Never. I just wanted to show you, mano. I don't know who else I would want to see this more than you. I thought you'd be proud. I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy? Feliz that people say you're the lone star of the family, of the whole goddamned town? Happy that even though I was born first, and I ran faster, and I bench

pressed more, and played first-string football, and went to work with Dad, and kissed a girl before you did...that still everyone will say you're the 'estrella'?"

Guadalupe felt uncomfortable for the first time in the presence of his older brother. His shoulders drooped a bit, and his slender frame seemed to shrink into the shadows. He ran his hands through his shoulder length black hair, and pulled a red bandana nervously from the back pocket of his jeans. His white T-shirt dotted with anxious perspiration.

"You're not better than me, Estrella," Ramon spit out. And suddenly, Ramon felt his fingers hoisting one of the kerosene lanterns from the ground and smashing it across his brother's face.

Neither of them could remember the rest very well. They had exchanged blows. More of the lamps had been thrown and spilled. The fire had spread rapidly across the ancient wooden floor and up the support beams to the rafters. Ramon stumbled out coughing and vomiting, blinded by the smoke. Guadalupe tried to save his paintings, but in doing so found himself impossibly trapped within the collapsing inferno.

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"Los cangrejos," Estrella explains to a gringo tourist on a historical walking tour of downtown, "are the crabs in a bucket. When they see one of their own attempting to escape they climb over each other simply to drag him down."

“Oh,” the elderly man with a straw hat replies uneasily, depositing an entire dollar bill in Estrella’s tin cup. “Now I see. It’s hard to get anywhere that way.” He chuckles apologetically.

“Yes, sir. Yes it is.” Estrella nods in agreement, the lone star still blazing unblemished on his right bicep as he pulls back the cup.

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