

The warmth of the sunlight embedded into his skin; even with the door left open, the air remained thick with moisture and sea salt. But no warmth or thick air, nor the ache in his eyes or feet, could disrupt the boy as he slept to the deep yet slow cradling of the boat. Up, down, up, down; with his body asleep, he could still feel his weight be lifted, becoming lighter, and then slowly press down against the seat he laid on as if gravity became stronger. It would all repeat with no sign of an end. In the beginning, the thick humidity mixed with the sea-salt air and neverending movement left him feeling a similar feeling he had in the alleyway. His throat clenched and relaxed, hoping for something to come up this time, but like before, there was nothing but the sensation of his muscles displaying repulsion. But in Garci's fatigued condition, of being grateful for finally having a soft surface to lay upon, the muscles in his throat slowly died down as they learned to embrace their new yet strange environment that had only been seen on paper.

A series of footsteps came up, and they were gradually becoming louder. However, Garci, still in his state of exhaustion, ignoring all things other than the bliss of rest, paid no mind to the sound until he felt the steps become closer and louder, then fall to a sudden stop. He was still asleep as his eyes and mind saw nothing but black, but he could feel the fabric of his still-damp shirt rub between his back and the worn cushioned seat as he turned and saw the source of the sound before him. But no light could make the figure visible with the sand that had nested in his eyes as he slept. Despite his temporary lack of vision, he could feel something push his feet and legs to his body before plopping onto the tiny space of seat that had just been made.

The figure didn't speak, nor did Garci, even as he stared at him with eyes full of exhaustion and sand. There was a click and then the smell of cigarettes like with the cashier before, but it was still a smell that was a stranger to him. The suffocating humidity and closed-in

space, mixed with the smell of unknown cigarettes, woke him out of discomfort. There, he could see a familiar white figure staring through the window– it was the man he had carried.

“Mornin,’ sweet child, I hope you enjoyed delaying my departure for your little nap.”

Compared to how he spoke moments ago, one could only assume that the man was never even intoxicated in the first place, that or he knew how to make himself sober on demand; both were very hard to believe as the scent of alcohol was still strong as Garci sat himself up to avoid the searing sun. He rubbed the sand out of his eyes as his eyelids were weak from the squinting and irritation of the sand. He could see the man's skin was no longer deathly pale as before but almost a bright pink hue, with bits of his white skin remaining unharmed thanks to his long hair. Garci quickly recalled placing him on his sun chair. It was in an open space but under enough shadow of the boat's wheelhouse to sleep soundly, but with it being summer, the cool morning quickly passed, and the cool shadow became nothing more than an unforgivingly burning surface. It took no rocket science to understand that the snide remark was the product of being purposely left under the sun to burn. Guilt pricked at Garci.

“Departure?” the boy asked with a voice both dehydrated and exhausted, “Oh, uh, sorry.”

“Yeah. You should be, but consider ourselves lucky that the people looking for me are too stupid to remember that you'd find boats on beaches, not wherever the hell they are.” A laugh left the man, pushing the smoke from his nose. He stared out the front window, looking at the empty fields a small child dragged him across. Sitting up, Garci joined in on the gaze, trying to remember the faces of the men he saw and then imagining them appear across the field. It took away the serenity of the field and filled it with now anticipated dread.

A question burned inside his mind but made his body cold. Before catching his tongue, the question left as he stared at the man.

"What happens if they find you?" It was a terrifying thought, to Garci at least, as the man before him couldn't even bother to give a proper answer.

"I dunno," the ashes from his cigarette fell, "they'd shoot me or whatever; maybe cut my head off and stuff like that."

Hearing an adult talk about his fate in such a calm manner scared the boy; the fact that it was not fiction, not in the slightest, sent a shock through his mind that made those faces appear more and more until Garci couldn't look away from the window. He couldn't look away, but he wanted to. He wanted to hide and run away, but he couldn't because he had no one to run to. The men knew what he looked like, and if they saw him, if they saw the man he was sitting right next to, the very man casually talking about his potential death and doing nothing about it to stop it, they would kill him too. They did not look nor sound like the kind of people who would show mercy on some child, but he was more than a child. In their eyes, Garci was a liar, a runaway, and just some dirty child on the street that no one would care about if he was even found dead on the side of the road. And that's because they all know who he is, the reality of God, of all that he was forced to swallow before the milk of his own mother was real. It was real this whole time, and he doubted it, and now he'll have to pay for it. And the Preacher, his own father, would not save him. No one was going to save hi

The smell of the sea and cigarettes eventually died down into nothing but air to his nose; it had been a while since the man next to him had sat down and lit his cigarettes as it had become nothing but burnt tobacco on the seat next to him.

"Well," he slammed the seat with both hands, picking himself up before bending backward and letting his hair reach the torn-up calves of his jeans, "that's enough fuckin' around. I gotta get out of here before those guys learn where a boat goes. Do 'ppreciate you getting me

back here without snitching, but I need you to kindly get your kiddy ass off my boat, please. I have no time to babysit." The man's tone was light, playful even, but clearly condescending.

But Garci had no such pride to be offended; his only concern was the men who were searching for him. The travel from San Antonio to Corpus Christi was no easy one. His feet were swollen, with cuts full of dried blood, wet mud, and sand; who knows how long it took until the skin of his feet rotted away. He heard about it from the Preacher.

Several months in a wet hole in the ground that stretched for what felt like miles with men and guns lining them like the fine Greek pillars that would hold up the roof, the Preacher said it was nowhere near as beautiful and that there was no roof, just a dark gray sky of smoke, despair, and death. And he said that when it rained, it would flood the hole and recreate what can be described as a pouring stream of weary nymphs and guns, where they lay down as their feet have given in to the countless days of waiting for a chance to fight for hope and life or for death to hurry to take them away from the horror and pain. Sometimes, they would lie down because they wouldn't have feet to stand with. With no feet, they drowned in the pouring stream of weary nymphs and guns, choosing their fate rather than letting an enemy's bullet do it for them.

*"Had they changed their damn socks,"* he would comment, a huff of smoke leaving his mouth as he would look onward into nothing, *"then maybe they'd still have a nub to stand on, unfortunate bastards."*

Since then, Garci would walk barefoot, in fear of losing his feet and being stuck and left to die. As he looked back at the story, sitting up inside the hot boat and feeling his feet burn, he couldn't help but ponder about the man as he was barefoot. He thought of the story he must have been told as a child that left him fearing for his ability to stand, but it was hard to imagine him having any fear.

“Kid, leave the boat,” the albino man repeated, “like go home or something. Go to school, play with matches, kiss a girl, just get off the boat.”

“But-”

“But?”

Out of all the strangers Garci had encountered, from the smokey-eyed gas station cashier to the strong, burly truck driver to the group of strange men who believed his lies, the man before him was the one he feared most. The stitches on his fingers, the eyepatch laid across his near-white skin, and the countless lines of healed yet exposed flesh embedded in his skin screamed that this man was trouble— a sign of *death*. Garci could barely look into his one good eye, baffled he was that the presumably dangerous man before him would let him sleep beside him without letting a single bit of burnt tobacco fall onto him.

If the cards were dealt right, and if Garci was careful enough with his words and actions, showing a bit of value in himself, then the albino man would believe his value and spare him. Perhaps he would be safer to be around than all alone, maybe even more so than the Preacher. No one would chase him down or consider him a betrayer- a Judas. Thinking deeper, it made Garci wonder if the man was a Judas too, with his history shown upon his skin— the stories of his actions meeting their consequences. Those scars seemed to be done by knives and bullets; some seemed to be made with the desire to make the man suffer, and some wanted his death done and over, saying that this dangerous man had no right to take in another breath of air. Similarly, he was despised and rejected— unwanted. The word lingered in Garci and made him reflect on the moment he was thrown down the creek and told by the Preacher that he had lost everything and all that could have been given to him.

“Let me stay. *Please.*” Garci added abruptly, being the first time his voice was almost loud since he had scolded his younger cousins. He wasn't sure if the eyebrows raised were of surprise or of offense, but if he continued to talk, it would be certain which one it was.

“I don't have anywhere to go.” His projecting voice remained, I don't have *anyone* to go to. I have no family or anything. I have nothing- I have *nothing.*”

And as if a magic word was born from his plead, the scarred man's lips stretched away from the other to push up the muscles on his face. The man before him was smiling, and with that smile came a scoff, and what he would've mistaken for a cough came a flood of laughter pouring from his mouth and into the air surrounding the boy, drowning him in the coarse sound. The warmth left his body, and the fear of rejection was soon to be confirmed as it twisted and turned in his stomach into something that froze and weighed him still.

The cackling was becoming louder as his hands slapped his thighs. Had his jeans not been so thick, the slap would have gotten the attention of the nearest person at least a mile away. It made the boy turn his head quickly to see any faces growing from behind the green hills that led to the beach, but there was none he could see for the second he had turned away. Eventually, the world fell back to nothing but the sound of crashing waves before the man's mouth opened again.

“Then the sea is perfect for you.”