



## *Water Dogs*

Veronica Vela

Tampico is never in bloom like most other cities. It is a place for water dogs, and the stories that come out of here could make the most romantic person forget the meaning of stars. Tampico is where we are, and Miguel and I decided we'll finally make it out – for good this time. We'll go up through Monterrey, all the way into Texas. We'd parachute in if we could. The Undertaker has a plan for my brother and me and promises he'll

take good care of us. "I have visited places much worse than this," he says, "although it is not much better than the wastelands in San Juan. You live here, you can live anywhere, through anything." It's regular, small-town village life. Everyone complains about some thing or another.

The Undertaker has had a hard life. People say he was abandoned on a hill in the southern neck of Reynosa. His mother continued south, to Veracruz, with afterbirth sliding down the insides of her legs. She left him, a dusty, brown baby, parched, in one-hundred-degree weather. His mother was said to have left sons in all thirty-one states of Mexico. He grew up crooked and bare-chested and had the ultimate misfortune of having his only love murdered. People say that, while driving through Las Petacas, he found her skinny body hanging from the limb of a tree. But people say lots of things.

"Enough with the town already. How big is it?"

"Big enough to carry three hundred onions. Big enough to haul a skinny guy like you. The ride is a real

bitch. You sure you can do this? Your brother over there said you can't even gut a fish without crying."

"My brother is nineteen and still wets the bed. He wakes our mother up so she can change the sheets. So what does he know?"

"Good, fine. I get paid before the drive. You bend at the knees all right?"

"I bend just fine." Miguel is watching me while he plays with his gun. "Sirens. Will there be sirens?"

"Nothing like that. Plenty of dogs, though. Yellow coyotes. Not the Looney Toons kind. These fuckers got mean throat holds. You'll be begging for sirens then."

"Good, fine. We'll meet you tonight. Don't worry about the money. We'll have it."

It has to start sometime. Our trip starts tonight, on Ash Wednesday. Mother says that something terrible always happens on Ash Wednesday, so we shouldn't be surprised if everything goes wrong. She only wants us to stay. I look at Miguel. "What the hell ever happens on Ash Wednesday, anyway?"

No one knows, but mother wishes us luck with a sinking feeling. She kisses us over and over again, like we are newborns. She wishes us luck hours before we're about to leave and reminds us that we are dust, and to dust we will return. *Remember that, O man.* "Remember to wear your crosses," she says.

"We won't be fighting any vampires," I say. Mother tells Miguel she'll light a candle for us and to remember the Virgin Mary on the trip. "What good is a candle," he says, "if the person you light it for doesn't believe in it as much as you?" He wanted to say that he doesn't believe in any of that shit, but didn't have the heart to be that honest. "Don't forget to pray," she says. Our *Hail Mary's*, our *Our Father's*. All of that. Miguel looks at our mother. "I'll try," he says, "for you."

Miguel thinks we're strong enough. He says he has enough guts to stomach it. What does he know? He's always been cocky and bug-eyed, walking around like he's wearing a crown on his head. Miguel doesn't even know how to endure bad weather. He'll probably want

to hide his face in my armpit every time there's a bump on the road.

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We haven't been to Texas in years.

We cleared the heap with our backs. The moss stubbornly held on to the ground with the most shade. Free from clouds, we took the turpentine from the trees. For years we withstood the rubbish that fell on our heads from all of the giants that were skinned, and, for years, the workers called themselves pillagers – soldiers plundering the forest with wicks of bark at their shoes. Many times, our father snuck us in, under his packs and close to his thighs, so we could work alongside the reapers that slipped into the woods on their tuckered feet. Men wearing overalls were compelled by the grim offer of raping the trees for oil – even for poor wages. Never having snow to play with, my brother and I wrapped our arms around the trees, pretending amidst

the shorn trunks and falling bark, unaware of how frightened our father was of getting caught.

The thought of my father ruthlessly stripping the trees for pennies made me doubt if I could stomach the trip across the border many mornings. My brother and I were told stories of Mexicans committing suicide after they were caught, or being shuttled back to Monterrey or wherever they happened to come from. We were told of one who shot himself through the head, but survived. Some men said these were horror stories that were made up just to keep us away, but my father knew what was real. For pennies, my father risked his life every day.

As if they were interested, my father would tell the wood-strippers about the terebinth that would grow in places like Portugal and how his grandfather died while hacking into the pulp of a terebinth rooted somewhere in the Mediterranean. He died with his mouth wide open, my father said, so that his soul could escape, his jaw relaxed, as if to catch a fly. He died the way many men had – rooting around the forest for liquid resin.

During lunch breaks, all the workers would gather in a circle, a kind of working-man's roundtable, with everyone sitting on stumps or lying on their backs with their hands behind their heads. Roy and Little Roy were father and son and came all the way from Venezuela. They often spoke of how women, the good ones at least, were as long and mean as cats. Little Roy was smaller than an average teenager and was known as Little Runt or Peckerhead, Peckerhead being the nickname my father enjoyed the most, causing him to laugh into his napkin whenever he heard it.

We listened as Little Roy spoke to the group. "You say you have never been with a woman on Valentine's Day? This one girl told me, 'Oh, sweet boy, you are a cobra, but I'm a viper. I eat the skin you shed. I'll eat you before long.' She was a snake, like all women are snakes. She was smart, though. Real sharp."

Guillermo, a true roughneck, shouted, "Sharper than a whale, huh, Little Roy? Hey, Big Roy! Pick him up by the armpits and show him who's boss, eh?" Little Roy

looked even smaller after that, like his hands were tied and he was powerless against the older grunts. In the woods, conversations like these were all men had.

Everyone had just gotten back to work, when a small blast of embers shot up in the middle of our meeting grounds. We only saw sparks at first, but the fire spread quickly. The workers scattered like chittering insects, splaying themselves across nature. We watched Guillermo, this three-hundred-pound gorilla, jet out like his head was on fire. My father took his work clothes and muffled the flames, looking composed throughout it all. Big Roy ran into the fire, stomping on the flames. My brother and I kept away and spread our arms out, as if we could contain the disaster. We watched the other workers practically scurry up tree trunks and rest on their branches out of fear. Big Roy looked at my father. "What inspires madmen like us, huh? I must look like Superman right now." "Only Mexican and with chipped teeth," my father said. "Yeah, a Mexican Superman. I like that," Big Roy said. Big Roy and my father were

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soaked with sweat and went on smothering the fire that ate its way up the trees.

Once the flames were out, the men stood back and watched. Everything untouched by the fire was smoked, blackened with soot. Everyone was quiet when Roy spoke to the ground with his eyes closed. "Pretend for a minute that everything you own is set on fire. Your clothes, your family. Pretend, now, that you're not such a prick, and ask yourself what you would do. Remember that you have nothing. Not even the hair on your head. Not even your goddess wife. Everything goes up in the blaze. What happens now?" Big Roy looked up at Little Roy, who was still sitting high up on the limb of a tree. "God bless these people that stink of shit." The men silently dispersed and timidly walked out of the forest to face, once again, months of unemployment.

Guillermo stayed behind and solemnly swept up the ashes between the furrows.

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Not since the fire my father helped put out have we set foot on those plains. Not since my father stopped working and stopped talking shortly after the fire had we even thought about going back. Mother had it the worst with our father's silence. She couldn't understand. He just gave up. He only sits in his chair, looking roped-in, like a scared animal, all potbellied and wizened. Our father came back from Texas worse off than all of those Mexicans that had shot themselves. He slept and he ate, but he wasn't there. Now, nothing is here. In Tampico, the lights have dimmed and, if given the chance, can lull the brightest torches. What once was a bonfire, is now a fleck.

We'll pack light and take none of our mother's advice. We'll probably get into trouble on our way there and wish we had listened. We'll wish for lots of things, I'm sure.

Our meeting place is near the oval-shaped pyramid, Las Flores. During the day, Las Flores is busy with

tourists, but at night, it becomes a take-off point, because the gold that exists underneath brings travelers good luck. You'll become wise and strong on your journey—that's what smugglers say, anyway. Gold is for luck, and the pyramid has plenty of it. This is all beyond any reason. Everything is shouting at us not to go. How would you explain any of this to someone you've just met? Say, an American you've just met. You'd start talking about the pyramid, the gold, dead Mexicans, and coyotes. Miguel thinks that women would probably think we were brave. Miguel thinks he knows about women. None of it would make sense to them. How could it? I'm not as lighthearted as my brother, but I do know that what we're doing wouldn't be considered so daring. People wouldn't think we were brave or charming for crossing the border in a crate.

The Undertaker has fruit in his hand. A mango, I think. He offers us some and tells us there are plenty more. "I hope you both packed light." Two crates are sitting in the bed of a pickup truck behind him. "Real

light.” He smiles and we offer the money that was promised. “Good job. Now, here’s the deal ...”

He goes on, but my mind wanders to the back of the truck. The crates are smaller than I imagined. Maybe the Las Flores, that oval pyramid, makes them look smaller than they are. God damn it, get brave, I think. There are so many others. So many people just waiting to get fetched and then tossed across the border. A family of four is getting shoved into the trunk of a car. There are no air holes. Smugglers are rushing them to get in and telling them to hold tight. God knows if they’ll make it through.

The Undertaker knows that I’m looking at the family of four squashed into a trunk. “They’ll probably survive,” he says. “At least they weren’t stupid enough to hide a toddler inside a tire. It happens every day, kid. Listen, the trip’s gonna take about three hours or so, depending on how often we get stopped. I don’t plan on giving guards a hard time, so hopefully we’ll make it on schedule. Good for you?” “Good for me. Yes.”

I look over at Miguel. I can tell he’s nervous, but he winks and whispers to me, “Brother.” Jesus, ‘brother.’ He couldn’t have said anything worse. At this moment, my brother is a saint, the sweetest guy in the world, and I just want to tell him we should go back. *Let’s go back home, I think. Let them keep the money. Mother would be so happy to see us, she’d fall to her knees. She’d give up god and everything if we went back.* Before I can tell my brother anything, the Undertaker is already covering Miguel with onions inside of his crate. I can’t see his face anymore, and the box is sealed. I had imagined at least being able to see one of his eyes peeking through a small hole in the wood, but nothing. I’m to blame for all of this.

The Undertaker will be responsible for us for however long it’ll take us to get into Texas. He’ll escort us through the howling dogs and armed guards and into an afterlife brimming with promise. “It’ll be all right. This will all be worth it in the end,” he says.

Mother is wrong. She only says he’s bad because

he was brought up in a witches' district. I tried telling her that his pain is what makes him a better caretaker. "Smuggler," she reminded me.

"He'll provide us safe passage because he's lost something, too." I tried so hard to convince her. "He is offering people their freedom," I told her.

"At what cost?" she said. Mother didn't swallow any of it.

The Undertaker wouldn't feed us to the wolves. He gave us his word, his soul, his honor as a man. I tried explaining all of this to her. I tried telling her there are still men with dignity left.

He has led us here to the underworld of Tampico, where unsightly business takes place, just to fulfill our hopes. The pyramid looms over the pickup, and I remember my father telling me how its stairs are made of lime and seashells. What a mess this whole thing is. What a disappointment I would seem to my father. If he only knew how I was ditching my home like some cheat.

"Look, everything's ready. I'm a good guide. Smarts and experience—all I need to get you through. Let's load you in." The Undertaker nudges me toward the wooden box. "The inside might smell like bear shit, but you'll get used to it. Remember to keep calm. There's no use in getting scared. Once the crate is closed, there's no way out."

It'll be fine. There's gold spread out underneath the pyramid. Good luck everywhere. Soon, we'll be let out. Let out like a dog let out of its pen. So soon, hundreds of onions will cover me and my crate will be sealed. I can already tell I'll have a small eyehole to look out of and maybe get a glimpse of that great, oval pyramid shrinking on our way out.