

## Remember Us Now, Wandering

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**D**own along the Rio Grande, where the orange canyon levels out to rocky sand, you and I meet the singing Mexican. We've almost lost the trail when we spot him, his feet planted wide and his voice a hollow note in the echoing chasm. I motion for us to go ahead, begin the steep slope up the path that leads away from the riverbed, but you want to stay and watch him. Standing there beside his mare, the horse's flanks so thin that we can see the outline of all eighteen of her ribs, the man sings as if he means to make some meaning of the split that divides us from him—of the Rio's depths, shallow enough for even my short legs to cross over and over again.

He sings, *¿Donde debago de estas arenas son los huesos de mis padres?* and later, when we are both tucked together like nesting dolls in our small nylon tent, you can't stop repeating the words back to me in English.

*Where?* you ask as you zip your sleeping bag open and hang the lantern up by its black braided strap. *Where beneath these sands are the bones of my parents?*

You whisper the question over and over again as the lantern's bulb grows dim, as outside the moon rises so bright that, at first, we are sure another car must have turned in. Lying with my ear pressed to the damp side of the tent, I listen to the wind that rises out there on the plains, to the approaching dust storm that will unearth all the metal stakes we have buried deep in the clay.

*Where,* you ask, *are they?* and I wait for some sort of answer as the night bleeds into day, as I sleep with my eyes shut tight against the desert's lonely caterwauling.

In the confines of the mountain basin, there is a small white cross that we take note of on our first expedition. You have your backpack hoisted high on your shoulders, your forearms and neck already pink with sunburn, and I stoop to examine the letters that have been painted there on the wood. I read out, *Juan de Leon*, and though we scour our guidebook for some mention of the man, we find no firm identity to settle on.

You suggest, *Maybe he wanted to be buried out here in the basin*, but I can't stop picturing what the heat of the desert would do to a body, how quickly the flesh would purple and bloat before falling away.

*Shot right off his horse*, the cashier at the camp store tells us. We have stopped by to wash our feet in the bathroom sink, our ankles swollen and

bruised from the six-mile hike. *Used the guy for target practice. At least, that's what I think.*

The man's skin is grizzled and unevenly pigmented, a white scar stretched high across one cheek and his right index finger missing from a one year stint in Vietnam. He has spent the last forty years traveling the most desolate landscapes in the country, from the Hundred-Mile Wilderness to the Nebraska Sand Hills and now the sullen deserts of West Texas.

*Body was so decayed when they found him out there, it had to be buried on the spot.*

We are quiet as he rings up a pair of baseball hats to stave off the sun, as he hands us a brochure warning of the dangers of heat stroke and dehydration, as he rubs at his nose with the stump of his foreshortened finger.

*I'm telling you. They only had a few scraps of clothes left to identify him.*

Back at our campsite, we lie beneath the blue tarp we have rigged between two stunted cottonwoods, and I wonder if it was the vultures or the wolves who got the last look at him—Juan's face a smooth plain before his cheeks hollowed and his brow began to disintegrate. Was it a man from town who shot him down that day, some gringo with the same dust-riddled skin and sunbaked hands of all those who live along the borderlands?

*Probably shot in the back, you say, your hands casting looming shadows down on my legs. The poor bastard never even saw it coming.*

We are on our way to the Hot Springs when we come across the signs warning of a recent uptick in thefts and muggings. I lock our wallets in the glove compartment while you change, your hiking pants exchanged for a pair of navy swim trunks and all the blonde downy hair revealed on your legs.

Along the trail, we stop to read the placards about the old bathhouse once run by J.O. Langford, a sick man driven out west in search of a cure—all hidden deep within the desert. He built a motor park here beside the magical springs—seven stone cabins and a brushwood bathing shelter to cure the weary of their rheumatism and stomach trouble and skin disease.

Now, the buildings stand to rot as does the metal gate at the nearby border crossing, and we walk slowly down the path through the thick encroaching reeds, through the grasses that rise so high as to block out all but the gray, cloud-streaked vista overhead.

The water is a steady one hundred and five degrees where it seeps from the springs' stone foundation. A fellow traveler has wedged a thermometer there in the century-old masonry, the cracked glass tube languidly leaking a diluted stream of mercury, but I take the flush that rises to our skin as proof more than anything. I sit there beside you as our legs color pink and then red, as our chests deflate and balloon, as the Rio winds past as it was always meant to do.

If there is a danger that lurks there upon the opposite shore, it is one that resides somewhere deep beneath the warbler's humming—beyond the rustle of a small javelina as she noses her snout into the water, behind the calm static drone of the cicadas.

You wrap your arm around my waist and ask me, *Are you scared?*

Peering through the grasses, I think of all that we cannot see: the Mexican black bears and the collared peccary and the dense amber coats of the coyotes. I imagine all of those who have tried to make a life here only to be displaced: of the Chisos who gave way to the Spanish presidios and the buffalo soldiers and the ranchers with their sheep and goats that overgrazed and overgrazed.

From within the springs, you pull out a grub that has been blackened and baked.

*No. Not yet, I say.*

There was once a wax factory here along the Great Comanche Trail, or so our guidebook proclaims. The workers were paid only a dollar a day—Mexican men hired to cut down the candelilla stalks and boil the stems, to add sulfuric acid to the raging concoction until the wax rose to the surface as a scalding, pliable skin. Skimmed from the top, the substance was boiled again, the wax rendered with steam and sweat and each worker's red, blistered flesh.

Hiking along a dried out creek bed, I can't imagine how one could live—plumes of suffocating, wet heat lingering atop the desert for days on end—but you take the guidebook from me and read out what happened to the camp.

*The whole factory was burned in a raid, you say, your finger tapping down hard on the glossy page. Nearly roasted those men alive when the bandits came.*

Now, there are no rust-laden boilers or ruins to mark the place of decay, and I wonder about the fire that must have consumed the place, the flames catching quickly across the dry sotol and the hard-spined agave. Throughout these one hundred miles of land, there has long been a burn ban, and we both know what even a hint of a spark could do to bring an end to all of life here in the basin.

Water is in short supply in the backlands, and we walk the trail with our baseball hats pulled down low against the sun, our lips raw and chapped from the desert's ever-circulating layer of dust. I suck in my cheeks and try to summon a modicum of spit, but find that my tongue is sore and limp, my throat so parched that I can barely speak up.

*It's just a little bit farther, you say, glancing over your shoulder to check on me, and I pray that we are close to the end, that some salvation will come here on the dirt road between Glenn Springs and Pine Canyon.*

Afterward on the car ride back to our tent, I make you pull over so I can dry heave beside a lone fragrant sumac.

You ask, *Are you ok?* but crouched down on my hands and knees, my palms covered in grit, I can only shake my head, my skin starved for the sweat that refuses to come.

On our hike up to Emory Peak, we hear that there is a wind advisory in effect.

*Nearly blew me right off the trail*, a fellow hiker says, his hair a mess of tangled curls and his pupils glassy and dilated. He has the same gaunt look as many of the other drifters we have met out here in the basin: his bones sharp beneath his skin, a constellation of track marks dotting his sunburned forearm. Camping is a cheap way to live, many of the young men hiking in with little more than a sleeping bag, and I wonder if there is anyone out there looking for them, what it would mean to find this teen sprawled out six-hundred feet below the peak with his delicate skull crushed in.

*He'll be ok*, you say as if to reassure me of the other hiker's safety, but it is us I fear for as we climb higher and higher in elevation, as the wind tears at my t-shirt and whips your pants around your legs.

You carry a gallon jug today, your backpack off-kilter and heavy, but no amount of water can save me from the panic slowly swelling inside my chest, from the numbness that creeps first over my arms and then my hands, from the white static noise filling my head. As we climb, I cling to the sparse tufts of scrub grass that populate the sand, to the rock face that turns slick with our perspiration, to whatever I can hold onto against the wind.

Around us, the vistas gradually begin to open—the earth a glowing canvas of orange and soda green and red—and my legs are shaking and wet with sweat, my breath short as we push on to the final ascent.

At the peak, the valley spreads out before us like the map we once studied at the very beginning of our journey, the desert reduced to a flat, surmountable plain. Across the way, the Rio winds like a extant vein along the borderlands, and I cry not because of all that I have heard or seen, but because I am finally scared of something.

*It's all right*, you say. *We can go back down again.*

But there are bones, I want to tell you, buried deep beneath this sand—so many sets of them that not even you or I could ever begin to understand.

*Perhaps*, I say, *we are both safer here on the mountain.* ∞