

## *Sean Marciniak*

### Sanctuary

“So what’s this,” Harlan says, “about you and Juanito paying Mexican police for details about the dead girl?”

Juanito is the newspaper’s fixer, who chaperones us through the streets of Reynosa. And the dead girl? She’s the one in the blue quinceañera dress, found noosed and dangling from the hurricane fence on the far side of the international bridge.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Harlan says, like he’s in charge of me.

The central air blows a steady drift of recycled breath and asbestos, and it’s not enough to keep the South Texas heat out of the newsroom and off my neck. I pull the collar from my skin. The rule is that you’re not supposed to pay for information, though it escapes me why a free fact is better than one you might buy. Anyway, Harlan doesn’t have it right. We never paid for any information.

The truth of it is—well, who fucking cares.

So there I was, in the newsroom, with Harlan cornering me at my desk. Waiting for an answer.

Harlan is a fine-boned man, the sort you’d expect to play piano. Androgynous, but he’s spread his seed around the newsroom. He’s just won a statewide award for some health and science story. Something about a diabetes epidemic in the Rio Grande Valley, as if it were dengue fever. Diabetes is a slow-moving, preventable disease that you don’t get from mosquitoes. Targeting it for a news story—it’s like hunting a moose.

He’s decided his next target, I guess, is the humble career of Pete Gaskill, yours truly, as if this is Pulitzer material.

“Well?” he says. “What’s your answer?” Since his award, he feels entitled to answers.

I stare back at him.

“What are you looking at?”

I say, “You reminded me. I think someone broke into your car.” And me being the resident authority on burglaries, it’s hard to dismiss the allegation. Because I’m custodian of the police beat. Burglaries. Child murders along the banks of the Rio Grande. Poisonings by doctored menudo. It’s a scummy, low-class beat, though if I were better looking people would think it was sexy. As things stand, I look like I could be Giovanni Ribisi’s scrawnier cousin.

Harlan is looking at me like he doesn’t believe his car window is smashed, but his hand is going for his keys. “Really?” he says.

Not really, but I nod my head and say, “See for yourself.”

He grabs his jacket.

It’s occurred to me that I should make up a news story. After enough time doing this, a byline isn’t enough. I need an award, because awards lift you from the gutter and into better papers. *The Houston Chronicle*. *The Dallas Morning Star*.

Making up a story wouldn’t be difficult. My editor spends his days watching pixilated Asian porn. The IT guy has been monitoring our internet usage and has tossed this factoid into the newsroom.

But I think better of faking the news. It’s fine to lie about personal things, small things, but in journalism there’s a code. News copy must contain fact, not fiction. People can say what they want about me, but I do keep to a code.

There’s a tap on my shoulder. My editor has taken a break from Japanese time-stop pornography and tells me to come to his office.

We sit down. I note the Kleenex on his desk.

“We need a copy editor,” he tells me. He’s got big round eyes and oily lips. Whenever I see him I imagine a fat Dutch kid, licking an oversized lollipop.

“I have some people in mind,” I say.

He looks up above my head. “No,” he says. “The job is yours.”

My gut goes numb. Reporting has its downsides, but it’s one of the

last noble professions and it's all I've got left. No girlfriend. No friends. In the late hours when I wonder what makes me matter in this world, it's that I'm a reporter. Copyediting, meanwhile, is shitty. It's fixing grammar and spelling, the janitorial work of the newsroom.

"But what'll happen to the police beat?" I say, because they can't possibly ditch the police beat. The crime blotter is the only part of the paper that people read. And stumbling upon that thought leads to a darker one. I'm being replaced.

"Jenny will cover the big stuff. She's been..."

While he's talking, I note Jenny is Asian. And I think, how is little Jenny Chu going to cover a population that's ninety percent Hispanic and Spanish-speaking? Except that nearly everyone in this newsroom is white, or near-white. Yankees. Californians. One or two from Michigan. We're a bunch of foreign correspondents, and most of us don't speak much beyond "taco, por favor" and "más queso."

"...and we're going to outsource the smaller stories."

The word "outsource" seats me back in the moment. "To who?"

"The Philippines."

I can't say I'm surprised. Already the call centers in Manila are hunting down bowling and little league scores, thinning the sports writers. The Filipinos only demand ten cents a word.

"How 'bout if I cover the big stories and do copyediting on the side?"

"Look," my editor says. "It's always the same with your beat. Border Patrol this, Border Patrol that. Drunk driving, car crashes. We can do these stories from press releases."

My hand goes up, weirdly, like I'm answering a question in grade school. "What about police misconduct?" I say. "You think they'll spoon-feed us that in a press release?"

"We'll put Jenny on that."

"She's not qualified." Which isn't entirely true. She is, in fact, the city hall reporter. "She doesn't have the relationships," I say.

My editor looks at me, maybe for the first time. "Gaskill, there's a concern," he says, "that you're too chummy with the law."

So there it is. It's a point undeserving of more air time. "What if I break Pulitzer-grade stuff by the end of the week?" I realize how goofy this sounds, but it's not my policy to backtrack.

"No." His attention flashes to his monitor. I'm losing him.

"Was there another candidate?" My mind races through the beats, scanning for something dispensable. "Edgerly," I say.

Edgerly is a guy whose face belongs on an oatmeal can—bland, Midwestern, somewhat boyish—and he covers the environmental beat. It's a useless beat. The Rio Grande carries untreated caca from Mexico's border prisons, toxic sludge from the maquiladoras. Everyone knows this.

"You want me to fire Edgerly?" he says. "Why would I do that?"

"So I won't tell everyone about your Oriental internet habits."

He's dumbstruck.

"For what it's worth," I say, "Edgerly hasn't figured this out. I'm just saying."

My editor's face turns purple. "No," he says, his voice coming from deeper within. He puts his face in his palm. "It was between you guys anyway, so we'll do this instead. Whoever has the better story by Friday keeps his beat."

For a second I think about pushing him to skip the contest, to just get rid of Edgerly. But it's not like I have a ton of leverage. My editor won't get fired over online smut. This isn't a big city office with ergonomic workstations and lactation rooms. No, what I've seen will, from his standpoint, cost him social capital in the newsroom. He's not aware his browser history already has a readership, so this one slip feels especially damaging to him.

Hopefully more damaging than Edgerly is useful to the paper.

It's Friday and my situation is—no bueno. Across the river, a plane skidded off the runway at the Reynosa airport and tore a trail through a colonia. Twenty-two are dead. And this landed on Edgerly's desk because our Mexican fixer, good ol' Juanito, apparently is in jail while Edgerly, despite his Midwestern origins, is the only one of us with

a high-school command of Spanish. He even knows how to use the subjunctive.

The only fact in my favor is that the Lower Rio Grande Valley is numb to tragedy. Violent death is a daily occurrence, so a plane crash in Mexico that leaves a bunch of Mexicans dead is above-the-fold, but has a short expiration date.

Friday finds me driving west along the border. I follow the highway along the Rio Grande, first clearing Hidalgo County, then Starr County. Past the border of the newspaper's circulation, to a place that has no paper. The place of myth, curanderismo, ghost stories, dead Apaches. La llorona wailing over drowned children. Where news and history and belief are blended and told through song.

By noon, I've reached what could be unclaimed territory. I sit on the tailgate of my truck and the Rio Grande twists below me and disappears between the bluffs. Beyond the river lies a town in Mexico, the name escapes me. That town and the one I'm in existed long before there was a border. They remain siblings, more alike each other than the countries behind them.

The truth out here will be what I make of it.

I watch a group of four kick their way across the river on inner tubes, their clothes in plastic bags that balloon out behind them. That's one version. Another has the bags full of black tar heroin. The wind sweeps past my face and I can hear nothing. No traffic, no noise, no birdsong. I've read somewhere that if you can't hear birds, it's a sign that danger is close.

I rehearse what I aim to do and turn away from the river and face the plaza behind me. It's long but skinny, framed on the sides by colonial buildings. A church sits up at the far end. I read somewhere it was the backdrop of a 1950s Western.

A block off this main square is a filling station, the only one you'll find for seventy miles in every direction. That's where I'll start.

Before I leave my truck behind I take another look at the Mexicans crossing the river. I go back and check the doors. Older model Ford F-150s are popular among narcotraficantes, especially black ones like

mine. And they're easy to steal.

At the gasoline station I spot the camera in my periphery. This is a big brand franchise of a gas station, one with a long history in Texas. It's relatively new to these parts, but its red signs already have been bleached to pink by the border sun.

I walk past the pumps and into the station, where I see myself arrive on a black-and-white monitor behind the clerk's head. The smell of chorizo lingers, remnants of the breakfast burritos an old lady sold from here this morning. I've done my homework.

The clerk is a Mexican boy with a moustache too thick for his age and his name is Chuy, according to the nametag pinned to his company-issue shirt. He nods at me. We've never met, we've only spoken by phone, but I'm probably the first new face he's seen this week. He knows who I am by virtue of who I'm not.

"I'm Gaskill," I offer.

He nods again. He's got the stare of a reptile, and I can't tell whether he's slow or bad intentioned.

"Do you have the footage?" I say.

He sets down a Styrofoam cup he's been holding at his belly and extends his hand.

"Of course." I fish two Andrew Jacksons from my wallet, seven hours' of my earnings, and put them in his hand.

The clerk beckons me behind the counter and begins rewinding his video setup. "What time did you say it was?" he says.

"All I know is that it was yesterday. In the morning."

The black-and-white monitor cuts out, then blinks back on, showing the gasoline pumps outside. We watch the day in reverse, then the night. Then the previous day. Until the clerk makes a little noise, stops the tape, fast forwards, and leaves the frame on a dark Ford F-150. It's black, but in the colorless feed it easily could be something else.

"It's maroon," I tell Chuy.

"Brown?"

"No. Dark reddish."

The truck in the frame pulls up to the pump and a man in a hoodie steps out. His movements are twitchy, he has the look of the hunted. Maybe he's a cliché, but that's fine—I don't need this character to do anything Oscar-worthy. It's enough that the license plate is readable, and that it looks realistic.

"You think it's Bad Luck Joe?" Chuy says. There's a mix of something in his voice. I sense curiosity, tempered by fear. Because the boy was working yesterday and he's wondering how the world will deal with his inattentiveness.

The man on the tape swipes a credit card at the outdoor pump and looks around. Maybe he looks too furtive, like a cartoon bandit. "How 'bout you check who that card belongs to?" I say, louder than intended.

Chuy punches buttons into his register and the machine chitters as hundreds of tiny black characters are branded into a strip of thermal paper. The paper discharges in a spool.

The boy stretches it and checks the tiny characters against the time on the monitor.

"Here it is," he says. "The name on the card is José Jardinero." And he starts thinking. Which looks painful. It's like he's trying to do long division in his head but, if he needs it, I'll help with the calculations.

José Jardinero translates into Joe Gardener. Bad Luck Joe Gardener, let's be clear. Age thirty-nine, husband, father of two. An engineer from a lower-tier college who became a maquiladora supervisor, last seen with his family in their dark red F-150 truck, crossing the border for dinner in Reynosa. Because Joe and his brood were all fair-skinned and blonde, their disappearance made international news last year.

They're goners, under two or three inches of border dirt. That's my guess, and a good one. But the three most popular internet theories all incorporate some element of survival. There's the kidnapping angle, though there's never been a demand for ransom. Then there's the embezzlement theory, which has Joe Gardener stealing pesos from the maquiladora and taking off with his family for Central America, likely Belize or Costa Rica. That one has its problems. I like the one which has Joe murdering his family, leaving three bodies in shallow graves,

and disappearing into Mexico. It has the upside of being three-quarters correct, and being the second most plausible.

Chuy is tapping the counter. He's arrived at a conclusion about the credit card. "Mira," he says. "The Anglo way to say José is Joe. And *Jardinero* means Gardener."

I do know how to pick 'em. But I'm most proud of José *Jardinero's* credit card. Ordered in a public library in Matamoros, shipped to a mailbox at a foreclosed home in Weslaco, Texas. The only hiccup in the application was the request for an SSN. I left it blank on all twenty applications. In the end, I had a choice between three lenders. Ha-cha-cha-cha.

I'm waiting for Chuy to notice which way the man on the tape turned after he filled up his truck and eased off the property. It's west. I'm waiting for him to notice that and wonder if Joe then continued west, toward Laredo and Del Rio and maybe Big Bend, or turned up north through the ranchlands, skirting the Border Patrol checkpoint on Farm-to-Market Road 1017 near Hebbronville. As far along as he can wonder, I can provide answers. And I will. They'll be strung across newspapers for the next few weeks. I'm betting this blows up on the Associated Press wire, and hits newsstands as far as San Francisco and Cape Code.

Truthfully, it's something I've been working on since Harlan won his bullshit prize last month. It was when Harlan got the award that I felt it—that this profession failed me. That its awards were given at random. Because Harlan never gets his hands dirty. He interviews doctors and looks at statistics. Anyone can do that. Try standing over an autopsy table and asking coherent questions while the county coroner peels the face off a shooting victim. Diabetes, please.

"How about some quotes?" I say.

Chuy backs up, like I'm brandishing roadkill.

"I don't know."

"How 'bout this, then?" I lean closer. "How 'bout I say you called this one in? Put two and two together?"

He closes his eyes. His tongue rubs its way across his lower lip. He's

tasting the glory in this new narrative.

“Okay,” he says.

“Except,” I tell him, “I’ll need my forty dollars back.”

The town square slopes toward the river and it’s a nice easy walk down. On my left is a variety store. The windows are dark and hand-written signs clutter the glass. Fifty percent off. All sales final, both in English and in Spanish. The paint’s peeling and I swear I can hear rats inside.

From decay comes life. Things are falling into place for me. I’ve got a serial story about to explode—an exclusive run on an international thriller. All that’s left to do is get in the truck, drive three hours east, and file a dynamite story I’ve already written by the five o’clock deadline. Edgerly’s story, meanwhile, will die within a few days. All that’s left for him is a 500-word follow-up with whatever bureaucracy is thanklessly tasked with investigating a Reynosa plane crash.

For kicks, I give Edgerly a call.

“What?” he says, all in a huff. He knows by now it was me who dragged him into this competition of ours. I start to talk, telling him I’ve got a game changer of a story, but he can’t wait his turn.

“What did I ever do to you, Pete?” he says.

There’s a pubescent strain in his voice, maybe it’s called earnestness, and the sound of it hollows me out. I turn off the phone and look up at the big sky and think about things. In one version of events, I’ve cheated him out of a job. But that would imply this profession truly has rules, or that anyone’s following them. Because, for fuck’s sake, you’ve got my editor making HR decisions with his tiny penis, like it’s a nanodivining rod. Then you’ve got the publisher outsourcing work to the South Pacific, having decided this industry is about ads and revenues and entertainment. Not quality information. Rules, rules, maxims, codes. What is a code, but the secular man’s word for religion.

Edgerly, I think, will look back on this as one of those bittersweet moments. A time that made him grow up, at least a little. He’ll be thankful.

I stop short. The four Mexicans I saw before, crossing the river, are huddled behind my truck. I stop where I'm going and put a flat hand to my brow, scouting the group for black tar heroin and weapons. And wondering if this will become a predicament that keeps Edgerly on the payroll and gets me fired from the shittiest paper in the country.

"Hey," I yell. "Amigos, que pasó?"

Four heads pop up. Two adults, two children, and I realize they're changing out of their wet clothes, using the truck for privacy and not trafficking. My lower cheeks unclench.

I've seen this so many times, I don't think anything of these people. No fear, none of that keep-out-the-browns attitude. But also no sympathy. These people, they're just not interesting. Not newsworthy. It's how I've come to commodify the world.

I wait for them to finish changing and we pass one another without hellos or holas, each of us preferring the other were invisible.

The inside of my truck is hot enough to cook an egg and I'll have to give it a couple minutes of A/C before the steering wheel becomes touchable. But when I turn the key in the ignition, there's nothing. Dead air. The ignition doesn't even whine.

It takes a good two seconds to see the problem. I've left the headlights on.

I rain a cluster of F-bombs into the cab, because I'm screwed. Internet is something people here won't see for ten years, and the nearest cell towers are equipped with 2G technology, at best. Which means I'll have to call into the newsroom and dictate the story to one of my allies, a population right now that rounds out to zero. I lean back and close my eyes. A thought sidles up. That maybe this was meant to be. There's certainly some relief in it, and when I open my eyes I'm content to watch the river drift below. Beyond its banks I see unknown lands and, further yet, an entire universe of unknowns lies in wait. Which makes me wonder why I've clawed so desperately to the small existence I've built here, on this side of things.

There's yelling. Behind me. In a flash of khaki, Border Patrol agents have popped out from inside the old dime store.

The Mexicans trudging up the plaza scatter.

Except the adult male. This guy, the father, raises his hands up toward the sky. He has a gallon-jug of water in each, and screams at the top of his lungs, “Tuerca tuerca tuerca...”

I can't be sure, but I think that means “lug nut.”

While one agent tries to make sense of the man yelling “tuerca,” other agents go after the dependents. And when they close in, the mother turns around and takes a square stance and holds out her hands. Like she's defending a point guard. The kids keep going.

But the agents are pros. One of them sets a pick and the other slips by. Most of these guys are ex-athletes, guys who've found consolation and purpose in border security after losing in the state playoffs. So with the mom wrapped up with one agent, the remaining lawman is charging toward the kids, who by this time have reached the top of the plaza and are nearing the church door.

I can't say who I'm rooting for. Maybe the agent because it looks like he'll win. In fact, it seems a lock. But then something happens. The kind of unbelievable thing that only happens in a place like this. The kids make it through the open church door, vanish inside, and the agent stops dead at the threshold. As if the hand of God has arrested him.

And the guy just stands there.

I get out of my truck. There's plenty of talk about church sanctuary law, but I figured it for one of those guidelines that no one really observes. Like peeing in a public pool.

Giddyup, I tell myself, Pete Gaskill is back in action.

When I reach the agents they're hustling the mom and dad into a white SUV. Up until now I'd experienced the agents as an undifferentiated mass, but my first observation is that one of them is a woman. A pretty Latina woman. Her jaw is a little broad for most tastes, and it's tough to scout her curves under the body armor, but flaws are good. Flaws keep women in my league.

I scan her face for any interest and, for a moment, our eyes lock. I

know how she feels, there are no words to get in the way. I'm a weakling, unworthy of association. The idea of "us" would make her look weaker, maybe unqualified, in the eyes of her colleagues.

But I have little time to feel embarrassed.

"Hey, Slick," the biggest agent says, and I realize I know this guy. He's a rookie out of Oklahoma that everyone calls Aquaman. He wears a big, friendly smile across a museum-quality jaw. "Two of four, whadya think?"

It's rare when a newsman's opinion is sought. But there's probably a fear this stat will show up on breakfast tables tomorrow, and he wants to know how it'll play. I open my mouth, but then think of the conversation I had with my editor about being too chummy with the law. The optics of it, how it came up to bite me.

I throw a thumb toward the church door. "What's up with that? You guys really won't go into churches?"

Aquaman shrugs. He bends his eyes toward the other agents.

He can't talk to me in front of them. None of them can talk to me, because it's all supposed to go through the public information officer. But Aquaman wants to appear helpful. I did a story on him some months back, after he dove into the river and rescued three illegals who almost drowned in the sweep of water around Los Ebanos. It was a puff piece, and I'm sure he got free beers and some chaca-chaca out of it. That's also how he got the name Aquaman.

I look to the other agents, who are playing dumb, so I take matters into my own hands and walk up the plaza to the church. It's bigger, I realize, than the other buildings on the square—a broad-shouldered beast of a church, and the steeple sits high and mighty above, its windows formed into a wrathful expression.

Like the agent, I stop at the threshold. It's like I'm expecting a force field. Like I'll bang my face against an invisible plane that only allows the penitent to pass.

I take a breath.

I step forward.

There's only natural light in the church. The air is heavier here, thick with the smell of geriatrics. Musty. Sickly sweet. A portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe stares back over the pews, and I don't see Jesus anywhere. To the right a priest hovers over the two children, speaking to them in Spanish. He looks up at me, the skin around his eyes ringed like an ancient tree.

"Yes?" he says. His skin is lighter than mine but he has an accent. Mexican, Spanish, Portuguese, I cannot say.

The proper thing to do is identify myself. Pete Gaskill, from the *McAllen Morning News*.

"Why won't the agents come in?" I say.

It's my stupid, oblong reporter's notebook, slipping from my left hand, that gives me away. The skin around the priest's eyes tightens. "Off the record only," he says. He's dealt with my kind before, and he knows the magic words.

"Fine," I say. "What's the deal?"

And then he says, as though only an idiot wouldn't know, "Churches are sanctuaries. All churches, since the day God commanded Moses to set aside cities in Israel where people could seek asylum from enemies."

I blink. "You can't be serious," I tell the priest. "You're saying that Jesus stops the agents? That the U.S. federal government listens to your God?"

The priest looks at the boys like they're pots of boiling water to be minded. He's irritated by the questions and squares on me, in an unpriestly way. "La migra are outnumbered in this part of the world," he says, his accent thickening. "If they mess with borderland religion, it's a last straw. La gente aquí son los chingones, juerito."

I write all of this down, everything the priest said. There's some guesswork with the Spanish part, though it definitely ended with "little white boy."

The priest watches me scribble. "I said it was off the record."

"Reporter rules don't apply here," I say. "Sanctuary." Because this story is too good. This idea that the frontier of U.S. law ends at a wall

made of mysticism. Or maybe the more interesting thread is that Aquaman and his team have gone rogue, though more likely it's a dissident supervisor at the McAllen station. Really, there aren't any bad answers, and if they fire me from the paper, I can shop this elsewhere. *The Texas Observer*. Shoot, maybe *The New York Times*. I won't even have to take risks with the Joe Gardener story.

I finish writing my notes and take out my mobile and snap a photo of the group. One of the kids stands from the pew. A boy. Age twelve, maybe thirteen. The age when you begin experimenting with adult judgments. He opens his mouth and submachine guns me with his language.

I catch only some of it. Desgraciado. Parásito. Cobarde. I don't know what's all said but his eyes are burning. He's got a handsome face, a strong face, and I can see he'll have an easier time in this world. He's better equipped for it. And at some point he's stopped talking but I can tell he's satisfied with himself. Satisfied that he's lived about half as long as me but successfully dissected and judged my contents. The priest is nodding, and has put a hand on the boy's shoulder. Which leaves me feeling cold, not at all like I expected. Unlovable still. But then I think things through. I remember to tell myself that life is hard. That there's no shame in doing whatever it is you have to do. That dignity is an indulgence of the privileged.

This Mexican boy and that smug judgment, I've seen it before. That self-righteousness. The boy believes I'm a lesser person, but it's only the circumstances that give him that power. His pain at this moment is greater than mine and he thinks that gives him moral authority. And the priest? As badass as he thinks he is, he took himself out of the game long ago, living in his sanctuary.

Fuck them.

"What do you know about me?" I say.

It's the kid who responds. "Todo," he says. Everything. And he's sure.

"Let me tell you a story." And I don't know how much English he has but the priest is here and I only need one person to bear witness.

“When I was twelve, I stole bibles from a church.” I look at the priest to see if he can think less of me.

There’s no special contempt evident.

“I took as many as I could carry in two brown paper bags,” I say. I don’t get into the “why” of things because it wasn’t bibles, but that’s not a critical detail.

“And so when I got home,” I say, “I started wondering, what the hell am I going to do with all these bibles? But then I get this idea that I can sell them.”

The priest begins talking to the boy in Spanish, like I’m not in the room, like I’m not a child of God, so I just talk over him.

“So I put on a white shirt and a black tie like I’d seen the Mormon kids do and I pedaled over to the Polish side of town with all the Catholics and sold those bibles for two dollars apiece. Fifty-two bucks total.

“And when I got home, my ma and stepdad and stepbrother were sitting down for supper. So there I was, still wearing the white dress shirt, which has pit stains and rumples—I look like a used car salesman after a shift. And they’re giving me this condescending look, the same one you have now.

“And my stepdad says, ‘Hey, there, little dick.’ And my stepbrother laughs and wiggles his pinky at me. And I look to my mom, because I need her to choose sides, but she’s high as fuck. So high she can handle just one compact thought at a time. She looks at me, like the world has stopped, like I can’t hear her, and she says just one thing. ‘Unlovable.’”

I think about what she said. That word. I move on.

“But I had something they didn’t. Fifty-two expendable dollars.” I give the Mexican kid a special look, lest he think hardship afflicts only one race. “So I take my fifty-two dollars and grab the phone and order fifty-two dollars’ worth of Chinese food. All of their favorite dishes. Mushu pork, General Tso’s chicken, pork fried rice, chicken chow mein. All the Chinese food that us white folk like to eat. And when the delivery guy shows up I take all six or seven dishes and set them up on the table. And I can see they want some, I can tell, because for them, it was baloney sandwiches every day, hot dogs and mac every night.

So they're salivating, because they think this is an offering. They think they're getting some. But here's what I do. I spit in each dish. And after I fork a mouthful from each carton I bring over the garbage bin and toss the food. All of it. Those meals were mine, comprende? They were my own."

By this time, the priest and the boy look confused, like maybe they haven't understood me. But they can tell I'm satisfied. And they can understand I'm not above revenge.

Outside there's just Aquaman, sitting in his vehicle. His colleagues have split.

He rolls the window down halfway. "Hot out there," he says.

I close my eyes. Already I can feel the frostiness of the climate control from his truck. "Hotter than a little sister," I say.

"Slick, what's the story inside?"

If I tell him I saw drugs—maybe some of that black tar heroin—I'm pretty sure the good Lord won't keep him out of there. But I need a minute on this. "They're gonna dash out the back," I say.

"No."

"They've got a relative who lives a few blocks away." I notice the Mexican mom and dad are in the back of the vehicle, jailed by a screened divider and child-locked doors. Perhaps I would hurt the boy and the priest most by keeping the status quo. Keeping everyone separate.

Aquaman is chewing his lip. "How'd you know that? About the relatives."

"I'm a reporter. I ask questions."

He nods. He accepts this. "I hate being two of four," he says. "How many exits?"

I think about the church. "Just one or two in the back," I say. "But there's a warren of alleys behind there. It's all tiny rectory buildings." My mouth is moving but my brain has lost control of it.

"Give me sixty seconds, Slick," he says, "then go in and flush 'em out. Tell 'em I'm coming in through the front."

“Ten-four.”

“Count ‘em in your head. To sixty.” He leaves his vehicle and makes for the rear of the church. And his keys, he leaves them in the truck with the engine running. But this isn’t weird, it’s a practice that lawmen down here favor. They tell me the extra seconds it takes to turn the ignition can make all the difference in a life-or-death matter. And there’s also this: Aquaman trusts me.

Like that I’m by myself. In this hot, treeless plaza, and I’m baking. I can feel my brain cook. And with my head starting to spin, I toy with the idea of slipping into the coolness of the truck. From the front seat, possibilities are more plentiful. I could take this U.S. government truck across the Rio Grande and disappear. I’d be a folk hero, get my own corrido. Or I could drive it into the river. My hand is on the door handle when someone begins yelling at me.

It sounds like a faraway yell but it’s coming from inside the white SUV, and when I get close to the tinted glass I see lips, the mom’s lips, forming words, the actual sounds tiny. I have a child’s understanding of Spanish but I can puzzle this one out. “My sons. Bring me my sons,” she says. It’s on repeat with the cadence of a car alarm.

Something deep inside me breaks loose. “Shut up,” I yell, and strike the window with my palm. “Just shut the fuck up.” I turn away from the Border Patrol vehicle, trying to will the mother from existence. Her and her commandment. Because I’m tired of mothers ruining my life. And I’m tired of everyone telling me what to do, enlisting me in their manipulations. I’m tired of my own manipulations. The idea of another one makes me sick.

So I do something else.

I open the door between us.

The mother blinks. Sunlight falls across her forehead and her pupils dilate in this new environment. Her breath is shallow and it’s like she’s unsure the outside atmosphere will support her.

It’s the father who, gently, so gently, ushers her out and takes her by the hand and runs, hunched over, as if minimizing his height will make him less visible. Until he and his wife disappear into the shadow

under the church's doorway.

He makes it just before Aquaman rounds the corner, back into view.

“Hey, Slick, what's the deal? Where are—”

He never finishes. He knows something is off, and understands it's something he must figure out himself. His eyes land on the open door. And in the second he takes to cogitate it, I've halved the distance to the church. And because I don't run, because I've maintained the fiction that nothing has gone wrong, I close the second five yards without a chase. He manages only a “stop right there” before I duck through the threshold, though there's bite to the order, something dark and uncharacteristic of the friendly oaf I've constructed in my head.

I stumble into the nave where the priest is attending to the family, just assessing their feet and clothes, sizing up their situation. The mom and dad and two kids sit together on the front pew, oblivious to everything but each other. And they're all touching. Hand to hand. Head to shoulder. There's no thought of a next step, their survival to this moment proof they'll survive to the next.

I ease into a pew on the other side of the church and close my eyes. I breathe. In one version of things I'm trapped in a border church, a cloud of federal authority and consequence gathering outside. And yet I don't feel trapped by anything. The pew against my back, the stone beneath my feet—these borders don't register. On a particle level there's a beautiful chaos, I'm dissolving into everything, and I realize that to tell a truth or a lie is the burden of someone outside a moment.

It is no longer my burden.