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Midnight Cactus

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Prologue

The Border 1983

It starts raining on the mountain first. Clouds which have been hovering since early afternoon finally crack open and spew their contents in a freak summer storm that lasts no longer than twenty minutes. It's June and there's been not a hint of rain since spring. In truth there's precious little of the stuff now, an inch – an inch and a quarter tops, but this is more than enough. The creosote bush, school bully of desert plants whose twisted yellow petals are currently in bloom, is the first to suck up the spoils of the storm. Next, a Gila monster, stomping belligerently from its shelter absorbs the water through the pores of its blotched skin. Surfacing from deep under the sand where it has burrowed to escape the sun, the stink beetle fractionally tilts its shell to allow the raindrops to trickle down its legs and into its waiting mouth. Soaring ten feet above, a saguaro cactus collects its own drops and transports them to its roots via a thousand needles affording this hoary old veteran of the desert, survival for another year.

Less than a mile away, Estella, a young Mexican girl, will not be so lucky.

Estella has no ingenious method of survival at her fingertips. Right now her best chance is brute will. She is desperate and desperation leads to blind faith and whatever religion sustains it, so as she picks her way carefully through the cholla, carrying her two year old son, feeling for holes in the ground with the toe of one sandaled foot and keeping a fearful eye out for snakes, she prays. She casts her devout net wide, sending out entreaties to

Our Lady of Sorrows, to Mary the Blessed Mother, the Virgin Sagrada, and just in case, she directs an extra missive to Santa Elena, Discoverer of the Cross, perhaps reflecting that she too had the temerity to fall in love with a man outside her social status – and no-one could say things hadn't turned out well for her.

From the day Estella was born, some twenty years earlier, in the small southern town of Chocan, many things were pre-ordained. That she would be poor, that she would have straight black hair. That she would press perfect tortillas by the age of six and that when it came to crossing into the U.S in search of whatever brand of American dream she might be chasing, the Sonoran Desert, hottest and most desolate of the four deserts of Southwestern America, would be her entry point. To be fair, this was less a question of fate, and more one of geography. The Sonoran Desert was simply the closest. That she chose to cross it in summer with the ground temperature peaking at 115 degrees was naivety. The rest was just plain bad luck.

Half a mile from the base of the mountain, not far from where Estella is winding her way north, the rainfall is now much less intense. Already the inch is down to a lousy centimetre which soon dwindles to pathetic millimetre until the downpour is represented by nothing more than a smell, the wistful aftermath of moisture in the air. The rain had fallen so close – just not close enough. In the way that a speeding bullet has the velocity to tear through the heart of one man, but will drop harmlessly at the foot of the next, so too does the rain peter out just before it can

be any use to Estella or the three men she is travelling with.

Originally there had been twenty others in the truck. Twenty sweating bodies piled together like the heaving ribs of a panting animal. Estella knew none of them, but they were men from small towns like hers, all following different strands of America's labour trails. From snatches of overheard conversation, she knew some were heading to Florida to pick oranges, others to construction jobs in Colorado and still more making for states further to the north, ones she hadn't even heard of. None had been thrilled about her joining the party at the eleventh hour, least of all the smallish campasino with tightly curled black hair and insubstantial moustache who had been ordered to make room for her. By the time a large rock broke the axel of the truck's back wheel, the group had reached Northern Arizona, their arrival on American soil justifying at least half the 500 dollars they had each paid their coyote for the privilege, but they were still eight miles away from the safe house – and a good coyote might have got them there. A good guide might have led them single file – a shepherd guiding his sheep across the soft sand of the drags, perhaps using a broken off branch to sweep clean the patterns of their shoes and boots. A good guide might have done everything in his power to keep them clear of the ever watchful eyes of the border patrol. But then this coyote was no good guide and hey, eight miles was nothing for a bunch of such young, fit men he re-assured them before scuttling sideways into the shimmering scrub of the desert. The safe house was indeed north east and true – it was only eight miles, but these were crow

miles. The Mexicans could not fly and swoop over the dips and rises of steep canyons. Instead they were forced to pick their way round their perimeters in ill-fitting shoes that soon blistered their feet, hauling suitcases and backpacks which rubbed the skin off their shoulders and hands. Degree by degree they lost their sense of direction and before long the eight miles turned to ten, and those ten soon to fifteen.

As the heat of the day grew stronger the group grew weaker. Nobody was carrying enough water for a journey on foot. Nobody could have carried the amount required. Dissent broke out amongst the leaders – which direction to go, from which direction they'd come, which way really was north. At 30 percent dehydration, simple decision making becomes a murky business at best. Fifty percent dehydration is more like the final stages of drunkenness, the one where you have to concentrate really hard to decide whether jumping out of a ten storey window is a good idea or not.

When the group finally split, Estella chose to stay close to her co-sardine from the truck. Though he now regretted telling her, he was heading for California (west?) and so was she, to Santa Monica. She had no idea where Santa Monica was but I imagine she liked the name. Two other men, for reasons no-one would ever be quite sure of, elected to go with them. The campasino watched them vigilantly for signs of bad behaviour but they were soon far too busy retching and gasping to think of behaving in an ungentlemanly like fashion towards the woman and child who were now nominally in their charge.

Estella is weak and dizzy. She can feel her tongue, a great swollen thing all but blocking her throat. She hasn't felt this sick since the first few months of her pregnancy when she'd become quite adept at chucking up in the flowerbeds of her neighbours'' gardens back in Chocan. She'd had bad luck in pregnancy too. The birth had been breach and she could remember the agony as the old witchdoctor turned the baby inside her with her bare hands. At the time she thought it worth the pain to bear a white child. Well white-ish, anyway. At least the lottery of skin colour had always favoured her. Of her four sisters and two brothers she was by far the lightest. But when the baby had finally been hauled out, she'd still been shocked by just how *alien* he'd looked. Even the campasino, once or twice looking into the baby's blue eyes to make sure if he was still alive, sussed something a little untoward with his parentage. Now he no longer wastes precious energy turning round to check the baby. For the last few hours he has felt his own life sweating out through every pore of his body and he has nothing left to sweat. When the two other men, the pair who had got drunk on King Beer the night before, suddenly sit down within a hundred yards of each other and fail to get up again, the campasino knows he must find water or they will all die.

By the time the truck rumbles towards them along the dirt road, the campasino has given up on his crossing. He no longer cares whether the truck is full of swimsuited Miss Mexico contestants dispensing maps and free Fantas or fully armed agents of the U.S.A Border Patrol. It was 1983 then and the divide be-

tween America and Mexico was not the great monstrous thing it is now. In 1983 the border was still an ideal, just a concept really and it was supposed to be easy to cross. If you didn't make it the first time, you cracked it the second or the third or the fourth. So when the dust from the approaching truck is almost upon him, he steps out from behind the scrub and waves the wave of a resigned man.

It's at this point that bad luck strikes Estella for the third and final time. The vehicle is neither full of Fanta dispensing goddesses, nor border guards. It's a shabby black camper van with a turquoise strip down the sides and it's being driven by another coyote and two of his men, who on finding four of their fellow citizens in dire need of emergency assistance, quickly identify the situation as an opportunity for a windfall.

The coyote's name is El Turrón. He's a young Mexican, no more than twenty-five, with a receding hairline, unusually small hands and a juvenile paunch. His manner is entirely pleasant as he orders his men to round up the inert Mexicans' remaining money and valuables. While he issues these instructions he chews, littering the ground with sweet papers. His round squirrel cheeks masticate the lump of nougat, his mouth open to reveal a wide gap between his front teeth. After helping the three men lighten their load for whatever journey they might have remaining to them, El Turrón rewards himself by raping Estella.

The campasino has three sisters, all younger. Nevertheless they had married before him in quick numerical succession and it had thus fallen to him to chaperone them on dates. Innumerable

times he'd sat at a table in the square while Florencio led Elena off to dance. He'd tramped a discreet ten paces behind as Ramiro walked Ysabel to and from the corner shop and by the time poor little Rosa was up for dating, he was heartily sick of the whole business.

'It's your duty,' his mother had rebuked him when he finally found the nerve to complain.

'It's every good brother's duty.' Estella was neither the campasino's sister nor even a distant cousin but he knew the burden of her protection fell to him anyway. That's just the way it is in Mexico.

'*¡Oye! ¡Parada!*' He shouts. Stop! In his head, the word sounds like a yell, but the noise that escapes his throat is barely louder than a croak. *'La se baja de!'* He stumbles across the road to where the buckled legs of the girl are pinned under the men. Before he can get anywhere close to pulling El Turrón off, one of the coyote's men steps forward and turning the gun in his hand until he holds the muzzle, strikes the campasino hard across the side of his face.

Estella feels the crushing weight on her chest. The second of Turrón's companions had helpfully knelt on her while Turrón spread her legs with his boots and folded his mirrored sunglasses into his pocket. She has only been kissed by one man before. Not that you could call this mashing of mouths a kiss. The cowboy had kissed her hungrily, but Turrón kisses her greedily, like she is a forbidden helping of fruit he knows he better take while it's still on the table. Considering the searing heat, Turrón's lips are

surprisingly wet, his breath sweet and sickly. The cowboy's lips had been so dry. His fingers always cracked with dirt. Estella had tried to keep the pregnancy from her parents for as long as possible believing he'd return for her before they noticed the swelling under her dress. 'I could take you back home with me, the cowboy had said in a moment that perhaps meant little to him and everything to her and at the time she had no reason to disbelieve him.

The first time El Turrón hits Estella she tastes the desert. The second time, her front teeth smash against a rock and her mouth fills with blood. Most people don't really believe they're going to die. It's a state just too far removed from anything they are familiar with. So while Turrón grinds her into the ground, Estella hangs on to life and she hangs on to hope. She tries to think of everything she is walking towards but all she can really conjure up is her past, those things she has left behind; the dirty faces of the Indian kids under the bridge, the smoke from roasting chickens drifting across the road. The smell of fresh corn. The naked light bulb which dances shadows across the doorway of her mother's house.

After they're through with her the Mexicans sift through Estella's possessions. They take her pendant of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and of course the money ; those bills of pesos that are the fuel of border economics, already slashed from the trouser pockets of the men and now ripped from the hem of her dress but the cowboy's letter, in which the money is wrapped, the men discard and let fall to the ground. Words and sentences are of no

use to them, but to Estella, this letter is by far the most valuable thing she owns. It is the key to her future.

Of course this is not really Estella's story because she has no future, and I have only pieced this much together as best as I can, but in some strange way, my story starts where hers ends. Our lives have parallels and opposites, both are governed by roots and destinations, by running away, by the possibility and impossibility of escape and so I think of Estella in this moment as I have thought of her so many times, as I have imagined her every hard-fought step of this journey – I think of her trapped, unable to move as her life melted away in the awful heat of that desert. The summer of 1983. Estella's flight from South to North ended through lack of water. In 1983, over in my world, a wind was rising across the Orkneys, Scotland, the wettest place imaginable. An island so drowning in water it seems that the earth must be tipped unfairly on its axis. In the summer of 1983 my journey North to South was only just beginning.

The campasino lies on the scrub, bleeding from his mouth and cheek. Across the track Estella lies dying. Three of her ribs are broken, she has difficulty breathing and her vision has begun to fade. By the time the campasino makes it to her side, she has felt for the letter on the ground and is agitatedly smoothing it against her dress with the palm of one hand as she calls out the name of her child. For a moment the campasino cannot register what she's saying. He has entirely forgotten about the existence of the child but when he screws up his eyes he can replay the last fifteen minutes like a cheap video from the market. El Turrón

grabbing her by the hair ; Estella calmly placing the child on the ground. The boy's reproachful cry. Benjamín looks into the glare of the sun, but he can see nothing and when Estella begs him to deliver the child to the address on the top of the letter he can promise nothing – his broken jaw hangs uselessly. Instead, he reaches over and takes her hand and when she stops breathing lays it on her chest over her heart, then he stands up stiffly and looks around. Despite the searing pain in his jaw he feels a knot of something far worse in his stomach. There is no child on the edge of the road – there is no child to be heard a few yards off, howling with indignation, the spike of some cactus sticking out of his finger – there is no child anywhere to be seen. The boy has gone.