

# AGUA

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## AGUA

1 .

It's late in the day. The riverbed is bone dry, its narrow course defined by towering red canyon walls, like Utah, but hotter. Drier. The kind of place where you can imagine vast numbers of dinosaurs, back in the day, when the valley floor was wet and lush. Then the rivers dried up and the great herds shrank to bog and oil.

The dinosaur hunters - those people who chip away at the desert trying to distinguish cretaceous scapulae from burned out limestone - say that the easiest way to tell a bone fragment from a rock is to lick it. The bone sticks. But this time of year, licking just about anything here will blister your tongue.

The canyon walls themselves are stunning - what fire would look like petrified in mid-flame. But the world that lies between its facing palisades is silent, until the water comes, released from mountains many miles away.

It begins as a pathetic trickle, hardly worth noticing as the moisture gathers near rocks, and shifts tiny grains of sand. Soon the trickle becomes a rivulet and then, just as suddenly, a creek and finally births with a crowning roar that explodes through the canyon, a wall of cascading water that swamps everything in its path. The noise is deafening.

Right behind the leading edge of the surging crest, a man, fully clothed, is tossed along the whitewater, his arms and legs flailing in the wild currents.

No one knows if he's screaming for help.

No one can see him. No one can hear him.

The rushing river drags the man past the rapids. He disappears under the churning water, and there's no sign of him again until the calmer waters of the lake deliver his lifeless, broken body to the ragged shore.

Within an hour a big lumbering SUV arrives. Police, patrolling the shores of the fast rising lake. It stops just short of the dead man.

The two Cops stand over the drenched body, reluctant to touch it. Eventually, one of them tilts the body over with the end of his shotgun.

"Holy Shit," he says in Buenos Aries Spanish.

"Holy Shit," the Mexican answers, equally concerned. He is built square and tough, and born twenty miles from here. "I don't need no more trouble."

The Argentine kneels beside the body and pokes at it until he finds an intact wallet in a jacket pocket. He removes the plasticized driver's license and waves it at his partner. Even in Mexico the face is immediately recognizable. "Si, it's the American," the Argentine declares, making it both an explanation and a curse.

The other, after considering several options, announces with apparently official despair, "We're fucked. I think we're really fucked."

"Not yet," suggests the Argentine, who has a little more experience in these kinds of matters. "We get back in the truck, we radio that

we're on the other side of the fucking mountain and we get our asses there as fast as this bucket of shit can go."

"And leave him for the dogs? How do we explain that?"

"We weren't here, we never saw him."

"No, I dunno, just leave him?"

"It doesn't make no difference to him no more."

"He's a human being, American or not, and he's entitled to some dignity."

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2.

The building Jake Berenson lives in, all lofts and apartments now, is an old four-story Manhattan Customs House on the West Side, not far from the river. It's all brick and stone, and the arches on the top floor, his floor, remain proudly intact. Some of the windows still bear the neatly gilded signage detailing which broker or lawyer had occupied which particular set of offices as long ago as 1871.

Neatly tucked away on the fourth floor, Jake was dreaming in French, which, while unusual because he speaks no French, is not entirely surprising. For the last several months, the French have been almost singularly occupying his attention. While he had the accent and the rhythms down, the words were all made up. Even so, he understood them. Until the phone started ringing.

By the second ring he was awake enough to know he hadn't understood a word. Omens, on the other hand posed no language barriers. Middle of the night, with all the blocks on his phone, it had to be the French.

Not the French directly. They'd call Rothman and if Rothman's calling him at this hour it had to be the news they were waiting for, because if the deal didn't close Rothman'd be up here in person, banging on the door, haranguing him for wrecking the company.

He was still unable to move by the third ring, and when he finally reached for his phone, he screamed in shock and awe. Every muscle in his body was trying to kill him. Every joint and every

tendon joined the assault. If he moved slowly enough, he hoped, he might be able to roll over and grab the phone, and then horror of horrors, he realized that it was the land line in the kitchen making all the noise.

"Rothman," he shouted, "Wait! I'm coming!"

What frightened him is that he did this to himself walking. Walking! Thirty-six years old, jog-free for no more than five or six months and look at him. He was ashamed of himself.

His "Fucking Idiot Disease" started when he decided to take a rare day off and walk around the city. There was a lot of pressure at the office, a lot on his shoulders and a lot on his mind. He usually let Rothman do the worry and anxiety for them, but this was make or break time and it was getting to him too.

Walking wasn't going to fix the pressure but he hoped it might just take the edge off a little. A few hours to himself. The kind you can often find on the crowded streets of the City.

He had devoted seven years of very long days and often complicated weeks to building this company, with the indispensable guidance, money and connections of Rothman. They made a great team. Rothman was the coach, Jake was the star and the reason so many gifted geeks wanted to hitch their wagons here. Jake was the lottery ticket.

If the French project works, they're a step or two from IPO territory and then everybody goes home rich. If it doesn't close, they're done. The big dreams turn into a pile of green melted witch. Friends and associates would vanish, and he'd certainly lose the building.

That was the thing that worried him most - failing everybody. Wrecking hopes and dashing dreams of everyone who came along for the ride. Including himself. His personal nightmare was that he'd never get to outshine his father. He'd never get to give the sonuvabitch the fuck-you-to-hell-I-did-it-my-way finger. If they ever actually saw each other again.

He figured he'd given himself this bad case of F.I.D. earlier in the day. He had spent the day wandering around midtown with his camera, casing museum entries and exits in search of soft spots. The way things were currently set up he thought he probably could have taken half the precious art in Manhattan without much fuss if he'd wanted to and half the city would view it as a public service.

So there he was, walking. Watching. Casing places. Walking. Walking. Shooting. Walking. Studying. Half of lower Manhattan. At twenty-five maybe you can just step out the door and walk a marathon, at thirty-five, he discovered, you pay big time.

He got the message about fourteen miles out. He stepped onto a curb and his leg suddenly cramped. Hard. Almost toppled him. As fortune had it, he happened to be outside an old-fashioned Jewish deli. Instinct kicked in.

"PICKLE!" he yelled as he burst through the doors madly rubbing his right calf and then screamed and grabbed for his left hamstring too.

It was as if he had landed in Emergency Heaven, a clinic staffed by doctors and nurses who smelled like brisket. They treated him with the urgency, respect and professional concern so often hard to find in non-deli situations. The assistant butcher held him up while a

young waitress handed him a cup of pickle juice and an older waitress said drink, drink.

It was magical. In seconds the cramp was gone and they were back in deli-land and all anybody wanted to do was feed him.

Pickle juice. They knew. He was very impressed.

He took a taxi home, along with a quart of chicken soup, a sliced rye bread, and some cold cuts. When he got there, the legs were stabilized but he was beginning to ache in other places too. Shoulders. His feet were on fire and his lower back in spasms.

Avoiding the Third Floor, where half the staff was still hard at work, Jake went straight to his loft and cuddled up to a bevy of ice packs. He was sore all over and knew that by morning he'd be in for some genuine agony.

RING. RING. RING.

"I'm coming! Don't hang up," he called out again in a virtually useless test of magical thinking as he shuffled himself across the bare wood floor. Cold damn floor.

He crossed the one large old rug in what he thought of as the formal space, and for a moment, when he shivered, he regretted not having wall-to-wall ruggery or heated floors, or even as a last resort, slippers.

It was a remarkable space. Floor-through huge. The ceilings were very high even by loft standards, and the huge un-shaded windows offered up unfailingly stunning views of both the river and the sparkling urban blight.



There were dirty shirts on the sofa and dry cleaning on the door. History in the kitchen. Stacks of magazines and bills on the hall table and office work spread across an old pine table. All telltale signs that girlfriend Gina has been gone for a while, almost a year, and he had pretty much reverted to the life of the single feral male.

Fourteen rings. It could only be Rothman. No heavy breather was going to wait that long. No political spam was going to risk this hour. It had to be Rothman and if it wasn't great news even he would have given up by now. He hated being this guy at the mercy of a ringing telephone, but the call was a life-changer. He could already feel it.

He finally got to it and cut straight to the quick. "This better be a fucking celebration, Rothman," he said.

"Excuse me?" the woman on the phone answered.

"Excuse me?"

"Jake Berenson?" she asked. She had a rich voice, assured.

"Berenson, yes" he answered, suddenly feeling like a man standing on jelly.

"Jake?" she said again.

"Yes."

"This is Senora Suarez."

"What?"

"Marisa Suarez." She paused, letting it sink in. "Alberto Suarez? From Ciudad Machia."

He ran the name around in his brain trying to retrieve enough little bits of relevant recall so he could say something familiar back to her.

"Marisa Suarez, yes," he lied.

"Yes," she said, "in Machia. Friends of your father."

Ben. Of course. Fucking Ben. Jake hadn't spoken to his father in a couple of years, and wasn't interested in hearing from him now. Once your father breaks your heart, it can take a lifetime to heal and Jake's hadn't even started.

"Jake," she said solemnly, "I have very bad news."

She had a most intimate voice, warm but the message carried a chill, a foreboding. Not just bad news, very bad news and suddenly he wasn't so sure of himself.

"It's about your father."

"Yes," he said, but the blood drained from his face anyway, because once you get this far, there's little left but the gory details. He thought he heard himself say, Oh God, but the only sound was the rush of air he exhaled.

Here it was, that generically disastrous, soul-screwing, oh-fuck-no, pre-dawn phone call that shatters worlds, and before the pieces had even landed he was overwhelmed with guilt and regret that he had ever spoken a foul word to his father. Had ever disappointed him. Had ever turned his back on him.

Suddenly, there was no road home for the prodigal son. No more possibilities. No path to redemption.

Marisa spoke as levelly as she could manage. Details were still sketchy. Terrible *accident*. "They found him washed up on the shore of a lake."

"He drowned!?" It blew through him cold and hollow. Ben hated water. Hated being on boats. Hated flying over the ocean.

"No, not drowned. A car accident."

She mentioned two other names, friends who died with Ben. Jurgen and Rogelio. He barely heard it.

"They say it was an accident," she said.

"An accident?"

"Yes," she said.

"They *say*? What do you mean, they say it was an accident?!"

"Yes." She didn't elaborate. "My English is not perfect, yes?"

"No, no. It's very good." He couldn't tell if she was ignoring the question or missing the import of his concern. "What kind of accident!?"

"I don't know details," she admitted. "The car skidded and went off the road."

"They found him in a lake?"

"Yes," she agreed. "We need to know what to do about his body."

*His body*. The phrase unleashed a deluge of dread and Jake didn't speak again until he could keep his voice from shaking. "His body."

"We can take care of everything." Marisa assured him. There was fear in her voice. He couldn't tell if she was trying to mask what she was feeling, or reveal it. Inform him or mislead him.

"Take care of?" Jake asked.

"Shipping the body. The paperwork. And the expenses, of course we'll take care of the expenses." She was trying to sound a caution, that it wasn't safe for him to come to Machia. She couldn't just say it, there was no way to know who was listening. And he couldn't hear it anyway.

Ben was dead, and Jake felt it like a cold spike through his belly. Ben was dead, and to Jake's complete fucking astonishment, it felt like his world just shattered. All the years of fury directed at Ben, no longer seemed relevant now that he'd really never see him again.

"Jake?" Marisa repeated, "are you still there? Hello?"

He snapped to. "I'm sorry, I was...yes, sure," he assured her, once again missing the alarm she was trying to sound.

"Jake," she explained, Ben was our very dear friend. I can assure you we will handle this with the utmost love and dignity."

He wasn't at all sure Ben deserved the dignity, or the honor, and he had no idea where this gush of familial pride came from, but he said no thank you.

"No. I'll come down and bring him home myself. He's my father."

"You're not listening, Jake - it's not safe for you here."

#####

3.

Ciudad Machia is a small city with about three-hundred thousand official residents, and at least that number again in makeshift settlements on the edges of the old town where people lived in alleys and on the streets, on the hillsides and beside the road. In everything from temporary cardboard shelters to tin shacks.

Until recently, Machia was a routine high plains town. Sleepy. Old. Life was hard, but people were getting by. Then suddenly it became a monster of industrial expansion. Huge manufacturing plants -*maquiladoras* - familiar international brands, sprang up everywhere. All of it made possible by Bancroft Aquifer and Engineering and their enormously generous commitment to restore and expand the old infrastructure and guarantee a reliable supply of water.

Now that Machia was thriving, poverty was rampant. When everybody was struggling, everybody got by. Now, for many, it was becoming impossible. The river was undrinkable, the fish had moved a good hundred miles downstream, and the only water available to the people was much too costly.

There used to be some dignity in simply managing. Now, only shame. Begging and scrounging and scavenging. It elicited not a prideful shame, not the gee-I-hope-nobody-sees-me kind, but a deeper shame. One that got into your bones and made you feel like you were one of the few creatures on the planet not pulling your

own weight. A sort of chronic, incurable humiliation. It was a hurt that cut so deep it could never be truly restored.

Alberto Suarez, Mayor of Ciudad Machia, was, in defiance of his slight frame, an imposing, handsome man in his mid-fifties. He was that rare politician, a true believer who still believed that the world could be a better place and that he could have something to do with making it so.

In the Mayor's office, Marisa was pacing, clearly more upset about Jake's arrival than Alberto seemed to be. She was barely thirty, with black hair and dark eyes full of implication, like her voice. She dressed plainly. Naturally. And she was stunning.

She loved Alberto, and it was commonly and correctly assumed by those who knew them that she was in fact the key to his blossoming political authority. It was Marisa's hard-nosed common sense and feet on the ground approach that had transformed Alberto from an enraged, flailing idealist into a sure-footed political player. She gave him focus and patience and he gave her a destiny.

"We need to leave for the airport," Alberto reminded her. "The plane is on time."

"He should not have come," Marisa replied, blaming herself. "It's not safe here, not for him."

"It's his father."

"Exactly. I could not have been more direct."

"*Toalla caliente, señor?*" the flight attendant inquired as she offered up her tray of steaming white washcloths to Jake.

He draped one over his face and sighed. Marisa had never actually said anything, but he couldn't shake the feeling that she would have if she had felt she could speak freely. They *say* it was an accident. They *say*, she had emphasized. They say.

Was somebody covering up something? Bad brakes on the rental car? Broken road? Dad was drinking too much again? Maybe one of the other guys was driving.

It was a long flight and Jake had lots of variations, until he realized that's just how it is with sudden death, it's incomprehensible so we reach for anything we can to explain it to ourselves. Without details or data, dark fantasies fill a lot of gaps.

He made allowances for his own sense of Mexico as a mysteriously dark and dangerous place. Even granting the bias, he couldn't shake the gnawing sense that Ben's story wasn't just about some old guy driving off a cliff.

He shrugged off the lonely existential despair and cast himself instead as hero in a journey of mythic redemption - errant son braves the world to bring his father home.

Still really pissed at Ben, he was unsure why he felt so driven to do this and chalked it up to the enigmatic gravity of family bonds. It certainly had to be something primal and mythic to get him to leave town just when the French were coming.

Death, he granted, does have a tendency to be inconvenient.

An hour or so after Marisa's call, Jake went down to the Third Floor to warn them he'd be away for a few days, and because it felt good to be among friends.

The eponymous Third Floor, a huge, very high tech, essentially open office plan is home to Rothman, Williams and Associates, The company is inspired, created and owned by Jake in partnership with the elegant and connected Colin Rothman and a mysterious investment group called Williams. Highly specialized, they create and build cutting edge security systems for 2extreme-need clients - prisons, museums, government buildings, research facilities.

The place is peopled by an unusually brilliant and tilted collection of arrogant designers, nerd programmers, some reformed ex-hackers (two previously convicted and none truly reformed,) three architects, two electrical engineers, and assorted other whiz kids, professional executive worriers, sales, and support staff. Almost forty people by now. And Maggi, his absolutely essential executive assistant and clockworks manager.

Back in his own hacker days, Jake did someone a favor once and slapped together a little security system for the friend of a relative who owned a little jewelry store that was always getting robbed. The next two attempts resulted in the robbers finding themselves trapped in the store and efficiently arrested.

The jeweler told his friend the car dealer, who told a supermarket manager who told a banker. Just like that, Jake was making money and having fun doing it. Then he met Rothman and moved to the fast track.

Even then, Ben didn't think much of it. Thought Jake was meant for something better, more noble, which made Jake feel like there



was nothing he could ever do that would make his father proud.  
Not a damn thing.

So when Jake came downstairs in the middle of the night he wasn't surprised to see so many people still working. "Don't any of you have homes!"

"Donnie does," someone shouted.

"And Myra does," somebody else reported.

"And everybody in accounting."

"Okay, okay," Jake interrupted, rubbing his neck. "It was a rhetorical question."

"It was an hysterical answer."

"What happened to you," someone asked, "you look like hell."

He laughed it off. "Run over by a bicycle messenger," he told them. "Anybody have a vicodin or a toke or anything, I got this killer headache."

The response was quick and enthusiastic. Lots of offers. Toke. Vicodin. Ativan. Prozac. Chlortrimeton. Neck rub. Shoulder rub. Beta-blockers. Some special tea they were already brewing in the organic kitchen. "You all need to go home and get some sleep."

The chant went up immediately. "The French are coming! The French are coming!" Several of them started pacing around muttering nonsense in phony (and some cases decent) French accents.

"Anyone have any airline connections?"

Four people (the Twins and two newbies) immediately stood, instantly seduced. "What do you need?"

"I've been trying to get a flight out to Mexico."

"Got it."

"Got it," the Twins said simultaneously. Almost gleeful.

"No, no, I didn't mean like that. I'm happy to pay for the tickets, but they're all booked. I just need a back door that'll find me a seat."

"You want to pay for your ticket?" One of the Twins asked, incredulous. "Who does that anymore?"

"Me. I want to pay for the tickets."

"Then you don't need us. Call a travel agent."

They were insulted. He was always doing stuff for them, not just hiring them, but the special stuff, the extra stuff. "Okay," he said, "how about you buy me Business Class but you hack me a First Class inconvenience upgrade?"

"Seriously?"

"One time only."

"We can do that," the hackers agreed, happy to be making a contribution. It was nice to get to play a little on the job.

"What the hell, Mexico?" someone finally asked.

"Research," he said.

"The French'll be here in a couple of days," someone complained. You could feel the anxiety in the observation.

"Day trip," Jake explained. I'll be back by tomorrow night." He decided not to say anything about Ben. Holding it together was complicated enough without an assault of sympathy. They'll hear it on the news and figure it out for themselves. So he opted for the tea, some ativan and a toke, and took the vicodin with him. First class all the way except for the last leg into Machia, a no-class commuter flight.

"*Senor?*" the young woman's voice was soft and soothing. He opened his eyes.

"*Senor?* We'll be landing in Machia shortly." She was polite. A touch flirtatious. It was not so much seductive as re-assuring. It was all theater. All she really wanted was her towel back.

On the upper deck at the far end of the terminal building, a soldier with a sniper's rifle scanned the tarmac. Beside him, a man sporting a straw hat and a long-lens Nikon snapped several close-ups of Jake: as he disembarked, in the doorway, on the steps, walking, meeting Alberto and Marisa.

The man in the straw hat took a few more pictures, then patted the soldier on the back and left. The man in the hat was in fact Colombian, not Mexican at all, and the soldier understood that he was to do whatever the Colombian wanted.

Jake was the last of the half dozen or so passengers to disembark and Alberto wasted no time rushing out to greet him. He grabbed

Jake by the shoulders. "I would never mistake you," Alberto announced, touched. "The resemblance to your father is clear."

It was too much for Alberto. He threw his arms around Jake, and Jake, immediately won over, returned the embrace. It was an instant connection, joined as stricken mourners in common loss. They surprised themselves as well as each other, and wept.

"I know there are no words. I loved your father," Alberto said. "That's all."

Marisa was patient and waited until they patted each other on the back and Alberto introduced her. With a generous flourish, he announced, "my wife, Marisa. You've already spoken on the phone."

"I am so sorry about your father," she said.

"Thank you." They shook hands. Her grip was firm and confident, not the grip of someone readily given to fear. And then, not so much an embrace, but they touched each other's shoulders. Sort of formally.

Alberto took him by the arm as they walked back toward the car. "I met your father at Yale when I was a graduate student. He was teaching a semester. He changed my life."

"It's kind of you to say--"

"It's my fault." Alberto declared, devoid of the theatrics of guilt. "I'm the reason he came here, to the Conference."

"My father never went anywhere he didn't want to go," Jake assured them.

"It was important," Marisa justified. "Over three thousand voting delegates - and many, many more government representatives, trade groups, industrial associations. It was not a small thing."

It was a coup for Alberto to secure this year's Conference for Machia. It was an essential platform for the major players in the world of Big Water. It was here the new technologies were introduced, where the deals were made, and where the players played.

"They practically took over the city," he said.

"We're a small city," Marisa laughed, "it's not that hard to do."

"Senora?" the old woman - Sylvie, the peanut lady from Lima - almost whispered. She approached cautiously, ignoring the Mayor, her natural timidity abated by her circumstance.

She had a small shack on the West Slope outside Machia but could no longer afford her garden now that the law required her to buy her water from the new Bancroft pipes, even though the new pipes hadn't reached her neighborhood yet. It was more difficult to manage.

She'd had three children. One drowned in a well, very young. Another, the youngest son, was killed in Arizona when he traveled there for work. And her daughter had run off some years ago with a man from Quito who had a car.

Her eyes practically glazed with honor at being this close to Marisa. Marisa was revered here - or as close to it as anyone gets without being dead. She was especially loved by the women living on the West Slope. If Alberto ever wondered what kept him in office, he was getting a demonstration. It was Marisa's

constituency that gave him sway. It was because of her that they came to the polls for Alberto, and came to the streets when he called them.

Sylvie, glowing with privilege, stood gawking at Marisa. Finally, she took a bag of her peanuts, and held it out. When Marisa accepted it, Sylvie plied two more bags into her arms.

Jake, in a gesture of foreign generosity, offered her money for the peanuts, but she ignored him.

"Jake, no," Marisa said, touching his arm, "it's a gift."

Then Sylvie took Marisa's hand and kissed it. Several times.

Marisa, gracefully and easily, took the old woman's hand and kissed it back. "Any news of your daughter?" Marisa asked.

"Christmas," Sylvie beamed. "I got a letter."

"Good," Marisa celebrated with her. "Good."

Jake was humbled by what he saw, taken aback because he was so rarely in the presence of such deeply bold sincerity. "What was that?" he asked Marisa when Sylvie shyly backed away beaming. It was her best day in a very long time

"It was nothing," Marisa deflected.

"Is everything here a secret?"

Nobody answered him, treating the question as rhetorical and obvious.

Sylvie watched them drive away, and then hurried back into the terminus where she found the Colombian in the straw hat waiting for her.

"Jackno," she told him.

"Jackno. His name is Jackno?"

"Si, Senor Gonzales, that's what she called him."

Pedro Gonzales, visiting from Colombia, commanded considerable respect and fear in his home country. He is prized for his loyalty, for his sense of duty and obligation, and for his ability to get it done, whatever it is, and whatever's required.

He didn't like being in Mexico but you go where they send you. Everything here was too intense, too rushed. He attributed it to being too close to America.

Smiling, actually feeling cheerful, Gonzales gave her some paper money. Generously even though he was hoping for a little more than Jackno. Well, he'd asked for a name and she got him a name. It amused him but it also confirmed what he already knew in his gut - that this is the guy.

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4.

Alberto had a Council meeting to attend and left Marisa to escort Jake. Alberto had pulled all the strings he could to set Ben's journey home in motion, but there were still papers to sign, affidavits to swear to, other jurisdictions to satisfy. The first step, he instructed Jake, was the Coroner.

But Marisa had other plans. There was something Jake had to see first and she drove him into the mountains.

On the ground, the high mountains are genuinely forbidding as they rise out of the formerly lush green valleys that support them. There is an embrangement about them you can't see from a plane. From up in the air it's a comforting carpet of green, but up close, riding by in Marisa's Jeep, it's a messy tangle of writhing biology.

Light and shadows flickered as they drove by. The world was intriguingly beautiful, and at the same time, suspiciously dark. As if foreboding lived in the leaves. This was the very same road Ben had spent his last minutes driving.

"Why not safe?" Jake asked.

"Safe?" she repeated, trying to get some purchase.

"You said it wasn't safe for me to be here," as if reminding her.

"I did?" she said, as if she had forgotten.



He wondered why she would lie about it but he did the polite thing and gave her a moment to reconsider and retract, which she did. "I did," she said quickly, "yes, you're right."

They drove the next quarter of a mile or so in silence while he waited for her answer. He watched her closely and admired how focused she was on not looking at him. "And?" he finally asked.

"I didn't mean you specifically," she answered. "I didn't mean it wasn't safe for you."

"You said me."

"I meant for strangers. Sometimes Mexico can be unkind to strangers."

"You said me."

"I meant Americans." She meant him.

"I see," he said, letting it go because she wanted him to, and learning that straight answers were going to be difficult to come by.

They were two switchbacks shy of the peak when she pulled over at the bottom of the hill Ben had been driving down. The site of the accident. Steeper than Jake had imagined. They crossed the road and stood at the edge of the cliff peering down the precipitous drop where the burned out hulk of Ben's SUV had already surrendered to the clinging vines.

"Ben was driving," Marisa explained. "They said he was coming down the hill too fast...there," she pointed. "Into this turn...the road is sandy, loose gravel...the car slides..."

"I was hoping if I saw it, saw where the thing happened, it might...I don't know."

"Make it easier?" She was gentle. "I don't think so, he was your father." Now that he was actually here, it was hard not to like him. So much of Ben in him, and something else, something new.

Even in the daylight it was clearly a tricky section of road. Mountain walls on your right as you drove down, death on your left in the shape of deep ravines and acrophobic invitation. The miracle was how few people had actually succumbed.

Jake scanned the hill, imagining what she had described. Very dark. He could practically feel the headlights bearing down the hill. He could see the car come up on the turn...

Sliding...

Engine roaring...

Brakes screeching...

"Dad!" he shouts, startling both Marisa and himself.

He closed his eyes and heard the screaming as the aging SUV slides from the road...wheels spinning ...and flies off into permanent night.

Eyes still closed he imagines a blinding explosion that rocks the night and lights the sky.

"They say you could hear the explosion ten miles away," she told him. "The police say he was thrown from the vehicle before it blew up, and that he rolled down into the river bed..."

"That's pretty much what the Consulate told me," he told her.

"Pretty much?"

"Pretty much exactly." He emphasized *exactly* so she would know that's what made him suspicious.

"The others were trapped in the car by their seatbelts."

"Jurgen."

"And Rogelio, yes."

They stared in silence for a while and Jake suddenly jumped from the edge of the road and scrambled down the very steep drop, heading for the wreck.

"What are you doing!"

"Just want to get a little a closer."

"Jake, it's not a good idea." She called down and he knew by the worry in her voice that she was serious. "It's not even a good idea to be here."

He walked around the wreck several times, not knowing what he was looking for or how he'd recognize it if he saw it.

He put a hand on it and was surprised to find it so cold to the touch. He expected it to still be at least warm.

She checked the road, both ways, there was no one in sight. "Come up," she insisted.

Jake had no idea what he was going to find. No idea what to look for. A severed brake line? He wouldn't know one if it was pointed out to him. Bullet holes? Possible, but this is Mexico, the car could

have come with the holes already installed. Flat tire? There was no rubber left to examine.

Jake continued to prowl, but he was flagging. All he was getting was confirmation that he was now an orphan. He shrugged off the thought because grown men are rarely spoken of as orphans, although so many of them are.

"Did anybody actually see it happen?" He shouted up. "Any eye-witnesses?"

Voices carry a long way up here and she tried to tone him down but it's close to impossible to shush someone from a distance. She held a finger up to her lips but she imagined that he thought she was picking her nose because it certainly didn't stop him.

She was right to be concerned. On the last switchback before the peak, the man in a wide-brimmed straw hat concealed himself high above and watched. He took two or three pictures, but mostly he just watched.

"Is there anyone we can talk to?" Jake yelled.

He pulled on the doors but nothing moved. The two that had been pried open in the crash were still open, and the other two were permanently fused closed. All the windows were shattered, all the paint blistered away, and the heat and flames had burned off any traces of the considerable blood that must have been shed.

"Marisa," he called up, "was there--"

"Jake," she shouted down, "shut up."

He walked carefully from where the SUV had come to a halt, stopped by convenient boulders, to the edge of the cliff. It wasn't a

straight drop to the bottom, but it was steep. Very steep. Jake thought the drop alone, never mind the explosion, could kill you. He could see the river below him, calm and peaceful. Not a river of tests and trials. Not a river of crossings or transitions. Just a quiet river minding it's own business.

He was afraid this was as close as he was going to get to an answer.

"Is there anything I can do for them...for the families?" Jake asked back in the car.

Marisa noticed. In the middle of his own grief, he still felt for others. There was a lot of Ben in him, she thought, but sensed she shouldn't say it. "You mean the finances? It's been taken care of."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Rogelio was flown home to Ecuador." It would have been easier for her to stop there, but it would have been a lie. "His body was so badly damaged that Carlos...the undertaker?...recommended to the family that they bury or cremate him without opening the casket."

"And Jurgen?"

"Austria."

"He hated Austria."

"His sister wanted him there." It was very difficult to talk about.

"There wasn't much left of him."

She had to stop and pulled off the road. It was a terrible vision to revisit. "A few teeth," she said. "A few bones. Maybe some ashes. But who knows ashes of what?"

"And the city of Machia took care of all this?"

"Yes."

"You mean Alberto. Personally."

Yes, she shrugged. "It's very sad, Ben comes down here to tell our story and there's no one to cover his."

"They'll give him thirty seconds on the Evening News," Jake replied, trying to make it sound less bitter than he felt. "There'll be a piece in the Times and the networks'll send senior vice-presidents in dark suits and limos to the funeral. Worst of it is, with all he's accomplished, he'll get remembered now as that old guy who drove his friends off a cliff down in Mexico."

For most of the drive down the mountain, it was quiet. Just the wind and the engine as Marisa took the twisting road with great confidence. He studied her, wondering who she was, really. Friend? She was obviously hiding much more than she was telling. When she looked over and caught him at it, he held her gaze.

"It's bullshit," she said calmly, but certainly.

"Excuse me?"

"The Official Story. It doesn't make any sense. Speeding? You know your father," she continued, "he wasn't speeding."

Jake laughed. "He risked his neck covering wars, climbing mountains, eating his own cooking...but speeding? Never."

"Yes."

He wondered what it was about this country that made everything seem either primordially gorgeous or decidedly suspicious. Marisa was both.

"You're right," Jake complained, "he always drove too slow. I remember how crazy it used to make us as kids. *Dad, c'mon everybody's passing us.*"

She knew the feeling. "I've driven with him."

"And no seatbelt!? Please." Inconceivable.

She agreed. "He didn't lose his life up there," she said, "it was stolen from him."

Wiping away the tears she was trying not to shed, she felt his loss, and her own.

"He wasn't speeding," she repeated, weeping, "And it was no fucking accident."

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