

It was early morning and the sun already scorched Prieto's back, scalp and clothes. Gas fumes whipped around him. He lay still on the ridged pavement with Mudo next to him by the wall of the gas station. The cool of the night steamed off the ground.

Prieto could smell his own and Mudo's animal stench. He was painfully uncomfortable from sweat thick in his armpits like the grease on his face. Gravel dust clung inside his soiled jeans and scraped against his skin. His arms were sunburned to black ceramic and cracked with mosquito bites.

He dreamed of the kind of shower where he used to live. The showerhead, when barely turned on, sprayed out water so hard it dimpled the skin. Only those sharp needles of hot water could clean out the grime that caked in his scalp and leave him with squeaky rubber skin. But the freshest bathing he ever managed in this pueblo was from the weak spigot of the plaza fountain. On good days, he slipped his head and arms under the noodle streams and barely had time to splash his chest and rinse his shirt before a guard pulled him off.

“Move away. You’re spreading your stinking pulgas on me,” Prieto said. Mudo punched his thigh. Mudo stopped speaking the night his mamá’s new man had him. His mamá shouted a storm when she found out. The pervert ran out, but a few months later the man returned. That was when Mudo left his pueblo for good. He took off with Feo, who never liked putting up with his family, because they were all a bunch of stupid cabrones.

“Wake up huevones. Your balls are so big you can’t even get up,” Feo shouted. Prieto opened his eyes disgusted. Feo held a plastic soda bottle filled with water in one hand and a shredded t-shirt in the other. He looked more ugly today than usual. Dirt was trapped in his premature wrinkles. He laughed and displayed the remaining rotten teeth in his squat face.

“Are you two dead or what? Andale, let’s wash cars.”

Niño, the orphan kid with big brown eyes, like the bottom of Malta bottles wiped the sweat from his forehead, with a dirty rag.

“Chingado.” Prieto rubbed his back and shoulders stiffened from the pavement bed. “We could have slept better in the walled-up convent.”

“Eat your shit. You passed out before all of us. Now, let’s go make some pesos.”

A Volkswagen pulled into the gas station in a white cloud of dirt from the desert highway. Feo being the guerilla window washer he was, leapt toward it. He splashed water on the insect splattered front window then climbed up on the foot of the car door. While it drove in, he quickly wiped with his rag. The driver stopped to let him finish then pointed to his back window. They only had this luck when cars came in from long road trips.

Prieto sat up and dug his arms into the ache of his empty stomach. He could muffle the pain with more sleep: sometimes its comfort served as a food. It was nice when he dozed away into the void that left hunger behind. However, the gurgling beast of his dry stomach eventually caught up to him. It tore into the lining of his dreams. Then he'd find himself tied up against a tree, with a basket of bread and fruit just beyond his reach. The hunger pains would elevate to the point where his inside were feasted on by the jaws of rabid coyotes, they dug and ripped into him, until there was nothing left of his gut but a flaccid bowl.

With a glance at his plastic backpack, protected all night by the matted side of his head, Prieto's whole body twitched for its contents. He wanted to put it off until night. But no-other-food, was a good enough excuse. When he picked up the bag, Mudo sprung up.

"You want some too?"

Of course he did.

"Let's go then."

"Hey, don't go without us." Feo and Niño ran after them.

"Did anyone see us?" Prieto asked.

"No. No. Let's hurry I'm dying for some." Feo said.

Prieto pushed open the corrugated door to the bathroom behind the gas station.

"Agghh." Prieto pulled back. "The devil shits here."

"Shit. Pure shit." Feo gagged and belched in his hand. "Let's get this over with."

Prieto closed the door. When he bolted it, they all halted in their spots, stunned by their air cut off with the stench and heat. The flies instantly attacked. Prieto beat one out

of his ear. They slopped away from a yellowish-brown puddle seeped out from behind the toilets like sardine oil with the odor of vomited fish. Hills of dirty toilet paper as high as their waists surrounded the overflowing toilets.

They huddled in the tight space. "A million cabrones blew out shit here." Niño covered his nose under the neck of his shirt.

A long cardboard sheet lay in one corner, warped and blackened with a roll of clothes on it. "Imagine sleeping here." Prieto said.

"Imagine fucking here." Feo hacked. "Let's fuck mi'ja while we shit."

"Andale, I want to go."

"I can't find the jar." Under the orange screen-light, Prieto searched through his backpack, his clothes stuck with used baggies. He dug to the bottom, and caught the prick of his hidden knife. The fly swarm pelted against his face and gathered on a sore at the back of his neck. He pulled out the jar then filled a still intact baggy with the clear liquid glue. They each took a turn and put it to their faces. The plastic bag expanded and contracted in sharp snaps as they inhaled and exhaled. It didn't take long. Niño was the first to stumble back. The instant stupor did the job on the grumble of Prieto's stomach. These few seconds were far better than any sleep. He licked the sweet sticky snot off his lips.

"I'm done." Prieto said when the pale pigskin walls rippled as if snakes writhed underneath them. Mudo banged his head against a stall.

"Let's get out of here," Feo said.

They stumbled outside. He gasped in the stale air. Feo leaned against the red weather beaten wall. His eyes were blacker inside a face that had become powdery

white. Prieto coughed out splatters of blood, where they sizzled on the ground in teardrop shapes.

“Wash cars,” Prieto said. “We need money for glue.”

Chucho, a no-tooth cabrón sold them the glue behind his cantina. He brought gallons of it from the city. He didn’t charge them much at all, just a few pesos for a can that lasted a couple of weeks.

“We can’t even move. How can we wash cars?” Feo hissed.

Prieto fell into infantile giggles he couldn’t control; they forced out tears and tightened his chest. He lost awareness, sunk into a pleasure that was only close to pissing. Better than anything, he felt like he was pissing in front of the whole world without a care. The pleasure foamed his mouth.

He returned to the blue and orange park of his old pueblo where he once played soccer with his friends from home. His limbs carried his body, completely weightless without any strain, across a grassy field. He ran fast without breath, his feet twisted in the mud as he weaved through a blur of bodies. He scored his own wins and laughed at their clouded faces. Without end, they played. Their shadows grew longer and longer then disappeared into the darkness.

“I’m starving,” Niño mumbled. “Let’s go take some food from the convent.”

Prieto’s hunger groans resurfaced. “We can’t go now. Too many people. They’ll catch us.”

“We wouldn’t even make it there,” Feo said.

Prieto wiped off the saliva where it itched his chin and neck. He would never do this again. Never, *ever*, again. The front of his shirt was soaked and sour. After the

pleasure was gone, he was left chicken-skinned with disgust. He didn't come to Tepecalli for this. He was just passing through and headed for some work in a city.

"This is the last time I spend a peso on this shit."

"Your wish my friend." Feo said sprawled on the ground, with an arm covering his face.

"I want to get out of here. All I need is the money for the bus ride. I could get it in two weeks."

"We don't last two hours."

"Not when you're so tired of it. I won't ever do this shit again."

"Whatever pendejo," Feo said. "Andale, huevones, let's wash cars. I'm getting my money for glue."

They stumbled for more car washes.

"Güera! Güera!" Feo yelled at a bleach-haired woman, who headed to her red car with Monterrey plates. Andale, dinero! This one was from the city. "Do you have any change to spare? I haven't eaten all day."

"No, I don't have anything." She shielded her face with huge fly-eyed glasses.

"Please, lady, see my father died and my mother is sick. Give me some money, just a peso you can spare. "

"I don't have anything." She pushed Feo with the side of her hand. This one was a bitch, which probably meant she had a lot of money.

Feo ran in front of her and got real near, "Andale lady, we'll wash your dirty filthy windows." He rubbed the sleeve of the woman's light pink shirt between his fingers.

She flicked her shoulder back. “Get off.” Then jumped into her car and slammed the door.

Feo pounded on her window. “Put a!”

The woman turned on the ignition and screeched back. Before they even saw the car hit Niño, he was underneath it. She sped away, left Niño writhing on the gravel.

“Help me.” Niño whimpered. He reached for his crushed leg.

“That’s what you get for standing behind her car,” Feo told him.

Niño growled on the ground, as other cars skimmed his head.

“Let’s move him.” Prieto said.

Mudo helped him lift Niño under each arm. He squealed as they dragged him off the lot to the sidewalk against the store. Feo didn’t budge. He stared at them as he sipped at his dirty water bottle.

“Maybe it’s not so bad.” Prieto hoped.

“It hurts real bad. That bitch flattened my leg.”

Prieto rolled up his pants that were already stuck to his leg with blood.

“Uggghh that’s disgusting,” Feo said.

“This is really bad. He has to get to a doctor.”

“You think they are going to let us walk into the doctor’s?”

“No I can’t go.” Niño moaned. “I’ve heard stories. They’ll put me down just to get rid of me.”

Mudo bit into his thick moldy nails.

“No they won’t. We’ll find someone to help you.” Prieto lifted him up.

“Chingado!” Niño screamed.

“We’re so tronados,” Feo laughed. “We won’t even make it there. Let’s just wait.”

“We can’t wait. Look at him.” Nino’s leg wobbled like a bloody turkey neck.

Mudo took Niño’s other arm.

“Are you going to help us take him?” Prieto asked.

“I’m not going anywhere. I can’t walk right now.” Feo said.

“Stay here then.”

On their way to the clinic, they passed families sitting at their doorways. One woman sat in a bright orange chair of threaded plastic. Rows of skirted fat bulged from her seat. She crossed her arms and shook her head.

“What happened to him?” she asked.

“He was run over by a car,” Prieto said.

“God’s taking care of him.”

“Stupid old woman!” Niño called out.

“Bunch of useless rats. Those are the kind that robbed my abuela.” The woman said

“Keep walking,” Prieto mumbled.

They carried Niño through glass double doors into a waiting room that singed their noses with a sharp vapor. The seats were filled with grumbling people and mothers bouncing babies on their laps. A heavy nurse angrily shuffled papers behind the counter.

“I’m sick of working in this mess.” She told another boney nurse, who leaned back in her chair, as she watched the television suspended from the ceiling.

“Please my friend needs help. A car ran over his leg,” Prieto said.

The fat nurse looked down at Niño who dripped blood from the seam of his pants onto the shiny white floor.

“Have a seat.”

“Please he needs to be helped right away.”

“You have to wait.”

Prieto pulled away from her desk. “I think I see a chair over at the back corner.” They maneuvered their way down the narrow aisle. Mudo and Prieto dropped on the floor next to Niño’s chair.

“We shouldn’t have come,” Niño said.

“This won’t take long.” Prieto didn’t want to be there either. He also felt like shit and needed a doctor. His high was now completely gone. It never took long. That was always the problem. A bug scurried down his arm. He quickly wiped it off. It could have come from that bathroom. He could still smell the fish on his shoes. It probably leaked through the holes of his soles into his toes. Seconds later another bug appeared and crawled up his wrist to his elbow. Prieto looked down at his empty arm. He wiped off the invisible bug. But where he wiped five more bubbled out of his pores. They scurried under his shirt and around his stomach. He groped it as he tried to contain them. But then hundreds erupted and scurried into his ears, his mouth, and into the back of his eyes. They crawled all over his skin, mercury fast.

Mudo kicked him.

“Don’t bother me now. I have to get rid of this.” Mudo kicked him harder.

“What!” He looked up angrily. Mudo pointed with his thumb at the patients in their seats who stared at Prieto, as he furiously scratched his head with one hand and in his pants with the other.

Mudo was right. He had to control himself and remember the ants that sprung up whenever his high came down, or else they would kick them out.

“I’m tired of this job.” The fat nurse complained. “I’ve been here too long.”

“At least we have one.” Her assistant signed in another patient.

“We have the worst job anyone could have hearing people complain all day.”

They complained without calling anyone. Prieto wrapped his hands around his ankles and pressed his head against his knees. His shivers died off a little. Time passed until a wail startled him. It was a toddler underneath a chair slapping her mother’s calf. Niño lay helpless in his whimpers.

“What’s taking so long?” Prieto got up to check.

“Nurse, my friend hasn’t been looked at yet.”

She looked at him as if it is the first time she's ever seen him. Then she peered around and over at Niño. Her mouth opened with surprise. “Oh, I forgot about you.”

“What! He’s dying over there.” Prieto gripped the counter to steady himself.

“Where did you boys come from?”

“Nowhere. Look we don’t have family or anything. He just needs help.”

“I’ll call the doctor over. There are many other patients today. But you two have to leave.”

“We want to stay here with him.”

She sighed impatiently. “You can’t. You’re not his family.”

“We’re his friends.”

“That doesn’t matter. I don’t want bums in here. Go on now.”

“No, no, don’t go,” Niño begged.

“Look we’ll have to leave or they won’t help you.” Prieto tried to reassure him.

“You’ll be alright. They’ll take care of you.”

“Please don’t leave.”

“We don’t have a choice.”

He gripped Prieto’s sleeve. “I don’t trust them.”

“Don’t be a girl.” Prieto turned away and pushed Mudo with him.

If he could get into a car, Prieto would leave this pueblo for good. All he had to do was wait by the highway for someone to pick him up. Then he could start all over again. He didn’t want much. Prieto didn’t even want to be proud of anything. So long as his bed wasn’t the pavement anymore at the back of Tepecalli’s gas station. But he asked for too much. It was so easy to leave, but still seemed impossible. The effort made him want glue. He didn’t want the company of the pack anymore. But there was nothing else.

Prieto continued to walk. Hot rocks snuck into the holes of his shoes and moved around like snails. They walked through the pueblo dazed. It all made sense to him in a fiery blur. Since the pueblo wasn’t in all these different distracting colors he noticed the people more. They were all strong and beaten like the hills that surrounded Tepecalli. And he was the shadow of a cloud passing through. The walls glistened. They glistened and they cracked and peeled like the skin of a crisp apple.

“I need a minute. I can’t walk anymore.” Prieto told Mudo as he leaned against a building. It was warm and comforting like his mother’s satin-slipped back had once been during thunderstorms. He clung to her under his fear. Prieto wondered where his mother was now. She probably waited by the window of her bedroom for him to return.

Prieto and Mudo headed back to the gas station to do the only thing they wanted. Feo waited there pushing the dirt with a stick. The air carried a carcass stench of a dog thrown to the side of the road. Chunks of hair stuck up from between its charred skin.

“Where’s Niño?” Feo asked.

“We had to leave him at the clinic.”

“It’s all over for him now.” Feo shrugged. “Bet they’re taking out his organs.”

“Nah. His insides aren’t good for anything.”

“Maybe.”

“Chingadera.” Feo stretched out. “I need some glue.”

“Let’s go in back.” Prieto replied.