

Border Field Blues

by

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Dedication

To my mother, Danah.

A far better influence on me than one
might guess from this book.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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El Muchacho (The Boy)

The men departed as the last of the sun dipped into the ocean, but the boy waited until the darkness was complete, when the great bullring was a dark purple shadow above the roaring ocean. He did not fear darkness. He did not fear anyone. He had a knife. A rattlesnake head hung from his belt. That was enough for a man to protect himself.

The guitar on his back shifted as he slipped under the wire fence. A knot in the strap caught on the cut wire. He dropped his shoulder and slipped off the strap, let it go slack, pulled away from the fence and got free, then pulled the guitar through after him. One of the coyotes had offered to take him across in exchange for the vihuela, but he refused the man's bargain. His mother gave the

little guitar to him, when he turned eight. It was his father's guitar. Or so she claimed. He could not always believe what his mother had told him. Many times she had lied.

She wished for him to become a guitarrista one day, that he would learn musical skills from the men who worked in that place. He did not wish to be like them. Guitar players drank too much tequila. They were drug addicts and degenerates, little better than the whores. He would not be surprised if one of them was his father, but he did not care which man it was. They were all whoremongers. He had seen what they did to his mother, what all the men who came to her did. When she died, it was nothing for him to leave that place. He hated the smell of it.

He slipped the guitar onto his back and climbed to his feet, stared into the dark land between the two cities. Behind him the lights of Tijuana glowed closely, a sickening yellow haze. Ahead of him, many miles, a cold blue line floated above the dark land. San Diego, the first American city he would come to. The sidewalks were scrubbed clean there. Every house had a toilet. And glass walls. A man could live there, free from the sulfurous stench of sewage and whores.

The night folded in on him as he moved down the canyon, feeling his way along the worn dirt path. He listened for voices, but the land was silent. He had only his breathing and footsteps for companionship. A tentative breeze filtered up through the canyon, bringing a pleasant perfume. He had travelled only a quarter mile into the new land, but already it smelled fresher, an ambrosia that lifted his spirits. The air smelled of mandarinas, the little orange fruit his mother gave

him each Christmas, the one without seeds. The air was a promise, wrapped in its skin.

Soon the land leveled out under his feet. The canyon widened. The shadows of trees rose up around him, aligned in perfect order, laid out in a grid. The trees gave off the perfume. He walked up to one of them, searched its branches, found the dark little globes hanging there. He reached for one of the globes, tugged on it. The fruit fell loose and dropped to the ground. He grabbed another, removed it more carefully, held it up to his nostrils, gorging on the aroma. He tore off the skin and devoured its sweetness. He picked three more and ate all of them. He felt rich.

He continued down the canyon, snatching the outermost fruit from the trees as he passed, stashing them in his pockets until they were full. A glimmering azure light beckoned from the end of the orchard. He stepped out from the trees, in behind a group of boulders that stood above a large house. The house was dark inside. The light came from the pool of water behind it. He'd never seen a real swimming pool, only the ones on TV, in the telenovelas the whores watched, in the daytime when business was slow.

There was a girl in the pool, paddling from one side to the other. She was naked. He'd seen women naked before, many of them, but they were all whores. They had scars, and bad teeth. Even the young ones had sagging breasts. This girl did not. She climbed out of the pool and sat on the edge, splashing her feet in the water. There was a roundness to her belly, like the Madonna. The girl looked up at him. He stepped further into the shadows, against the rock. He did not know if she had seen him or only looked up at the place where

he stood. He continued to watch her through a gap in the rock. A feeling came over him, unlike any before. The girl was his destiny. She was a vision, like Coatlxopeuh, she who gave the roses to Juan Diego in the desert. The girl's hair glowed orange, like the mandarina skins; even the hair of her concha had the same color. Her skin seemed translucent, glowing with soft light.

"You like what you see?" came a voice from inside the rocks. The boy jumped.

"¿Quién está allí?" he called to the darkness.

"She is temptation," the voice continued. "She has married the serpent."

"Muéstrese," the boy said, demanding to see the man's face.

"Will you renounce the serpent?"

"No le entiendo," the boy said. He reached for the knife in his pocket. "No sabe."

Something moved from the darkness into the half-light. He saw a man's face, a glint of metal. Two barrels of cold steel jammed into his neck. It was a shotgun. He'd felt one before. The Chulo who ran the house kept one behind the bar.

"¡Renuncie la serpiente!" the man whispered. "Or I'll blow your head off."

"¡Lo renuncio!" the boy said. It was nothing for him to renounce the devil. He'd made no contract with Satan, or the Cristo. They were both for the foolish and weak. His only contract was with himself, with his knife and his rattlesnake head. He had cut the old Chulo. He would cut this man too.

"Don't move!" the man called. The boy paused. He touched the knife handle under the bulging tangerines. He waited.

"Show your penitence," the man said. The boy didn't move.

“On your knees,” said the man, kicking the boy’s feet out from under him. The boy fell to the ground, tasted dirt in his mouth. He pulled the knife from his pocket. He would not let this man make him unclean.

“To renounce the devil, you must deny the serpent,” the man said. “Only those who have shown penitence may pass through his kingdom.”

The boy did not understand.

“¡Su dinero!” the man said. The boy understood. The man was a thief, a common bandit, like the other insects who scuttled these hills. The boy had six hundred pesos, but he would not give the man any of it. The man pressed the gun barrel hard against the boy’s cheek.

“Your money or your immortal soul,” he said.

The boy twitched, grabbed the barrel of the gun and pushed it away. The shot blasted against the hard ground, a bright explosion that lit up the rocks with a split-second flash. Hot pebbles burned the side of his face. He swung his knife, caught the man full in the groin. The man screamed. The boy pulled the knife out and stabbed him again. The man fell on top of him, flailing his arms. The boy grabbed the man’s shirt, twisted the cloth in his grip. He slashed his knife across the man’s throat. The warm smell of blood engulfed him as it sprayed across his face. The man gurgled and twisted in a great spasm, like a chicken, an alley dog. He grabbed the boy’s shoulders. And then he was still.

The boy pushed the man’s body away and climbed to his feet. It was the first time he’d killed a man. Others had turned away at the sight of his blade, or run away with the first cut. He felt the side of his face. There were little holes where it burned. He felt dizzy.

“Daddy?” a voice called. He looked through the hole in the rock. It was the girl, the Madonna. She stood near the fence, looking up at the hill.

“Daddy?” she called again. “Is that you?”

The boy stepped out of the rocks and walked down to the fence where she stood. He did not care what she thought of him, if her father was dead. She watched him come down to her. She looked unafraid. He walked to the edge of the thick metal fence, reached a hand through the iron railing and beckoned her. She stepped towards him.

“Is he dead?” she asked. The boy nodded.

“I knew you would come for me,” she said. She took his bloody hand and placed it on the cool skin of her belly.

“You are the serpent,” she said. “And I am your concubine.”

“Game Over” flashed in yellow letters on the television screen. The computerized characters froze in place.

“Who won?” said the fat man on the sofa.

“Nobody won,” said the boy. “We have to play again.”

“Sure. I guess. I got nothing better to do.”

The fat man pulled a cell phone out of his pocket.

“I’m gonna order some Mexican,” he said. “You want anything?”

The boy punched a button on his controller, rebooting the game. He didn’t say anything.

“How do you win this game, anyway?” said the fat man.

“Somebody kills The Ancestor. That’s how you win.”

“That’s the shadow thingy?”

“Yes.”

The fat man found the number he wanted and tapped on his phone.

“Sure is a weird freakin’ game,” he muttered to himself as he waited for someone to answer his call.