

*It's a rush, running wide open, the blast of wind on our faces before the windows roll up and our masks come down. The gun oil smell. Everything racing, no one talking, just watching as we close, knowing it could go wrong but knowing it won't because we've done it a hundred times and we're still alive and who's going to stop us and who's more afraid of dying? I watch their gringo faces go pale — the best moment and always the same — when they realize it's too late to save themselves. Their scared eyes. The sick looks. Then we're on them like roaches. How the Indians used to do it before they became gringos, before the roads were paved, finding the solitary wagon, circling, whooping and wild, taking trophies. There's no better feeling than belonging to such a party, running with the men. It's a rush, like I said.*

**R**UGG NEVER SAW WHERE they took to the highway. Stealth perfected. Empty asphalt in his rearview. When the white Cheyenne appeared alongside, it ran close enough for him to glimpse his reflection in the polarized glass — how he was seen, his wonder and advertence. He backed off the accelerator to let it pass. Then the Cheyenne’s windows came down, their masked faces daylit. No badges, no khaki. One of them waved a pistol.

“Rose,” he said.

Her bare feet rode the dash. Her ears wired to a world he almost heard.

“Rose.”

“What?”

“Get the passports. Your shoes.”

The Cheyenne clung to the pickup, one shadow running. Their shouts heard through the glass. Rugg did not look at them.

“Who are they, Dad?”

“Some men. Get the passports.”

“Where?”



## OFF THE WELL-LIT PATH

The road straight, the shoulder dropping steeply to a range fence. Beyond it the desert lay flat. The scrub thick and without dwelling. He considered their chances to outrun them should the pickup not roll from a shot tire, should the masked men not shoot the windows. Small chance.

“In the bag, Rose. Put on your shoes.” The cockpit calm kept in his voice.

He coasted, no brakes, not wanting a sudden stop to be mistaken for cleverness or stupidity. The shoulder not wide enough for the truck to fully side the road. When the Cheyenne cornered the front bumper, Rugg braked hard to avoid a collision.

The four doors opened. Quick like flies, they swarmed the pickup. One of the gavilleros pulled at the driver’s door. He gestured for Rugg to unlock it. “¡Ábrelo!” he ordered. A second masked man rapped on Rose’s window with his weapon.

“Dad!”

Rugg unlocked the doors.

Her bare feet the last thing he saw before they pulled him out, the truck motor still idling. They manhandled him to the highway centerline, where they released him and took aim. Rugg glimpsed the arrival of other vehicles, the occupants getting down, their faces also masked. He raised his hands and lowered his gaze. He knew to do this.

“Please! Please!” cried Rose.

Don't, Rugg thought. Don't speak.

"Please! Leave us alone!"

The small gavillero who approached him wore flashy sneakers and walked with a limp. His pant waist showed a pistol with a silver grip. He ducked into Rugg's downturned gaze, his mask a sock hat with scissor-cut holes. He winked through an eyehole before he patted Rugg's pockets, lifting his wallet so cleanly Rugg wasn't sure it was taken until he saw it held. His watch and ring not taken.

Rose began to scream. "Stop this! I want my dad!"

A man's voice ordered her to shut up. "Zip it or we kill you both." The voice graveled, the English clean. Rugg believed the man's words, and he did not believe what most men said.

Rose began to cry.

Across the blacktop Rugg's shadow cast to the highway's edge. He had told her about the passports, the shoes. He had not told her about silence. So much not told. Rugg's life clocked to a standstill. He saw himself distantly, a stranger sharing the two-legged likeness of men. He remembered a rancher from years back who had told him that when a horse saw another horse, it did not see a horse. What it saw was a stranger made like a horse. So Rugg saw himself.

He heard a large truck approach, the harmonic whine of its weighted tires. He heard the downshift and the chatter of a Jake brake, and then he heard the big diesel idle at a cautionary distance.

OFF THE WELL-LIT PATH

The gavilleros stood. Rugg watched their stilled shadows on the blacktop. He glimpsed the Cheyenne, no plate on it.

“Él se queda,” ordered the graveled voice.

They grabbed him by the arms and pulled him off the highway.

“Dad!”

When Rugg saw the embankment, he wrested himself from them and turned to where the graveled voice had spoken. “Take me,” he shouted. “I’m worth it.”

The boss stood taller than the others. No mask covered his face. His silver hair short-cropped. Rugg did not try to see more.

“Worth what, my friend?”

“More money,” said Rugg. “Less trouble. Take me.”

The boss studied him. “But you are not as pretty. Eres un gringo feo.”

The men laughed.

Rugg shook his head. “No. It’s a good trade.”

“I will let you run,” the boss said. “She will not see. That is a good trade.”

“She is all I have.”

“Then you have nothing, my friend.”

No reprieve in his voice. A stone sooner turned cold in hell. Rugg looked at him. His face handsome to a degree beyond good looks or grooming. Cruelty absent. Misdeeds unmarked. A child’s frank gaze. Why he wore no mask. Why none needed.

“Please,” Rugg said, the word saved for this moment.

The boss smiled. “We call it the *ley fuga*. There is no good translation. It is a law of luck.” He chinned toward the desert at a distant point where the land met the sky. “You must run fast.”

The men retook Rugg. “Wait!” he said. “Wait!”

He pushed them. The men agile and wiry. One of them swung his weapon and broke Rugg’s jaw. He knew it was broken when he called her name, the sound flung raw from his mouth. They dragged him down the embankment. He heard Rose scream. He thrashed and kicked.

“Daaad!”

The highway fence strung with livestock mesh topped with barbed wire held to T-posts. They muscled Rugg over the top.

He landed torn and twisted. When he stood, he stared slack-jawed.

“¡Corre!” they shouted. They pointed to where Rugg should run into the desert.

The rumble of the diesel truck idled in Rugg’s head. He heard car doors slam. He saw his pickup retake the road, tires spitting gravel. He saw the white Cheyenne in pursuit. He did not see Rose.

“¡Corre!”

A weapon clicked. Not here, Rugg thought. His last memory of her not bled to this spot.

The one who had broken his jaw climbed the wire fence. He shoved Rugg. “¡Corre!”

OFF THE WELL-LIT PATH

Rugg stood.

“¡Corre, hijo de tu puta madre!”

When the man tried to kick Rugg, Rugg knocked him to the ground with a punch. Two gavilleros watched from behind the fence, their weapons shouldered. “Órale,” one of them said.

The kicker got to his feet. A rib-knit, three-hole balaclava covered his face. He touched the mask where Rugg had struck him. Rugg saw the man’s drugged eyes, his bad teeth. A large knife sheathed on his belt.

“Roon, greengo,” he slurred.

His weapon a pistol-caliber carbine with a short box magazine. The stock worn, the bluing gone from the barrel. Rugg saw the muzzle soiled from when the man had fallen to the ground from the punch.

“Roon, greengo.” He raised the carbine and pointed it.

Rugg measured the man’s narcotized stare and the way he stood with his feet together, his left shoulder dropped in a southpaw stance. The first round likely to go right, he guessed. The muzzle likely to blow dust. Then what, he could not guess.

The fenceline cleared of scrub where range cattle had trampled and grazed. The men behind the wire spectated shoulder to shoulder. “Déjate de pendejadas,” one of them told the drugged gavillero. “Mátalo ya.”

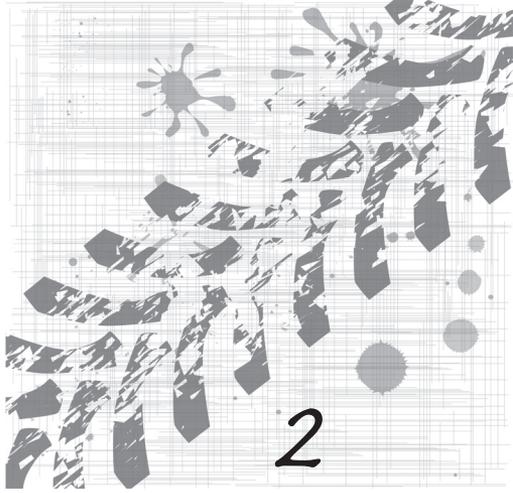
On the highway their ride waited, its doors open. Rugg heard the air brakes release on the big diesel. He heard the truck’s slow advance. He did not look at it, his eyes

fixed on the gavillero's weapon, how his finger held the trigger. When he saw the knuckle lines disappear, Rugg sprang left along the fence. He knew he had cleared the shot when he heard it, when he felt nothing — no stab, no bludgeon — his breath not sucked from a gaping hole, light's beauty not eclipsed. He rose and scrambled up the fenceline, their shouts and gunmetal clatter a muted babel to him, his world a paper-thin sphere across which he must hurry or fall through. At the first scrub opening he broke from the fence and ran flat and shadow-clung, like something four-footed scurrying to its hole. Fear contracted. Life shrunk to a final moment. He cut a zigzagged path, threading the brush gaps to put cover behind him. No sharpshooter rose to preeminence among them, their wild gunning set upon his white shirt, the fusillade snapping thornscrub limbs.

The desert without gully or outcrop. A vanished sea had left Rugg no concealment beyond the holes of long dead foraminifera, their benthic shells crunching under his feet. He ran with his mouth blooded and agape, as though in astonishment at a newly broken world, one where masked marauders set a man free so that they might shoot him in the back. He weaved and dodged, the low-hung sun horizoned before him, his shadow a feverish paroxysm cast on the brindled land. The first bullet buckled his left leg and pitched him to the ground well before he heard the shot, its sonic sizzle a bullwhip cracked at his feet. Someone shouted. When he looked

## OFF THE WELL-LIT PATH

back, he saw the muzzle flashes coming from where they had ascended the highway embankment. The dirt sputtered and popped around him. He lifted himself and lurched into the thicket, his shot leg a leaden appendage, his left shoe gone. The second shot struck his shoulder with an impact that spun him onto his back. He lay as though pinned to the desert, the world a circle. When the third shot hit him, he heard nothing — not the sound of it, not the assailant's approach, not the click of the empty carbine near his head or the spatter of urine wetting him. Rugg did not feel the blade of the man's knife cut his toes.



*I ride in the bed of the gringo's truck, watching her pale face and crying eyes. Her vanilla hair. She sits between Chango and Tecolote inside the Cheyenne, which runs tight behind us. At the state line Chango pushes her to the floor, so the checkpoint inspectors won't notice as we drive through the gate. Then the Cheyenne passes us, and I don't see her.*

*We turn off at Talamantes and drive the dirt lateral until we cross the tracks. At the construction pits we unload the suitcases, a cooler, and fishing poles. We drink their canned Cokes from the cooler. Mencho opens the suitcases and dumps them on the ground. The gringa suitcase has a bikini and face paint and a package of tampons and red panties with white hearts. Inside a leather purse I find their dollars — fifties, twenties — traveling money, not a payout. The purse has their passports too, which I open*

OFF THE WELL-LIT PATH

*to look at the pictures. Her face has freckles and her teeth have braces and her hair is pulled in a ponytail. She looks like she hasn't lived a sad day in her life. Not one. Her old man, the gringo, looks like a minted cabrón. His picture has the same tough guy look I saw on his face. But that didn't save him. Anyway, tough is not how you look — the Mazatleco is tough and he has the sainted face of a baby hero.*

*I throw the passports in the fire that Duende built to burn the truck papers pulled from the glove box. I throw in the gringo's wallet too. Mencho smashes their phones and computers, and he takes the plates off the truck, which is a white crew cab with four doors. White is our favorite boost. Four-door is good for unloading crews in a hurry. What we don't burn we throw into the pits. Besides the fishing poles there's a tackle box. Inside it are hooks, weights, bobbers, extra line — the whole show. I've always wanted to try fishing, but today isn't the start. We don't keep anything from our boosts. That's the rule. El Sin's rule. Nothing from the boosts. Nothing from the batos.*