

Coffee Port Road

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Reeser loved to shoot down Coffee Port at midnight on the wrong side of the road with his lights off.

I met him through art class, not because he was a particularly creative type or even enrolled in the course, but because he was Julia's boyfriend and Julia had won the top prize in the school's art festival two years in a row before I swiped it by surprise at the end of freshman year.

After the painting of my dad struggling to sell limes from the back of his truck won Best in Show, I became somewhat of a celebrity within the severely limited art circles at Porter High. So much so, that in my sophomore year I was deemed worthy enough to consort with seniors like Julia, and by association, Reeser.

Reeser was a lanky surfer dude with dusty blonde hair, pale blue eyes, and a seemingly endless supply of marijuana. Nobody could decipher what kind of academic schedule he adhered to, and he seemed to share no classes with anyone I knew. Everybody at Porter was required to participate in a certain number of electives or extracurricular activities, but Reeser was neither an athlete nor an artist, not a musician nor a member of the metal shop. He was a metalhead though, invariably sporting a black T-shirt emblazoned with album cover art by Iron Maiden or Judas Priest or Black Sabbath.

Reeser drove a souped-up 1983, Chevy Monte Carlo SS, black with darkly tinted windows. This act alone gave him a certain amount of street cred with a broad cross-section of Porter's social classes. The gearheads accepted him, despite his gringo status,

hovering over his open hood in the senior parking lot, pontificating about the benefits of nitro and turbo and eight cylinders versus six. The girls liked him because he had a cool set of wheels and he was a surfer to boot. Plus, there weren't too many blonde guys in Brownsville, let alone Porter. And, of course, the stoners and the skaters hallowed him as one of their own, perhaps a shining beacon of what they might attain if only they could play their cards as well as he did.

Aside from the car, and the cool hair, and an uncanny ability to ride waves while high, Reeser's most coveted claim to fame was – no doubt – his enduring relationship with Julia.

Julia was a cross between Goth artiste and smoldering Mexican mob boss' daughter. She wore a uniform of tight black jeans and black tank tops, her wavy black hair tumbling down to her waist. The first time she spoke to me, I thought I might hyperventilate. She was congratulating me for winning the art contest, but – judging by my metabolic response – one might have thought she had threatened my life. It wasn't like I never talked to girls, but Julia was different. She made the other girls look – well – like girls, while she embodied a whole other level of womanhood. It wasn't just about her looks, although they were enough to rob me of my breath. It was her throaty voice, her pout while she assessed her work on canvas, and the laser-focused fury with which she painted, completely engrossed in her work as she unwittingly entranced others.

When she nonchalantly invited me to join her and Reeser at their lunch table in the cafeteria, my status immediately skyrocketed, as did my heart rate.

“Do you like to play games?” Julia asked, smiling mischievously.

“What kind of games?”

“Strategy? Role playing?” Reeser probed.

“I like chess and Risk, but what do you mean by role playing?”

“D&D?” asked Julia.

“Dungeons & Dragons?”

“Yeah,” Reeser replied, leaning forward. “What about it?”

“I’ve heard of it, but never played.”

“Wanna join our group?” Julia offered.

“Sure!” I couldn’t believe my luck. “But, why me?”

“Our paladin went and got himself killed,” Reeser explained in terms only a seasoned D&D player could understand.

I balked. “You mean one of your group members...died?”

Julia giggled. “Not like for real, dork. Just in the game.”

“Oh,” I slumped back in relief. “Like I said, I’ve never played, but one hears things. My grandma’s church group calls it demonic.”

My eyes hovered over Reeser’s T-shirt, which sported a glowing orange demon and the name of a band called DIO in gothic script. Reeser had already shown me that when you flipped the logo upside down it spelled “devil.”

“What’s a paladin?” I asked, pushing Satan worship from my mind.

“A paladin is a holy warrior, someone who fights for what’s right and what’s honorable,” Julia explained, her amber eyes swallowing me whole as she spoke. “I think you’d make a good paladin. Yes, there are evil monsters in the game, but it’s all make-believe. Plus, as a paladin, you can fight those demons.”

Reeser smiled slyly. “Yeah, my grandma used to call it demonic too...till we converted her.”

My eyes widened in apprehension.

Julia laughed. “Don’t listen to him. His grandmother lives in Ohio and has no idea what goes on down here on the border.”

Reeser chuckled. “Yeah, she probably thinks everything down here is Satan’s work.”

Julia planted a kiss on his mouth and acrobatically swung one of her legs onto his lap. “Speaking of which, we’ve got time before next period.”

Reeser cocked an eyebrow. “The Blaster?”

“C’mon.”

As the two left with their arms around each other’s waists, I watched them traverse the parking lot towards Reeser’s car. She had a way of swinging her hips as she walked, her long mane following in rhythm like a hypnotic pendulum. Their forms vanished behind the impenetrable windows and the engine roared to life. What went on in there? Were they smoking pot? Making out? Summoning Beelzebub? All of the above?

My rumination was disrupted by a hard kick against the metal leg of my flimsy plastic chair, the impact nearly knocking me out of my seat.

“Hey, ese, outside. Now!” a menacing figure with shoulder-length black hair towered over me, tattoos emblazoning his sinewy arms.

“Andale,” another guy shoved me, forcing me to scramble to my feet to avoid sprawling to the floor.

I immediately recognized them as a pair of senior bullies known as Juan Diego and Chuck Norris. Juan Diego had earned the pseudonym as a result of his Virgen de Guadalupe tattoo. And his goon-like follower had attained his moniker due to his obsession with martial arts movies.

Flanked by my assailants, I was gruffly escorted out of the cafeteria and into a corner of the parking lot, my back pressed against the brick wall.

“Who do you think you are, Fish, hanging out with seniors?” Juan Diego asked.

I stared down at the red bandana hanging out of his jean pocket. It was the color of blood.

“Yeah, ese. Who do you think you are?” echoed Chuck Norris.

“I’m not a f...freshman anymore,” I stuttered nervously, peering towards Reeser’s car, the so-called “Blaster.” Would they notice my plight and come to my aid? Was the car oscillating like a boat on choppy waters?

“You think we give a shit, ese?”

“Yeah, ese.”

“You need to stay in your place, vato,” Juan Diego snarled, shoving me hard against the wall, his Virgen de Guadalupe tattoo dancing as he flexed his biceps.

“Yeah, your place,” Chuck Norris repeated, pointedly placing his hand on a set of nunchucks jutting from his back pocket.

“Listen, vatos, I don’t want any trouble.” I detested the quiver in my voice. If Julia could hear me now, would she deem me worthy of being a paladin?

“Don’t you try to talk like us or be like us, Ese. We know where you’re from. You’re not from the barrio. You went to private school before you came here.”

“I grew up in Southmost,” I protested. There had been a time – at my Catholic elementary school – when that proclamation had earned me instant respect. But that was long ago, before my father’s descent into bankruptcy had landed me at the most dubious of Brownsville’s public high schools, before my parents and brother had left me at my grandma’s house and moved across the border to Mexico because they couldn’t afford their American Dream anymore.

“You think we give a shit?”

“Yeah, you think?”

I stared sullenly at my tattered sneakers. My lunch soured in my stomach, morphing into a tightly raging ball of acid. What would a paladin do? What would Julia be impressed by, were she not distracted doing Satan-knew-what in The Blaster? I curled my hands into tight fists. “You know what I think?”

They jabbed their chins toward the sky, daring me.

“I think you two better leave me the fuck alone before I get pissed off. It’s not right to bully people.”

Chuck Norris pulled his nunchucks out as Juan Diego recoiled his arm and readied to swing. I called upon everything my dad had taught me over the years, which – I now realized – amounted to a considerate cache of constant counsel. Waiting until I saw Juan weight shift towards me, I ducked. A whoosh of displaced air grazed the top of my head as he missed. As his momentum carried him forward, I swept his legs out from under him. I shielded my head in anticipation of the nunchucks slamming down on my skull, but they never dropped. As I rose, I was surprised to see Dante, my lone football

player friend, looming over us. He clasped the nunchuks mid-air as my assailants cowered against the wall.

“You two better split,” Dante growled. “I’ll keep these.”

The nunchucks slipped from Chuck Norris’ hand as the fight drained from his eyes. Juan Diego slowly backed away. “No hay bronca, Dante,” Juan Diego assured. “Go Cowboys, ese.”

“Yeah, go Cowboys, ese.”

The two retreated without meeting my eyes again.

Dante patted me on the shoulder, handing me the nunchucks. “Keep these as a memento. Better yet, learn to use them in case you get in trouble and I’m not around.”

As Dante strolled away, I stared at the pair of black sticks bound by a short silver chain. Would a paladin use these? Would Julia approve?

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“Nunchucks?” Reeser stifled a laugh when I posed my question in the art studio. “No way, dude. A paladin wields a holy sword, high-octane magic. Nunchucks are for thieves and low-level martial arts wanna-be’s. Paladins fight evil head on, eye to eye.”

Julia nodded, her eyes fixed on her canvas.

“Maybe I’ll paint them,” I thought aloud, setting them on a stool in front of my blank canvas and reaching for my pencil.

“That could be interesting,” Reeser leaned back in the desk he occupied, his feet draped over the seat in front of him, his eyes diligently tracing Julia’s figure.

“Don’t you have a class to be in?” asked Julia as she flowingly manipulated her paintbrush.

“I guess so,” Reeser sighed, dragging his feet towards the door.

When he left, Julia’s eyes finally detached from her artwork and slid in my direction. As she smiled, I dropped my pencil.

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In D&D terms, cruising in The Blaster was akin to consuming a potion imbued with magical properties. The vehicle possessed the power to transport its lucky passengers away from the mundane and the monotonous, leaving Brownsville behind in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes, a blur of palm trees and little pink houses rendered meaningless beyond the dark filter of its tinted windows. The stereo system enveloped us in sound. The booming pile driver shook my very soul from slumber. Shouting over the din of grinding electric guitars, Reeser expounded about amps and wattage and the late great Randy Rhodes and how Black Sabbath was going to Hades in a Hollywood hand basket now that Ozzy had gone solo. Speaking of Ozzy, had I heard about him biting heads off bats and pissing on the Alamo? I nodded reverentially, pretending I knew what he was talking about while actually wondering if my bones would ever stop vibrating. The other thing about the car, besides its supple black leather seats and gleaming chrome, was its air conditioner. The Blaster was an aerodynamic refrigerator on wheels, a most welcome escape from the very real hell of the scalding South Texas heat.

I stopped nodding in awed agreement as we drove up to what appeared to be a small Middle Eastern city. Behind towering wrought iron gates and a massive stucco wall, rose countless turrets and golden domes.

Reeser decreased the volume as we approached.

“Is this one of those new ‘gated communities’?” I asked, gaping at the spectacular sight.

Reeser chuckled, lowering his window to punch the code into the security keypad.

“No, man. This is where Julia lives.”

I squinted, blinking as the sunlight bounced off the minarets and basilica-like structures gleaming beneath the blue sky. As we rumbled through the smoothly parting gates, palm trees soared on both sides of the driveway.

“Like, in a country club?”

“Like in...this is her house, dude.”

“Shiiiiit,” I mouthed slowly, struggling to take in the magnitude of the place.

We prowled up the long drive, swung around a massive fountain shooting jets of water twenty feet into the air, and slowed to a halt beneath a vast, vaulted porte cochère, a fancy French word I first learned right there at Julia’s house. Next to that glorified carport sat a dazzling array of vehicular firepower that threatened to eclipse Reeser’s Blaster: a white Mercedes, a silver Porsche, the requisite red Ferrari, and a heavily armored black Land Rover. They were neatly lined up, facing towards the gates like brand new show cars on display at a luxury dealership.

As I stepped out of Reeser's frigid Blaster into the oppressive heat, the arched wooden doors of the mansion swung open and Julia welcomed us with open arms. She wore a black, floor-length silk robe.

"Wow!" I said as she hugged me. Through her robe I momentarily felt her soft flesh press against me, causing me to swoon. "I like your get-up."

"I'm the wizard queen!" she bounded giddily to Reeser, throwing her arms around him and kissing him on the lips. "And these are my magic-user's robes. C'mon," she towed us both into her palace.

The D&D was surprisingly fun. Helmed by Julia's melodramatic cousin Aaron, who was a student at Southmost College, and accompanied by two other senior girls who were friends of Julia's, we embarked on an epic adventure. But what followed afterwards managed to be even more entertaining. Given the day's tremendous amount of what Julia and Reeser called "hacking and slashing" – which entailed rolling handfuls of many-sided dice, slaughtering monsters and listening to Aaron graphically describe the spilling of blood and guts all over dungeon floors – Julia proclaimed that we needed to be cleansed. She flung a variety of swim trunks at Reeser and me, and the next thing I knew we were floating in the largest swimming pool I'd ever laid eyes on. Was this what they meant by "infinity?" Long and rectangular, it was flanked on both sides by gargantuan white statues representing Greek gods and goddesses. At the far end, Corinthian columns formed a portico, beyond which a large resaca sparkled in the late afternoon sun. Off to the side, a bar sat beneath a thatched roof hut. Reeser ferried ice-cold Coronas for everyone. Julia – barely contained in a black string bikini – held court on a giant pink floatie shaped like a donut covered in rainbow sprinkles.

Later that night, as Reeser gave me a ride to my Grandma Fina's, where the houses stood askew and were slapped together from peeling slats of wood, he took a detour.

"What are we doing?" I asked as we headed towards the outskirts of town.

"You'll see," he answered cryptically. "Coffee Port has a couple of virtues that merit taking it, even if it doesn't lead to where you want to go."

As we drove, he surprised me by ejecting the Judas Priest cassette and speaking in a tranquil, sincere voice rather than shouting over the metallic fracas as he usually did. "I owe you a big thank you, man."

"For what?" I had no idea what he was talking about, but I started hoping he hadn't had one too many Coronas at Julia's house.

"For winning that art contest last year. If Julia had won again, she'd probably be headed up to New York for art college after graduation. But instead, she's staying in Texas, which means we'll be able to keep seeing each other. And for that, I'll be thanking you the rest of my life."

I gazed out at the shadowy, sparsely populated landscape blurring by at an alarming speed. I hadn't meant to ruin Julia's chances at going to a great art school. I felt overwhelmed by guilt.

"But enough of that serious shit," Reeser declared as we finally turned onto the street he had insisted on taking despite it making no sense. "Coffee Port Road has only two lanes, one in each direction. And Coffee Port Road has no street lamps or stop signs or traffic lights. And Coffeport Road is long and usually abandoned."

As he finished his ode to Coffee Port Road, he abruptly swerved into the middle of the street and slammed his pedal to the metal with a loud thud. The engine roared. The tires squealed. The stench of burnt rubber seared my nostrils. My head whipped back. As the car rocketed through the night, he extinguished the headlights, plunging us into absolute darkness.

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I screamed so loud and so long that when Reeser dropped me off at my grandmother's house, I feared my ears would never stop ringing. Could you give yourself tinnitus? That night, I churned restlessly in bed, alternating between dreams of Julia in her colossal swimming pool and nightmares of Reeser barreling down Coffee Port in the pitch black. What if someone else harbored the same insane idea, coming from the opposite direction? Paladins and demons seemed pretty tame compared to the world I was being drawn into by my newfound friends.

The following day was a Sunday, so my parents and little brother Rubén paid their ritual visit to Grandma Fina's, braving the line at the bridge. After a hearty lunch, my father and I sat on the back porch in the rocking chairs, as was tradition. I'd come to realize he had a preternatural sense for what was going on in my life, even though I'd been living with my grandmother for nearly two years.

“You look like you've got ‘susto’,” he said.

“Susto?”

“Yes, like something is troubling you. You have to be careful whom you spend time with at school, and also outside of school for that matter. You know how the dicho goes.”

“What dicho?”

“Mejor solo que mal acompañado.”

I mulled his message, that it was better to be alone than in bad company. “My friends are good people, Dad,” I replied defensively.

“Of course they are. But the inexperience of youth can lead to many mistakes, some that you can’t take back or do over.”

He certainly knew about making mistakes. If he was so smart, why couldn’t he seem to avoid them?

“Especially, be careful with the older kids and los gringos.”

“Why? I thought it wasn’t good to be racist towards people of other backgrounds.”

“Racist, no! Dios, no. God created us all equal. I mean: be careful because older kids may be doing things that you shouldn’t be involved in at your age, and los gringos – well – they have different customs.”

“Like what?”

“Often, their parents aren’t from these parts. They’ve been transferred to the border by manufacturers to manage maquiladoras in Matamoros. They have no idea what goes on down here. They give their kids the same privileges they would grant them up in Ohio and Indiana and Michigan. They buy them fast cars. They let them come home whenever they want. They let them sleep over at other people’s houses. How do they

know they're not sleeping with their girlfriends or boyfriends? The parents even go on vacations and leave the kids alone at home, trusting that nothing will go wrong. Don't they know their children can cross the border, buy beer, and throw a big party?" He shook his head in disbelief at gringo naiveté. "Life on the border is different than up in the Midwest, m'ijo. Those parents don't know what they're getting into down here. And if you run with their kids you could end up in some bad trouble."

I nodded solemnly, wondering if he had a spy tailing me at Porter.

"Also, be careful with the muchachas. Mucho cuidado. Nunca les faltes el respeto. Respect is the key. Treat them as if their bodies and minds are sacred temples. You would not defile a church, would you? Then respect women, m'ijo. Remember, there is a time and a place for everything, including laying down with a woman. That time is adulthood and that place is the marriage bed. Any other time and place can change your life – and hers – forever, and not in a good way."

"Who is 'her'?"

"I don't know. You tell me. Who is she?"

I shook my head, determined to end the conversation before I regretted it further. As it was, his sage advice had already singled out my friends on multiple counts. I was surprised he hadn't mentioned them by name. "I'll be fine, Dad. I'm focused on my art classes. Besides, if I did things your way I'd have no friends left. Just don't worry about me."

He furrowed his brow. "I'll always worry about you, son. And, someday, you'll worry about your own children. Ya veras. Whatever you do while you're young will

haunt you many times over when you get to be my age. Just remember, there's a time and a place..."

We rocked in silence until my mother called him inside for their weekly commute back to their tiny cinderblock house deep inside Matamoros' voracious concrete belly.

"How's business?" I asked as he opened the screen door.

"Slow. I'm still trying to get the tire recapping plant up and running again. I moved it over there to save money, but there are a lot of hidden costs. And that lime business really wiped me out."

I couldn't help myself even though I regretted the words the moment they left my mouth, "I guess that wasn't the right time and place either, huh?"

He hesitated and turned back slowly, glowering at me. But then, as he assessed me, his features softened. He put his hand on my shoulder and replied calmly, "Ramón, it wasn't just a matter of time and place. See, the problem is: the older you get, the more variables life throws at you."

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Julia and I stood at our canvasses, working late as the year-end art show approached. Hers was an elaborate dry brush rendering of a Rio Grande Valley ranch scene. A rancher and his wife fed chickens highly detailed corn kernels in a dusty corral fenced by wooden posts and barbed wire. Palm trees stood silhouetted against a glorious sunset rimming billowy clouds with purple, crimson and gold. Verdant rows of crops

arced towards the horizon. It was quite lovely really, a dazzling display of skill. I didn't even know how to paint in dry brush yet. But somehow, it felt "safe."

When I looked back at my painting, I saw a hyperrealistic portrait based on my mental photograph of Juan Diego and Chuck Norris the day they nearly beat me up in the parking lot. It was rendered in various shades of blue for the jeans, the cornflower sky, the Virgen de Guadalupe tattoo; white for the wife-beater T-shirts and marshmallow clouds hovering overhead; gray for the concrete sidewalk and unyielding walls of the corner in which they had ended up trapped by Dante. The color scheme was punctuated by the vibrant red of Juan Diego's bandana dangling from his pocket and the gleaming black and silver of Chuck Norris' nunchucks, hanging in surrender from his still-curved fist. The splashes of red and black were disruptive and dangerous. They foreshadowed bloodshed and pain. The true coup, however, was not the technical feat of achieving a photorealistic effect but rather the look in their eyes. Everything about the image conveyed that these were two tough guys from the barrio, but in their eyes one could glimpse their fear betraying them. Dante's miniature silhouette lurked menacingly in their pupil's reflections.

My art teacher, Señora Martinez, had stared at it for a long time, tears welling in her eyes as she said, "It breaks my heart. It's stunning. You've painted a macho stereotype with a multitude of perfectly placed strokes and then you've flipped it on its head with just a couple dabs of your most delicate brush. There," she pointed, "in their eyes, you have planted the seeds of fear. And that makes them vulnerable. That helps any viewer – regardless of race or ethnicity or gender – connect with them because, m'ijo, if there's anything that binds us as humans, it is fear. We're all afraid of the day we will

lose, the day we will hurt, the day we will inevitably face the ultimate challenge none of us can overcome.”

Thrilled at her reaction, I ran my paint-splattered hands through my hair, smearing blue and white through it until I resembled a comic book character.

Julia, who’d been listening studiously while continuing her own finishing touches, had cheerily chimed in, “You’re going to win again, Ramón!”

Now, as we toiled together in the studio, always first to arrive and last to leave, I was revisited by the wave of guilt that had swamped me when Reeser had revealed the consequences of Julia’s loss the previous year.

“Reeser told me you’ve decided on an art college in Dallas?” I asked as we kept our eyes on our respective paintings.

“Yes,” she rued. “But I’m on the waiting list for one in New York City. So who knows...”

I glanced at her painting and back at mine. If she won the contest, her work would be entered into the statewide event and she’d likely receive a slew of accolades. It might be enough to nudge her from waiting list to admission. I’d been learning about the competitive processes that drove the world of fine art education from Señora Martinez, who expressed high hopes for my future. But I had time on my side, two more years. For Julia, time was running out.

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As the judges approached my easel at the contest, I stealthily switched my portrait of Juan Diego and Chuck Norris for a still life study of the latter's nunchuks. It was something I'd done in preparation for the larger piece, and its unfinished nature was evident. Having arrived with high expectations, the judges scowled at the work and peered at me quizzically. They were so disappointed they didn't even place me among the finalists, which was a good thing because then nobody would see what I had ended up submitting. After the judges left shaking their heads, I put my portrait of Juan Diego and Chuck Norris back on the easel and watched Julia win the grand prize. I beamed with pride as she strutted across the stage to gather her awards. Her picture of the rancher and wife amidst an archetypical Valley landscape was lauded as an homage to our homeland and heritage.

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When Julia was accepted to the art school in New York, her joy could not be constrained. Massive festivities ensued at her palatial compound. The Greek statues even ended up donning some of the partygoers' bathing suits.

Reeser, however, was devastated. He knew Julia's good fortune spelled the end of their four-year romance. His middling grades had gotten him into a state school in rural North Texas. From there, it would have been a quick trip in The Blaster to Big D and Julia. But now his fate was sealed. On the outside, he forcibly maintained a feeble smile and a supportive spirit, but inside he was seething, which led to the tragic conclusion of our D&D campaign. The last time we played, his fighter took out Reeser's frustrations on

the whole group, picking a fight with each of us and slaying us one by one until he faced Julia's magic-user. She, however, turned out to be too powerful for him to defeat. And when he found himself at death's door, he defiantly declared: "I impale myself upon my magical broadsword."

Stunned, the group somberly dispersed. Battered, bruised, and in mourning for my fallen paladin, I bummed a ride from Aaron the Dungeon Master to avoid a chilling ride with Reeser.

A couple of nights later, though, Julia invited me to a senior bash. Incapable of refusing her, I assented to her and Reeser picking me up, but only if she was already in the car.

Laughing, she asked, "You're not still pissed about the D&D game, are you?"

"No," I lied. "It's just a game."

"You're so cute," she said. I envisioned her smiling, her full lips hovering over the phone speaker as she spoke.

When they picked me up, it was already dark. The car smelled like an intoxicating blend of her high-end perfume, his cheap cologne, and marijuana. Reeser drove us to the northwestern edge of town, to an unfinished subdivision that had been abandoned when the developer ran out of cash. We meandered through what seemed like an endless labyrinth of barren cul-de-sacs. There were no streetlights, no houses, nothing but overgrown grass and weeds illuminated by The Blaster's headlights.

Finally, in one of the cul-de-sacs, we encountered a cluster of cars assembled around a fire raging in an oil drum. In the flickering light, I could make out a cross-

section of the senior class that would soon disintegrate, a few absconding to college, the rest laboring in supermarkets and flipping burgers.

Hovering near Julia, I did my best to steer clear of the rowdy guys crowding the beer keg. Once in a while throughout the night, Reeser brought us a beer and offered us a toke, but we passed on both, instead nursing a warm wine cooler between the two of us.

At the end of the night, when everyone began to leave, Julia and I found Reeser passed out in the backseat. Julia slid into the driver's seat, gesturing for me to climb into the other side. She fired up the car so we could cool off in its prodigious air-conditioner. As she leaned back, her hair flowed in the artificial breeze. Sensing my admiring gaze, her lips curved into a smile.

Turning to look at me, she said, "Thanks for keeping me company tonight. Reeser's no fun these days. He's always wasted and depressed."

I nodded, still nervous in her crosshairs after all these months hanging out together. My heart pounded in my chest as she leaned across the console. Her left hand reached out and pulled the back of my neck gently towards her, our lips touching and then locking as one. We kissed for a long while and before I knew what was happening she had maneuvered her lithe body onto my lap, straddling me, her black skirt riding up to her hips, her hair tumbling over my shoulders, my hands exploring her soft curves.

"I'm not wearing any underwear," she whispered, her breath hot and moist on my ear.

My first thought was to ask her why, but I fortunately found myself unable to speak, my tongue entangled with hers.

"I want to be your first," she said, her hand reaching for my zipper.

I could have died right then and there as I mentally heard my droning on about respect and temples, times and places. His voice was joined by my dead paladin's, proclaiming platitudes about honor and friendship. I wanted her more than anything I had ever wanted before, yet this holier-than-thou choir urged me to stop, insisted on reminding me that Reeser was asleep in the backseat and that this was terribly wrong.

"I can't." My hand halted hers.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know."

"You don't like me?"

"I love you," I confessed.

She released her grip on my hand, relaxing her shoulders and leaning back against the dash. After a long pause, she sighed, "You've been so sweet to me this year."

I stared back at her, her hair all a mess, her mascara and lipstick smeared, her black blouse open, her bra rendered nearly pointless.

"If you want, we can take it slow. I don't go to New York until August," she added soothingly.

Overcome by a combination of feelings for her, ethical concerns, and downright fear of the unknown, I felt like weeping.

She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around me, holding me tight, our bodies oscillating gently.

Suddenly, a rustling in the back startled us. She wiggled into the driver's seat, pulling down her skirt and buttoning her blouse with blazing speed. I turned around to block Reeser's line of sight.

Sitting up groggily, he eyed me suspiciously. “How long was I out?”

“Too long,” I croaked, my voice cracking.

He reached over me and yanked clumsily at the handle, opening the passenger door. Impatiently, he motioned for me to let him out. We both stepped onto the crunchy gravel of the abandoned cul-de-sac.

Closing the door behind us, he edged up to me. His breath oozed alcohol while the scent of weed wafted from his Iron Maiden T-shirt and rumpled hair. He glared at me, his bloodshot eyes squinting in the dim light. “I thought you were my friend,” he snarled. “Find your own way home.”

Brushing past me, he parted a cloud of dragonflies dancing chaotically in the headlight beams as he circled to his side of the car. Julia shifted into the passenger seat so he could drive.

I banged my fist on the window, shouting, “Julia, don’t go. Don’t let him drive.”

It was too late. He shifted gears. Squealing tires burned rubber and spit gravel. She gazed mournfully at me through the glass, her eyes betraying apprehension. The chassis fishtailed as they sped ferociously away.

Desperately, I chased their taillights, futilely hoping to catch them, obstinately yearning to stop Reeser from doing what I knew he would do next. The circles in the unfinished neighborhood all flowed into one main street, and that one boulevard ended at Coffee Port Road.

* * *

Out on those desolate, windswept, pitch-black fields, sound traveled unfettered and far. As I struggled to stay on the paved streets, starlight bathing the concrete in a bleak blue glow, I was shaken by a sonic boom rippling across the long reeds of grass.

“No!” I shouted, sprinting in blind terror towards Coffee Port.

I stumbled over the curb, tumbling into the grass. I rose, spitting dirt, yanking stickers off my bloodied arms as I continued my mad scramble.

By the time, I reached Coffee Port Road, multicolored lights flashed a mile away. Reeser had boasted that The Blaster could zoom from 0 to 60 in 8.1 seconds. By the time he’d thundered a mile down Coffee Port Road he could have easily been doing 80 to 100 miles per hour.

As the math sank in, I stopped running towards the crash. My arms dropped to my sides. I proceeded slowly, burdened by the realization that there would be no survivors. It happened every year around graduation. Usually on the two-lane highway to South Padre, kids returning from beach parties, drunk, drag racing. Graduation gowns traded for funeral clothes, commencement ceremonies exchanged for rosaries and funerals. Futures buried in freshly turned soil.

My shoes crunched over fragments of glass. I smelled gasoline, spied pieces of rubber and metal flung from the impact. A flash of blue light illuminated one of The Blaster’s chrome hubcaps, tossed like litter into the roadside weeds. A cluster of black silhouettes circled two twisted hunks of steel melded into one steaming maelstrom. Ambulances and police cruisers idled as an enormous machine with mechanical jaws pried apart the fused and distorted mass. I expected to hear screams of agony, but the

only sounds were the crunching and screeching of metal, the hissing and pumping of the hydraulically powered jaws of life. The paramedics stood vigil respectfully.

Through the wreckage, I caught a glimpse of Julia's lustrous mane. It glittered in the flashing lights, crowned by safety glass. She was slumped motionless over the remnants of the dashboard.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as a deputy pulled me aside.

"They were my friends," I blurted out.

He nodded somberly, informing me in a hushed tone that they were gone, that there was nothing anybody could do.

* * *

That night, my father salvaged me from the scene in his rusty red pick-up. I thought he'd yell at me for being out late, ignoring his advice and nearly getting myself killed. But he didn't say a word. As the police waved us past the accident, I didn't dare look again. Instead, I followed my father's eyes. His pupils mirrored the police lights, but beyond that reflection lurked a flicker of fear. I sensed he was terrified it could have been me in one of those cars.

That night he took me home to Matamoros, to the cinderblock hovel where they lived. I slept swaddled in blankets on my parents' floor.

"Que pasó?" my mom whispered when she thought I was asleep.

"Two of his friends died."

"Dios mio." The sheets rustled as she made the sign of the cross.

“Solo por la gracia de Dios,” he murmured. He left his thought unfinished, but it was clear he believed that only by the grace of God was I still alive.

* * *

I attended both funerals.

Reeser’s parents appeared baffled as a sparsely attended ceremony unfolded silently around them at an impersonal funeral home. There would be no burial because Reeser would be laid to rest up north. My dad had been correct in assuming that his parents had been shipped down to the Rio Grande Valley to manage a maquiladora, only to now find themselves shipping their son’s body back home to Ohio.

The border specialized in cruel trade, I realized, wondering how quickly Reeser’s parents would pack up their possessions and follow their son back where they came from. Hopefully, they would do so before their two younger children reached driving age.

Julia’s funeral was sharply contrasting. So many people attended the rosary that my parents and I had to sit in an overflow room. The next day at the burial, throngs clad in black swarmed the Buena Vista cemetery. We had to park on a side road and traverse the graveyard to reach her family’s ornate mausoleum. There was much crying and hand wringing. Her mother wailed inconsolably. In the sweltering heat, we stood in line to pay our respects and give our “pésame” to her parents. Mariachis played mournful songs as her shiny black coffin laden with red roses was lowered into the ground. Afterwards, as we walked away with our heads hung low, a man in a pin-striped suit intercepted us. He wore sunglasses and his hair was slicked back.

“Excuse me, Señor Lopez?” he asked my father.

“Sí?”

“Julia’s father wishes to speak with your son before you leave.”

My father nodded gravely. Weaving our way through the crowd, we followed the man back to the family’s tent. When we reached the shaded Astroturf, Julia’s father stood flanked by bodyguards.

Spotting us, the tall, broad-shouldered man cut off his conversation and waved us over. Standing in front of him, in his tailored black suit and shiny shoes, we must have looked like a rag-tag band of hobos, our clothes outdated and ill-fitting, our shoes scuffed, our eyes unshielded by designer sunglasses like the ones he and his entourage wore. Yet, none of that mattered, because despite all his wealth and power, Julia was in the ground. And we were alive, whether we deserved it – or carried it off with dignity – or not. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. But – like most things on the border – this was how it was.

“Lopez,” he acknowledged my dad, nodding.

“Señor Guerrero,” my father answered, shaking his head sadly. “Sentimos mucho su pérdida.”

My mom nodded, staring glumly at the artificial grass.

“This is your son?” Julia’s dad looked down at me.

“Sí. This is Ramón.”

“Ramón,” Mr. Guerrero removed his sunglasses, revealing light grey eyes that sparkled against his dark skin. “You were a good friend to m’ija. She spoke a great deal about you.”

What had she said? How had she really felt about me?

“You’re a bit younger than her...than she was...” he continued, battling his emotions to produce the right words.

“Yes, sir. Two years younger. I’ll be a junior next year.”

“Si Dios quiere,” my mom murmured, nodding in deference to the Almighty and His inscrutable will.

“Ramón, Julia told me that you lost the art contest on purpose so she could get into art school in New York,” Mr. Guerrero stated.

I stared back in disbelief. I’d had no idea that Julia had figured out my scheme. “I...she...Julia was a great artist. And she was an even greater friend.”

“Well, m’ijo, you made her very happy. That day, when she came home with the awards, she lit up the house with her smile. And when they let her into that school after all that waiting, she was over la luna! I’d never seen her more excited, more full of life. She was eager to meet her future. That’s how I will remember her. So I wanted to say gracias to you for being such a friend.”

“I wish I could have done more.”

“We all do, m’ijo,” he replied. “If you ever need anything, you come see me. Me entiendes?”

I nodded.

“Pues, ándale, que nos quemamos en este infierno,” he concluded, gesturing for his bodyguards to escort him to his limo.

During the drive to Grandma Fina’s house, my mother asked, “Is that the Señor Guerrero that is well known for his ‘business’?”

“Yes,” my dad replied, morosely viewing the road ahead.

They were referring to the drug trade, but it would be disrespectful to cast aspersions at a time like this.

My mom pursed her lips, staring out the window at the passing palm trees.

“How did he know you, Dad?”

“We grew up together, ran in the same circles as kids, like you and his daughter.”

Somehow, I knew whatever they’d done together as teenagers was far different from what Julia and I had shared painting in the studio, playing D&D, and stealing glances.

“Le vas a decir algo? Al niño?” my mom asked, still looking out the window.

What did she want him to tell me that I didn’t already know?

He sighed, “I know Julia’s father told you that if you ever need anything you can call him, but with people like this, you must keep your distance.”

“But he’s Julia’s dad,” I protested.

“You never want to be indebted to someone in his...profession. If approached, be respectful, but go your own way. Let’s just leave it at that. Trust me. I know what I’m talking about.”

I frowned as we approached Grandma Fina’s house. If he knew so much, why wasn’t he as rich and successful as Julia’s dad? Was he just jealous or did he really want to protect me? It was pointless to continue the conversation. There simply was no arguing or debating anything with him.

As they dropped me off at my grandmother’s house, he addressed me through the truck window. “I’m very sorry about your friend. She was a beautiful young woman.”

“Yes, she was.”

He gazed at me wistfully. “Keep yourself alive, son. With a little luck, someday you’ll meet someone like her again.”

I fought back the tears as they drove away.

* * *

Graduation was a somber affair that year. In memory of Julia and Reeser, the school band didn’t even play Pomp & Circumstance. The seniors marched silently, the rustling of their robes filling the tense auditorium. The valedictorian spoke sorrowfully of Julia’s squandered promise and Reeser’s unforgettable style. Afterwards, as a long and vacuous summer stretched out before me, I gathered my meager savings and rode my bike to Curiel’s flower shop. Recalling that Julia had worn the scent of her favorite flowers, I asked Old Man Curiel to fashion a small garland of gardenias accompanied by a metal stand.

Beneath the blistering sun, I pedaled out to the spot where her racing heart marked its final beat. Laying my bike on the caliche shoulder, I propped the fragrant flowers up amidst a clump of dry grass and withered weeds. On the scorching pavement, through ripples of rising heat, I could still make out shards of glass, chunks of rubber and slivers of shiny metal scattered like ashes, the remains of the night our paths diverged on Coffee Port Road.